ARTICLES

# Toward More Honest Description[1]

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**ABSTRACT**

This article argues that the convention of archival description has been to hide the variety of shaping processes that lead to the eventual formation of an archival aggregation. It suggests that archivists need to more carefully consider three types of archives shaping: shaping by the archiving I; shaping by other interested parties; and shaping by the archivist. After examining the extent to which such shaping is reflected in a number of archival finding aids created for writers' records, the article suggests means by which archival description could better account for the inevitable "constructedness" of the *fonds*.



**KEY WORDS**

Personal archives, Archival description, Writers' archives

> What I was trying to say was that I've put my interventionist paws all over this; it's not a reflection of Engel's own ideas about her collection [because] there was no discernible way of trying to figure out what her ideas were.[2]

> I got this really weird feeling like I was an interloper in her literary imagination. And I was! I was moving [things around].[3]

In recent years, it has been fairly widely recognized that a processing archivist has an effect on the final shape and representation of an archival *fonds*. Early writings on archival theory and methodology stressed the moral imperative for the archivist neither to add to nor subtract from the archives, to preserve the archives in the "pure" state in which it was received from its creator, or to return it to that "pure" state so that it "says what it has to say" without any intervention or corruption;[4] the archivist was supposed to be objective in all respects, not an active shaper of the archives he or she cared for, but a neutral custodian. In the latter part of the twentieth century, however, the neutrality of the archivist and the objectivity of the archives began to be called into question. In the first case, the "postmodernists" drew attention to the ways in which archival work changed the nature of a body of records; Brien Brothman, Terry Cook, Tom Nesmith, Eric Ketelaar, and others explained how the selection of certain documents by archivists reified them as records and suggested how their arrangement into *fonds* and series is not nearly as natural a process as archival theory had typically supposed.[5] Heather MacNeil, Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, and Michelle Light and Tom Hyry[6] focused more specifically on the ways in which the processes of arrangement and description affect how a researcher encounters an aggregation of records. In "Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archival Editor," for example, Heather MacNeil compared the work of the archivist to that of a textual critic, as both work to "restore a text as closely as possible to its original form." Inevitably, such work "involves conscious and deliberate decisions" that will affect the final representation of the text, whether that representation is the textual critic's critical edition or the archivist's arranged *fonds* and finding aid.[7]

This article takes another look at the shaping of archival aggregations and their representations in finding aids. I focus on three different types of archival shaping—shaping by the creator of the archives, shaping by the archivist, and shaping by other interested parties. Through the study of each of these different types of shaping and their representations by archivists in finding aids and with reference throughout to the broader archival literature, I will demonstrate how conventional means of describing archives tend to hide the "constructedness" of the *fonds*, choosing instead to adhere to traditional notions of an archives as an

un-self-conscious and more or less spontaneous output of its creator. I conclude by arguing for a more honest description of archives, one that acknowledges the various ways in which archives are shaped over time, even when these ways conflict with traditional archival thinking and methods.

## The Research

This article draws on research conducted for my doctoral dissertation,[8] for which I studied writers' archives in an attempt to characterize how archivists understand the nature of personal archives and how they try to represent that nature through arrangement and description.[9] To complete my study, I undertook research in the archives of eight Canadian and American writers, including the analysis of various finding aids created for the archives,[10] and I conducted qualitative, expert interviews with thirteen Canadian archivists and librarians who regularly work with writers' archives.[11] Previously published articles arising from this research focused on the conceptual analysis of writers' archives, on understanding how archives accumulate over time, and on the interpretation and application of fundamental archival principles, in particular the principle of respect for original order.[12] In this article, I proceed from the study of principles and concepts and their manifestations in the writers' *archives* I studied, to look at how they are embodied in *archival description*.

It should be noted that while I refer to certain descriptive standards, such as the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*, the *General International Standard Archival Description (ISAD(G))*, and the American *Describing Archives: A Content Standard (DACS)* in different parts of this article, my purpose here is neither to critique particular standards nor to propose solutions specific to any particular standards; rather, my aim is to call attention to what is typically lacking from archival description, and I focus on the gap between *what is done* and *what could be done* by archivists to more fully represent the nature of the archives with which they work.

## Shaping Archives

As explained above, this article focuses on three types of shaping: shaping by an archives' creator, shaping by the archivist, and shaping by other interested parties. In the sections that follow, I examine each type of shaping—and its representation in various finding aids—in some detail.

## Shaping by the Archiving I

Creators are the reason archives exist: traditional archival theory posits that an archives develops as an individual goes about his or her usual activities. Although archival theory rests on the notion that archives result from the activities of a creator, it has, historically, characterized the accretion of an archives as a fairly passive process: an archives develops over time as a natural by-product of activity, not through the deliberate efforts of a creator. Indeed, archivists tend to view consciously created archives as untrustworthy and essentially unarchival. For example, Sir Hilary Jenkinson, one of the forefathers of English-language archival theory, stressed the requirement that archives be impartial; according to him, archives created "in the interest or for the information of Posterity" could neither be granted the status of archives nor trusted as evidence.[13] Of course, this point of view has been challenged in recent years. Adrian Cunningham, for example, argued that "all records are purposeful" and, further, that many are "consciously created" for an "outside reader." Rather than suggesting, however, that awareness of an eventual outside reader corrupts the nature of archives, Cunningham suggested that this awareness should become part of the acknowledged context of the records.[14] Elsewhere, I have suggested that archivists might think of the creator of an archives as the "archiving I."[15] The archiving I might choose to include only certain types of materials in her archives, or to arrange the archives or parts of it to tell a particular kind of story. She might make efforts to place her archives in one repository or another, or to keep her records from ever entering a library or archives. In some cases, the decisions the archiving I makes might be less self-conscious in nature and may simply involve the work of packing up the archives and engaging in the usual negotiations with an archival institution to arrange its donation and transfer. In any case, the actions of the archiving I affect the nature of the archives that is acquired and eventually made available to researchers. In this section, I look to the descriptions of the archives I studied and to the finding aids provided to me by the archivists and librarians I interviewed to discover in what ways archival description indicates the work of the archiving I.

The first author whose case I will discuss is L. M. Montgomery, the author of the well-loved series of *Anne of Green Gables* books. Montgomery, whose actions as archiving I I have discussed at length elsewhere,[16] clearly intended her journals, which she kept from 1889 when she was fourteen until just before her death in 1942, to stand as the definitive record of her life and carefully managed both their contents and their appearance. In the winter of 1918–19, Montgomery began the long work of recopying her entire diary, which until then she had composed in "various 'blank books' of equally various shapes sizes," into a series of uniform ledgers; as she copied entries, she pasted in photos to illustrate them

and added extra, explanatory detail where she thought necessary.[17] Shortly thereafter, she began to refer in the journals to their potential literary value and to suggest that they might be published after her death.[18] In her later years, Montgomery treated the diary as a repository for other documents that held value for her, using them to store cards and mementos she wished to save forever, while at the same time burning papers she no longer needed and/or wished to see preserved.[19] Conscious of the legacy she would leave, Montgomery carefully curated the records that would inform it.

Although Montgomery's journals and the methods by which she composed and preserved them have garnered a significant amount of scholarly attention,[20] the descriptions of the diary held at the University of Guelph's Archival and Special Collections provide no information about those processes. The online account of the L. M. Montgomery Collection describes the journals as being at the "center" of the larger collection that has grown up around them, but it includes no more detailed description of their contents or of the mode of their creation.[21] On the University of Guelph's L. M. Montgomery Research Centre website, researchers can access digitized copies of some of the photographs that Montgomery pasted into her journals, and will, presumably, eventually be able to access digitized pages; again, however, nowhere described is the type of recordkeeping activities that Montgomery engaged in and that shaped the documents researchers consult today. While evidence and discussion of the journals' complicated genesis can be found in the diary itself and in the scholarship around it, the actions of the archiving I remain hidden in the library's representations of it.

The archiving I achieves slightly more presence in some of the finding aids for the Alice Munro *fonds*, the Marian Engel *fonds*, and the Douglas Coupland *fonds*.[22] In online finding aids for the Engel and Munro *fonds*, the only significant mention of either author's role in the formation of the archives is as the source of acquisition, but the older, paper-based finding aids for each *fonds* invoke the authors in discussing the state of the materials when the University of Calgary and McMaster University, respectively, received them. In the introduction to the inventory for the Marian Engel *fonds* compiled by K. E. Garay and Norma Smith, Garay noted that when the *fonds* arrived at McMaster, it "was not in good order." She explained that while "certain segments of it had been kept together . . . the very important book manuscripts were in disarray, with rejected pages from one book intermingled with castoffs from another and no indication of the order in which drafts, or sections of drafts, had been written."[23] In the inventory for the first accession of the Alice Munro *fonds*, Jean M. Moore and Jean F. Tener explained that Munro initially indicated she "had not retained 'that many' manuscripts," but added that "fortunately, this proved not to be the case." Materials arrived at the repository in "a trunk and a suitcase" and,

like the Engel materials, were in fairly significant "disorder."[24] In the finding aid for the Douglas Coupland *fonds*, housed at Rare Books and Special Collections at the University of British Columbia, the archivist made similar observations about disorder at the time of acquisition, noting that "much of the material had little arrangement" and that there was "no apparent order within each [original] box."[25]

In the finding aid for the Alistair MacLeod *fonds* at Library and Archives Canada (LAC) referred to by LAC literary archivist Catherine Hobbs in her interview with me, considerable effort was made to represent MacLeod's recordkeeping practices. In the *fonds*-level scope and content, Hobbs explained that "the majority of the documents were created and amassed" at MacLeod's university office and home in Windsor, Ontario, but that a significant amount of material was also created in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, where MacLeod spent summers writing. Hobbs recorded, too, that MacLeod "reused" files at different times, and where MacLeod made notes on original folders, Hobbs transcribed these for the researcher.

Hobbs also included notes at the series level about MacLeod's filing habits. For example, a note with Series 3—Correspondence and Events, explains:

> Typically, MacLeod arranged correspondence and event material in files beginning in the Fall of a given year marking his return to the academic setting. Files were arranged with separate correspondence and events files for each year, though later these types of documents were merged in combined files. Usually files were titled with a start date and a symbol indicating the records are from the point forward (e.g. ">"). Some material was sent to Scotland or created in Scotland during the 1984–85 Canada Scotland Writers Exchange. Additional material was added from Cape Breton (Boxes 13a, 14a and 14b), which, though it displays similar interest to the balance of the series, was not kept in formal files.[26]

These descriptions allow researchers an idea of how MacLeod used and organized his records while they were in active use and before they were prepared for transfer to the archives.

In these various discussions about the state of the archives when they were acquired, the involvement of the authors in the formation of the archives is, if not fully explicated, at least acknowledged, and researchers are provided with some sense of the authors' attitudes toward their records.[27] In none of the cases cited above, however, is the full role of the author made explicit; for example, the researcher does not gain any insight into the decisions made by authors regarding the types of materials to include in or withhold from the archives. Of the authors whose archives I studied, Alice Munro, Marian Engel, Margaret Atwood, and Margaret Laurence shared similar aversions to their archives being read as evidence of their personality and psychology, and each made efforts

to restrict the amount of personal material that they included in their *fonds*.[28] The finding aids do not make these aversions evident. The Munro, Engel, and Laurence finding aids do not mention the authors' efforts to control the contents of their archives and/or to limit the amount of personal material in them. In the finding aid for the first accession of Atwood materials at the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library at the University of Toronto, an introduction notes that the *fonds* contains very little of a biographical nature and that the "focus of the collection is almost completely on Atwood's literary work," but no further mention is made of Atwood's specific intent to keep personal materials out of what is essentially a professional archives.[29]

In her interview with me, Monique Ostiguy (French literary archivist at Library and Archives Canada) referred to the finding aid for the *fonds* of the Québecois writer Suzanne Jacob. In this finding aid, Ostiguy recorded in a *fonds*-level conservation note that, prior to the establishment of the Suzanne Jacob *fonds* at LAC, Jacob had lost or destroyed several manuscripts. Similarly, in a finding aid referred to by Tony Power (from the Contemporary Literature Collection Library at Special Collections and Rare Books at Simon Fraser University), a *fonds*-level arrangement note explains that several items were removed from the *fonds* for "privacy reasons" and returned to the author; the finding aid includes a list titled "Folders Removed During Appraisal" that gives researchers an idea of what type of information has been withheld from the *fonds* at the behest of the author.[30] In the majority of the finding aids I consulted for this project, however, this type of information related to the author's own appraisal decisions is notably absent.

Some descriptive standards include an element where archivists can record information about appraisal,[31] but these tend to focus on the archivists' appraisal acts, rather than on those of the creators. Elements used to record custodial history can be used to describe some of the history of an archives prior to its acquisition, but as the term "custodial history" indicates, the intention of this element is to capture the history of the archives after it has passed out of a creator's hands and into the care of *subsequent* custodians. In the Canadian descriptive standard, for example, the custodial history element of the archival description area is intended to provide "information about the chain of agencies, officers, or persons, *if different from the creator(s)*, that have exercised custody or control over the records at all stages in their existence" (emphasis added).[32] The "immediate source of acquisition" element in the notes area allows archivists to record the "immediate prior custodian" from whom records were acquired and suggests the inclusion of information about "date and method of acquisition, as well as the source/donor's relationship to the material," but this data element is neither required as part of the description nor widely used to state more than the name of the source or donor.

In the international descriptive standard, *ISAD(G): General International Standard Archival Description*, the rule for the archival history element (3.2.3) in the context area instructs archivists to

> Record the successive transfers of ownership, responsibility and/or custody of the unit of description and indicate those actions, such as history of the arrangement, production of contemporary finding aids, re-use of the records for other purpose or software migrations, that have contributed to its present structure and arrangement.

The rule also provides archivists with an option:

> When the unit of description is acquired directly from the creator, do not record an archival history, but rather, record this information as the Immediate source of acquisition.[33]

The wording of this option implies that records maintained by their original creators until the time they are transferred to a repository have no archival history. This implication is in line with one of the most traditional tenets of archival theory: that archives are the natural by-products of their creators' activities and are formed without deliberation or a view to their future *as archives*. As mentioned above, in traditional theory, archives are not archives if they result from the self-conscious archiving activities of their creators; as a result, perhaps, archival description most often seems to ignore or efface the active role that creators can—and often do—play in determining the final shape an archives takes.

## Shaping by Custodians and Other Interested Parties

In the last section, I showed how infrequently conventional archival description indicates the work of the creator (the archiving I). In this section, I look at the finding aids for the archives I studied and for those referred to by participants in interviews to determine whether and how the actions of *other* interested parties are represented. For the moment, I will leave aside the actions of archivists and discuss them in the next section.

Life-writing scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson used the terms "coaxers and coercers" to refer to individuals other than the writer of an autobiographical or biographical text who participate in and/or influence its contents and structure;[34] in many archives, family members, literary executors, and other custodians play a coaxing role, affecting through their actions the final shape of the archival aggregation. The Sylvia Plath collections, held at the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College Library and at the Lilly Library at Indiana University, provide clear examples of the effect of coaxers and coercers

on an archival collection. When Plath died intestate in 1963, decisions about the disposal of her literary and personal papers fell to her estranged husband, Ted Hughes. In the years following Plath's death, Hughes (and the Plath estate, eventually headed by Hughes's sister, Olwyn Hughes) and Plath's mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, each struggled to assert a particular view of Plath's work and personal life. This struggle spilled over into her archives, both at Smith College and at the Lilly Library.

The Sylvia Plath collection at Smith College consists of multiple accessions from different sources. The primary finding aid indicates that the "bulk of the collection was purchased from the estate of Sylvia Plath in 1981," that additional materials were donated by Aurelia Plath in 1983, and that "the rest of the collection was donated or sold to Smith College by friends of Sylvia Plath."[35] Throughout the finding aid, notes are made when materials have been donated either by Aurelia Plath or by other individuals, although these are not consistent. For example, a number of letters listed in the correspondence series are described as having been annotated by Aurelia Plath; the researcher assumes these must have been in the custody of Aurelia Plath, but she is not mentioned as the donor of the materials. Materials donated from different sources are mostly interfiled with materials attained through Hughes and the Plath estate, and series of materials generated by Plath sometimes also include letters written by others following her death in February 1963. For example, in the correspondence series are letters listed from Ted Hughes to Ann and Leo Goodman in May 1963, in 1965, and in 1966; the finding aid notes that in the letter from 1963, Hughes offered congratulations on the birth of the Goodmans' son and thanked them for their condolences following Plath's death. In a letter from 1966, he inquired about the Goodmans' dealings with Lois Ames, a Plath biographer of whom Hughes did not approve.

The Sylvia Plath collection at Smith College has been arranged to include separate series of materials created by Aurelia Plath and Ted Hughes. Items listed in the Aurelia Plath series include letters to and from friends of Aurelia Plath's and students of Plath's poetry or her biographers. The letters are primarily about Sylvia Plath. Aurelia Plath wrote several to friends prior to her daughter's suicide discussing the state of the Plath-Hughes marriage and her concern for her daughter. Others are condolence letters received after Sylvia Plath's death and those in which Aurelia Plath clearly tried to "set the record straight" on matters concerning both Plath's life and death. A substantial number of letters to and from Olywn Hughes provide an account of the complicated and contentious posthumous publication history of Plath's works and of the battle over her representation in different biographies. The series list briefly abstracts each of these letters. The Ted Hughes series is less fully described in the collection finding aid; items are listed, but not as consistently abstracted. The series

includes partial drafts of two plays, drafts of several poems, two envelopes containing sealed typescripts of sections of Plath's journals (Hughes unsealed these in 1998), and an undisclosed number of "Notes (personal) (about SP collection)."

Descriptions of these materials in separate series help researchers see how individuals other than Plath authored certain materials within the collection, but they do not fully illustrate the ways in which the collection—rather than just some of its contents—was also "authored" by others. Plath scholars tend to see Aurelia Plath's publication of *Letters Home*, a selection of her daughter's letters to her,[36] as a means of presenting to the public a more wholesome view of her daughter than readers found in her writing and Hughes's publication of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* as an attempt to further a more mythic portrayal of Plath's "creative self."[37] The efforts of Aurelia Plath and Ted Hughes to control how Plath is represented extend into the archives. Their efforts can be read in many of the letters contained in the Aurelia Plath series and in the personal notes in the Ted Hughes series, but they can also be read into the development of the collection at Smith, which began with Hughes's sale of Plath's journals, letters, poetry, and novel manuscripts and which grew through the addition of letters and juvenilia donated by Aurelia Plath. Through the addition of letters written and received after Plath's death and of notes to her draft manuscripts, Hughes inserted his particular point of view regarding both the arresting qualities of her writing and his role in her death and its aftermath. Similarly, Aurelia Plath asserted her version of Plath as a stable and hard-working daughter, mother, and artist by adding to the archives her own letters, mementos of Plath's apparently happy childhood and successful school career, and clipped magazine articles reinforcing her assessment of Plath's character.[38]

The Plath collection at the Lilly Library includes a letter from Sylvia Plath to her mother in which she described an argument she had with Olwyn Hughes, who later, as executor of the Plath estate and as someone substantially involved in raising Plath's two children following her suicide, was often in conflict with Aurelia Plath. Aurelia Plath made a note in the margin of this letter to remind herself that she needed to make Plath's version of the story public by selling or donating her letters.[39] Traditional archival theory defines an archives as resulting from the activities of its creator; if this is so, the Plath collection at the Lilly Library might best be seen as the archives of Aurelia Plath's efforts to tell the story she wanted told. The short introduction to the collection in the online finding aid indicates that the collection titled "Plath Mss. II" includes "the correspondence, writings and memorabilia of Sylvia Plath and her family" and that it was purchased from Aurelia Schober Plath in 1977.[40] A large number of items in the collection date from Sylvia Plath's adolescent and young adult years, including school memorabilia and early diaries, and were likely saved by Aurelia Plath in the family home. The collection also includes many of the letters collected by

Aurelia Plath to use in *Letters Home*, as well as the manuscript for her book and correspondence related to it. Although the collection at the Lilly is *about* Sylvia Plath, it seems to have been largely *created* by her mother.

The finding aids available for the collections at the Lilly and at Smith contain little explicit indication of the processes that led to their establishment. Both sets of finding aids indicate from whom materials were bought or gifted, but this is the extent of description related to the custodial history of the collections or to the recordkeeping practices by which they accumulated. The work of discovering how the collections developed, at least in part, out of Hughes's and Aurelia Plath's efforts to bolster their contesting views is left largely to the researcher.

The absence of coaxers and coercers in description is also evident in other finding aids I studied. For example, materials in the accession file for the Douglas Coupland *fonds* at Rare Books and Special Collections (RBSC) at the University of British Columbia suggest that Coupland's partner, David Weir, played a significant role in preparing and packing materials for transfer to RBSC. His name is signed to the cover sheet for the box list sent to RBSC and throughout the cover sheet, Coupland is referred to in the third person, as Weir provided some cursory details about the ordering of materials in boxes.[41] However, Weir's name does not appear anywhere in the finding aid to the Douglas Coupland *fonds*. Similarly, the finding aids for the Margaret Atwood collection at the Fisher Library, indicate nothing of the role played by her personal assistants in maintaining records in her office or in preparing them for transfer to the Fisher Library.[42]

The online finding aid for the Marian Engel *fonds* at McMaster University lists the various sources of acquisition for the eight different accessions that make up the *fonds*:

> The first accrual was acquired from Engel in 1982. The second accrual was acquired from the estate of Engel in 1992. The third accrual was acquired from James P. Carley in August 1995. The fourth accrual was acquired from Alphabet Bookshop, Port Colborne, Ontario in August 1996. The fifth accrual was also acquired from Alphabet Bookshop in 1997. The sixth accrual was acquired from Ruth Grogan in May 2000. The seventh accrual was acquired in April 2001, from Sara Sutcliffe, who purchased Engel's house after her death in 1985. The eighth accrual (01-2005) was acquired from Bob and Barbara Beardsley in February 2005.[43]

Although this description provides researchers with the names of the sources, it does not help us to understand either who the named individuals are, what their relationship was to Engel, or how they came to be in possession of parts of her archives. In his interview with me, Carl Spadoni, then director of the William Ready Division of Archives and Special Collections at McMaster

University, explained that the materials acquired from Sara Sutcliffe were found by her in garbage bags that Engel left at the house:

> When Engel sold the house, close to the time of her death, she threw out a lot of her papers, put them all in garbage bags and the woman who bought the house actually looked in the garbage bags and found the archives and contacted us. I don't know whether Marian Engel did that consciously or not. There were all sorts of wonderful letters from Timothy Findley, Robertson Davies, who, for example, commented on the *Bear* book. I [don't know why Engel wanted to throw the material out.] That's one of the fortunate accidents where we acquired the material as a donation. Engel's garbage became our treasure.[44]

Correspondence in the first accession, that is, the accession acquired directly from Engel, is primarily to or from literary agents, publishers, and associations with which Engel was involved or that solicited her involvement. In other words, correspondence in the first accrual is primarily professional and business oriented. In the seventh accrual, described above by Spadoni, are letters from numerous, well-known Canadian writers in addition to Robertson and Findley.[45] Originally, Engel had wished to keep her personal correspondence out of her archives at McMaster.[46] Although Spadoni gently implies that Engel might have wanted her letters to be found, it is equally plausible that she had indeed intended to destroy them. Ultimately, we cannot know what Engel's intentions were, and, because the description of the *fonds* does not make additional information about the Sutcliffe accrual (as relayed by Spadoni) available, researchers will have very little context for understanding why the letters from writers are separated from Engel's other correspondence, who Sara Sutcliffe was, and why the letters were in her possession for nearly fifteen years prior to being donated.

Although descriptive standards frequently include elements to record custodial history, these are often "woefully underused,"[47] and/or are understood as providing "added value" to the description rather than as essential elements of it.[48] Furthermore, the custodial history element, when it is included in description, does not encourage or require archivists to record the kind of shaping undertaken by coaxers like Weir and Atwood's assistants whose decisions and actions affect records while they remain in the custody of their primary creators. In both descriptive standards and practice, valuable information about how archives are formed over time and about the roles of individuals other than the primary creator named in a finding aid often seems to be treated as an afterthought and excluded from description.

## Shaping by the Archivist

Archivists are increasingly acknowledging—at least in their theoretical and scholarly literature—the ways their actions shape aggregations of records. From beginning to end—from appraisal and acquisition, to arrangement and description, to reference and reproduction—the archivist's work mediates the *fonds*. In recent years, several calls have gone out for increased transparency in archival work, largely through better documentation of that work and its impact on records. In 2001, Terry Cook noted that "the profession preaches the merits of accountability through good records to any who will listen," but wondered, "How accountable are archivists willing to be through keeping good records about themselves about what *they* do and making these records readily available?"[49] Cook suggested that archivists should make appraisal decisions more obvious to researchers by linking appraisal reports to finding aids. In addition, he recommended that the appraiser's full curriculum vitae and a statement of the values on which he or she based appraisal decisions should also be linked to the appraisal report and to the archival description.[50]

Other archivists have suggested various means of adding information about the archivist's processing work to archival description. For example, Michelle Light and Tom Hyry suggested the addition of colophons to finding aids. As well as information about the "history and provenance of a collection," the colophon could include information related to decisions made during appraisal, arrangement and description, preservation processes, and the biography of the processor. The colophon, they suggested, "represents a certain self-conscious perspective that acknowledges the processor's role in shaping a collection and presenting a specific view of it to patrons."[51] In "Reopening Archives," Tom Nesmith suggested that archivists could supplement their finding aids with essays discussing, among other things, descriptive practices and their impact on particular record groups.[52] More recently, Heather MacNeil suggested ways that the *ISAD(G)* might be adapted to include areas where archivists could better describe the custodial history of a body of records and account for the impact of their conservation and reproduction activities.[53]

The finding aids for the archives I studied or to which interview participants referred employ various means for discussing the impact of the archivist's work on the shape of the archives. Interestingly, two of the oldest finding aids were the only ones to include in-depth discussion of archival processing and its impacts. Archivist Kathy Garay made considerable efforts during her arrangement of the Marian Engel *fonds* to reconstruct the original creative order of the materials. In her introduction to the original inventory for the *fonds*, Garay provided a fairly detailed account of this process. In her interview with me, Garay explained that she felt compelled in her introduction to explain how the

final order of the *fonds* was entirely the result of her intervention. "What I was trying to say," Garay explained, "was that I've put my interventionist paws all over this; it's not a reflection of Engel's own ideas about her collection [because] there was no discernible way of trying to figure out what her ideas were."[54] In a similar way, Jean Tener and Jean Moore used the "Archival Introduction" to the inventories for the first and second accessions of the Alice Munro *fonds* to provide researchers with a sense of the original disorder of the materials and of the types of decisions made and actions taken to establish new order in the *fonds*.

The introductions to the Marian Engel *fonds* and to the Alice Munro *fonds* function in some of the ways envisioned by Cook and Nesmith; they explain archival principles, discuss the nature of the materials included in the archives, and provide outlines of the archivists' work. In some of the other finding aids I consulted, the work of the archivists—particularly as it pertains to arrangement—is mentioned within the description of specific levels. In finding aids compiled according to the Canadian *Rules for Archival Description*, the archivists' comments on their own arrangement activities tend to appear in the arrangement note (Rule 1.8B13) at whichever level is being described. For example, in the finding aid for the Alistair MacLeod *fonds*, Hobbs explained in the arrangement note at the *fonds* level that while "the original filing order is reflected in the series," some "additional files were composed of loose material which was brought together." Hobbs added that these files "are noted" throughout the finding aid.[55] Stephen Russo, the archivist who arranged and described the first accession to the Douglas Coupland *fonds*, also used the *fonds*-level arrangement note in his finding aid to very briefly describe the state of the materials when received and the decisions he made during their arrangement, including how he determined series and the steps he took to ensure that both the original, physical order and an intellectual, archival order would be represented to users.

In some cases, archivists who use the arrangement note this way, that is, to provide a sense of how the archivist either respects or adapts the found order of materials, also use it to indicate the uncertainty of some of their arrangement decisions. For example, in her finding aid for the Carol Shields *fonds*, Hobbs explained that manuscripts "are arranged to approximate the order of their creation"; however, she advised researchers that "this order is not infallible but by and large represents the order they assumed during un-boxing."[56] Tener and Moore also alerted researchers to the uncertainty of their arrangement in their introduction to the inventory for the first accession of the Alice Munro *fonds*, where they noted that their arrangement of manuscripts of *Who Do You Think You Are* was necessarily "tentative." They leave it to the "responsibility of the researcher to verify the arrangement."[57]

The examples cited above show different ways in which archivists attempt to account for their own influence on the shape of the *fonds* they acquire and

process. Despite these efforts, and even in the most self-conscious and reflexive of the finding aids I consulted for this research, the general tendency of archival description seems to be to downplay—or even to hide—the role of the archivist in the shaping of the archives. In an article about the relationship between historians and archivists, Terry Cook suggested that the "need by historians, for methodological [and] epistemological reasons, to have a nonproblematic, pure, virginal archive, ready for the historian to discover and exploit, almost by definition required the archivist to be an invisible caretaker."[58] For history to be objective, "the archive could certainly not be acknowledged as the product of the subjective process of archival appraisal, or of active interventions by archivists to shape and reshape the meaning of records in all the other subsequent archival activities."[59] Cook argued that archivists have been complicit in the silencing of their own voices, that they have been content to accept the myth of the archivist's objective stance, and that they have historically been more comfortable with the technological and methodological aspects of their jobs than with the theoretical and abstract ones.

Some of the conventions of archival description directly contribute to the silencing of the archival voice and the effacement of the archivist's impact on the shape and meaning of archives. A striking feature of most finding aids is their neutral tone and the use of a passive-voiced, third person omniscient narrator. For example, a common means of describing the arrangement of a *fonds* in the scope-and-content sections of a finding aid is to note that "the fonds *is arranged* in four series," or "the fonds *has been* arranged in four series." Both of these sentence constructions use the passive voice and therefore do not convey *who* did the arranging: was it the creator of the archives or the archivist? In the finding aid for the Don McKay *fonds* at the Fisher Rare Book Library, the description for Box 4 noted that "folders have been arranged individually and alphabetically by poem title."[60] Correspondence is "arranged alphabetically by sender," and reading and lecture notes are "arranged alphabetically by writer/artist."[61] Because I spoke with archivist John Shoesmith about his work on this *fonds*, I know that the arrangement of McKay's research files is his own, but that Shoesmith is responsible for the order of the other two series; however, based on the description alone, it is impossible to know whether the archivist or McKay did the arranging, or to know that the answer is different for different boxes.

By using the passive voice, archivists do not have to take responsibility for the acts of arrangement in which they engage, but can instead maintain the illusion that they are not actively shaping the *fonds*. While the use of the passive voice in description might be attributed to convention, that is, to one archivist following a previous archivist's example, it might also be argued that by using the passive voice, archivists are able to allay or disguise any anxiety they might

feel over the disturbances they inevitably provoke as they carry out their work. In cases where archivists *are* aware of and concerned about their impact on a *fonds*, the use of the passive voice dilutes this concern by leaving the question of agency as related to arrangement unresolved in the finding aid. It rests with the researcher to decide—or rather to presume—who is responsible for arrangement or to ask the archivist outright.

The typically neutral tone of finding aids can also be attributed to the standardization of description. In an article about the archives of visual artist John Latham, Athanasios Velios suggested that the effect of descriptive standards on the representation of archives is to make "the individuality of archives disappear in the unified approach to archiving."[62] Duff and Harris made a similar assertion, arguing that standards tend to force complex and "wild realities" into uniform and sterilizing "boxes";[63] the sterilizing effect of descriptive standards contributes to the sense that both the finding aids and the archives they represent are pure and impartial, and works to hide the fact that "in every case" and at every stage, "the aggregation is determined by decision-making on the part of human beings."[64]

Standardization also affects file titling, an issue Hobbs identified in both her interview with me and in an essay about the personal ethics involved in being an archivist of writers' archives. In the article and in her interview, Hobbs spoke of the difficulties inherent both in choosing a file title for an originally untitled file or for a file created by the archivist and of applying *RAD*'s rules for capitalization and punctuation to an original title. Arguing that a writer's choice of capitalization and/or personal titling idiosyncrasies can be significant to an understanding of the contents of the file and of the writer's working process or creativity, Hobbs concluded that rules for description lend a "deceptive simplicity"[65] to completed file lists and run the risk of "formalizing something that didn't exist or misinterpreting it."[66]

In the interviews I conducted for this project, I asked participants first what they think the impact of archival processing is on the shape of the *fonds* and then how or whether they account to researchers for the processing decisions they make. While interviewees sometimes seemed to have difficulty articulating the precise nature of the effect of archival processing, they all admitted that an aggregation of records does not look the same after it has been worked on by archivists. "There's no doubt about it. We do affect the records in the way that we arrange them," Jean Tener told me. Tener suggested that "the less they are organized, the more we affect them" but acknowledged also that *any* archival processing changes an aggregation to some degree.[67]

Heather Home discussed the impact of the physical changes wrought on a collection, noting that "we do alter the record by putting it all into nice neat

folders and the consistency of labeling; it changes the aesthetic of it, how people approach it." Home suggested that this type of archival effect is inevitable:

> What do you do? Leave it at the writer's house? Just send the researcher over to the writer's house and tell them it's in drawer 3? Every remove is a remove from that whole, or that place where it's created, that site of creation, so it is just a question of where do we draw that line.[68]

Focusing more on the impact of an archivist's intellectual arrangement, Monique Ostiguy wondered if different archivists could potentially see different series in the same aggregation. Thinking that they likely could, Ostiguy suggested that the archivist's primary impact on the eventual shape of a *fonds* is through the identification and labeling of series.[69]

Whether they spoke of the intellectual or physical effect of archival processing on the archives, interviewees unanimously supported the idea that the processed archives is different in significant ways from the unprocessed archives; however, for the most part, they also admitted that they do little to record for researchers their processing decisions and how they impacted the shape of the *fonds*. Some of the archivists and librarians I interviewed did not attach a great importance to the principle of respect for original order; typically, these archivists and librarians explained that a significant amount of rearrangement was usually required to make writers' archives readily accessible to researchers and that they were unlikely to document any of the changes made during rearrangement or to make information about the rearrangement available to researchers.[70]

Even interviewees who are strong proponents of archival principles sparsely document processing decisions. Attempts to document processing effects tend to be correlated to options provided in *RAD*; for example, interviewees referred to the use of arrangement notes (as discussed above) and of the note for the source of supplied title proper. Hobbs explained to me that she makes an attempt to indicate where she (rather than the *fonds*' creator) assembles a file or provides a file title during the processing of the *fonds*;[71] where she did so with the Alastair MacLeod materials, she recorded in the finding aid that the file title is "based on the contents" of the file. This type of wording is typical in *RAD*-based finding aids, but as with the use of the passive voice to convey arrangement, it is perhaps too vague; a researcher unversed in the conventions of archival descriptive language might easily interpret this statement to mean that the archives' creator titled the file based on its contents.[72]

Home explained to me that she tries to "put arrangement into scope and content as much as [she] can," but added that she "find[s] that we don't do enough of that in our descriptions." The emphasis, she suggested, is on the content of the materials at a particular level rather than on how that content

has been shaped or structured over time.[73] Several archivists described extensive rearrangement projects intended to reconstruct what was believed to be an original order and admitted that they often do not keep records—or only keep very poor records—of the received state of the materials or of any processing decisions made. "To be perfectly frank," Tener told me, "I'm sure I didn't make notes of how I moved this from here to there [in the Alice Munro *fonds*]. I would be suddenly able to make things fit together, and realize this and do a big 'swoop.'"[74]

## Acknowledging Shaping through More Honest Description

The above discussion concerning how the shaping of archives by various individuals including creators, custodians, and archivists is represented in archival description highlights the tendency of finding aids to downplay or hide what we might call the "constructedness" of the *fonds*. Instead of openly acknowledging the different shaping processes that archivists *know* contribute to the final (or evolving) form an archives achieves, finding aids more often sidestep or obscure them, requiring researchers to either infer or ignore the history of a body of records. In the section that follows, I consider some possible means by which archival description might better account for this history. I do not claim to be exhaustive; I simply wish to call attention to some of the many possibilities that exist for creating a more honest descriptive practice. Cognizant of the usual heavy workload that archivists face and the common refrain that archivists do not have any more time to add tasks to their descriptive work, I mostly suggest changes that do not require significant extra work but mainly require archivists to improve the means by which they capture and disseminate information that they typically already gather.[75]

### Honest Description

Honest description requires that archivists acknowledge the different types of shaping that form an archives over time. It requires that archivists disclose *all* that they know and can responsibly share about a group of records.[76] In the prior sections, I referred to a number of suggested means for improving archival description by making it more transparent and accountable: the addition of colophons or footnotes to finding aids to account for processing decisions and to acknowledge the archivist's interpretive role; the use of essays to describe institutional policies and practices surrounding description and to allow more space to trace the history of a *fonds*; and an increased emphasis on custodial history. Although several different solutions—or partial solutions—have been proposed, archivists have been slow to adopt them.

One of the first steps toward creating more honest descriptions should involve admitting a more active role for the primary creator of an archives. An interesting feature of several of the finding aids I consulted at the Fisher Rare Book Library is the inclusion of the creator's voice. During her interview with me, Jennifer Teows, modern manuscripts and reference librarian at the Fisher Library, referred frequently to the finding aid for the Malka Marom manuscript collection. Throughout the finding aid, information provided by Marom herself is conveyed in quotation marks. This information includes detailed file titles that provide precise and descriptive indications of content, as well as additional notes included by Marom with particular files. For example, Box 10 contains various drafts of "Arik's Section" of Marom's novel *Sulha* and a note from Marom explains that these materials provide "an example of work on one section. (most of the novel was composed section by section.) This section is the first version of the Israeli part of 'Sulha,' and was meant to be the start of the novel."[77]

Another of Marom's notes, this time for draft nine of *Sulha*, directs the researcher through the archives:

> This is the first completed and clean draft. It was sent to—and accepted by—Wayne Kabak, literary agent at ICM, then William Morris, New York. He subsequently sent it to a few Editors who liked the writing, the story, but—too long . . . (look at Kabak file for their letters). Therefore Kabak advised to edit a shorter version of Sulha. (which I did—look drafts 10, 11, 12.)[78]

Although these notes do not exactly describe Marom's archiving activities, they do permit her particular perspective on the contents of her archives to be included in the official description of the collection. The Fisher Library does not use *RAD*, and, in this case, the finding aid is simply a box and file list with Marom's notes transcribed directly into the file description. Several of the finding aids for different accessions of materials from Margaret Atwood use a similar method, and Atwood's own descriptions of some materials are included in quotation marks in the file-level descriptions. For example, the description for Box 119 of Manuscript Collection 335 includes the following note:

> An envelope sent to me by my Aunt Kae in 1979, containing items she found after my grandfather died. 1. Picture of fairy @ age 4 or 5; the writing on the back is my mother's. 2. Two letters to my grandfather, written when I was 13. One contains a description of early puppet show activities—these were marionettes, not to be confused with a later hand-puppet show—plus a comic poem, and the other an account of a novel I was at work on—I'd forgotten this—called Happy the Hog. (Morphed into Pigoons, in later life . . .).[79]

Several notes from Atwood in this part of the finding aid provide context for juvenilia and sometimes explain the connection between early works and later ones. For example, a note with the description of Folder 9 in the same box

mentioned above indicates that a draft contained therein was Atwood's "first attempt at what would later become Cat's Eye, probably 1959."[80] One interesting effect of these notes is that they inject into an otherwise fairly sterile and neutral listing of materials Atwood's own wry voice. A note describing three school essays explains that they were written for "Miss Smedley, who once said I showed no particular promise in her class." Atwood added: "Evidently I did show some."[81] Another note described the draft of a short story as "a not altogether intentionally hilarious story about a girl who ends up strangling her hamster."[82]

Every archivist and librarian I interviewed reported that they have discussions with donors about their archives; these discussions address topics such as the donor's recordkeeping habits, his or her writing and editing practices, attitudes toward keeping and/or destroying materials, and the significance of particular materials within a collection. This type of information aids archivists in making informed appraisal decisions and in determining the arrangement of the *fonds* as it is processed, and it can provide valuable contextual details for researchers. Most of the time, however, the information gathered from donors during these interviews is not fully recorded or formally documented,[83] and/or is not made available to researchers either in the finding aid or through any other means. Because archivists are already gathering this type of information and using it to inform their decisions about the treatment of *fonds*, a fairly simple and not too onerous additional step would be to plan for more formal capture of the information and for its inclusion in finding aids, either through excerpts included in the appropriate descriptive element or as available appendixes to a more standardized description. The amount of information to be included will vary depending on the particular circumstances of individual cases; for some *fonds*, donors may provide significant detail, while in other cases, they may have very little to say about their archives. In any event, the actions donors take to shape their *fonds* impact the evidence that researchers are left with, and any available information about those actions should therefore be communicated.

Kristan Cook and Heather Dean made the related suggestion to open accession and processing files to researchers. Noting that these files often contain important information about "provenance and custodial history," "details about how a repository acquired and manages a fonds," "historical and biographical information relating to [*sic*] the records to more extensive investigations into the people, places and organizations represented in the records," and "consultations with donors,"[84] Cook and Dean argued that providing researchers access to these materials allows for greater contextualization of a *fonds* and better understanding of the various negotiations and processes that form it.

The accession file for the Douglas Coupland *fonds* is open to researchers (although it was reviewed first to ensure that no confidential materials were released), and information in that file led me to question the degree to which

Coupland was responsible for the "original order" of his archives. However, while it is certainly helpful to have accession and processing files available for researchers, it might be easier—and certainly more forthright—to include pertinent information from the files directly within or attached to finding aids. If the type of information these files provide is as critical as Cook and Dean suggest to an understanding of the *fonds*—and I agree with them that it is—then surely it should also be considered a critical component of any good finding aid.

Opening up information gathered from the donors of archives and related to their decisions regarding the contents and shape of the archives, as well as information related to their acquisition and processing, would help call attention to the roles of the archiving I, of subsequent custodians, and of archivists in the formation of the archives researchers eventually encounter. Better use of particular descriptive elements would also help in this regard. In "Trusting Description," MacNeil advocated for a stronger emphasis in description on archival history. She suggested that the archival history element of *ISAD(G)*, which is currently located in the context area, be established as a separate and distinct area of its own to "give archival history more prominence"[85] and draw "users' attention to the journey the records have taken before their arrival in an archival institution."[86] As a distinct area, archival history would be broken down into three elements: name(s) of custodian(s); custodial history; and history of the records' arrangement and associated finding aids. The custodial history element "would focus on the sequence of ownership and custody of the records from their original owners up to the point of transfer to the archives, the sequence of places of custody from origin to transfer and any known losses or additions to the records while in a particular custody," while the third element "would explain the ways in which the records have been structured and restructured over time by creators, collectors, and custodians prior to their transfer to the archives, identify any associated finding aids, and indicate the time frame(s) within which the rearrangement(s) of the records took place."[87]

The creation of a separate and distinct archival history area in descriptive standards could provide archivists with a space to record the different types of creative acts that led to the formation of an archives. For example, the additions made to the Sylvia Plath collection by Aurelia Plath and Ted Hughes could be briefly, but explicitly, recounted in a custodial history element. A distinct archival history area could also provide a space to record the variety of orders archivists encounter in archives and/or to specify the type of order they identify in any instance as "original." Using the history of the records' arrangement element in an archival history area, archivists might identify and describe the order in which materials arrived at the archives (received order or packing order), the order in which they believe the creator used the archives (creative order for writers), and/or the order they encountered during site visits, along

with any other orders that appear to be significant to an understanding of the archives. As well, a more complete account of the effect of archival appraisal and processing on a body of records could be recorded in an element of this type.

Elsewhere, I have argued that the usual archival hierarchical series structure—the intellectual order of an archives—is often more an archival construct than it is an original order, since the archivist's inference of intellectual order is necessarily based on limited knowledge of original contexts and because the identification of intellectual order is inevitably influenced by how archivists understand the ideal structure of a *fonds*. I suggested that instead of presenting the archivist's intellectual ordering as inherently a kind of resurrection of the creator's original order, at least in some cases, it would be more honest to call it the archival order and admit the archivist's role in determining it. This role and the archivist's unavoidable rearrangement (physical and/or conceptual) of the materials could then be acknowledged and described within the elements of descriptive standards that ask archivists to account for their arrangement activities.[88]

In *ISAD(G)* the archivist's arrangement activities are meant to be included in the system of arrangement element (3.3.4) within the content and structure area; the standard advises archivists to "specify" in this element "the internal structure, order and/or system of classification of the unit of description" and to "note how these have been treated by the archivist." In both *RAD* and *DACS*, archivists' arrangement activities can be included in notes. Neither of these options is entirely satisfactory. As MacNeil suggested, the instruction to "note archivist's treatment" in the system of arrangement element in *ISAD(G)* should be "parsed to make clear that the history of the records' arrangements since their transfer to archival custody . . . and the rationale for the records' current arrangement are part of the scope" of the element.[89] If the possible ways in which the system of arrangement element could—and should—be used were made more explicit, archivists might begin to include more extensive accounts of their treatment of archives and of their impact on them.

In both *RAD* and *DACS*, the inclusion of information about archival processing in a note area rather than in a content and structure area suggests that such information is of secondary importance or stature; adding an archival processing area or element to these standards might encourage archivists and researchers alike to accord more significance to the impact archival treatment has on a body of records. A related solution could be to create a new element of description that would focus specifically on the different orders found in archives. While most information of this type could potentially be included in scope-and-content, custodial history, and systems of arrangement elements, it

might nevertheless be helpful to include an element where archivists can list and describe the different types of order they encounter, infer, and create.

Alternately, a discussion of different physical and archival orders may need to be compiled in a separate document and appended to a standardized description. Gabrielle Dean suggested the addition of "parallel texts" to a standardized description. These texts would "address not just the 'what' and 'where' but the 'how' and 'why' of sources."[90] Velios made a similar suggestion in his article on artists' archives, arguing that archivists "have a unique understanding of the history that the archive holds."[91] He envisioned an "additional layer" of description[92] that would be more "creative" than standardized descriptive forms and that would embrace the archivist's inevitable partiality, admit his or her interpretive role, and provide a detailed account of work on the archives.

This proposal is similar to Nesmith's and Cook's suggestions that archivists write essays to append to traditional finding aids. Appending "parallel texts" to standardized descriptions allows archivists to retain the benefits of well-established descriptive standards while also providing an extra space to include the types of knowledge that archivists have about records but that have not traditionally been included in finding aids. In times of increasingly tight budgets and staffing cutbacks, some archivists might argue that more description is simply not feasible; however, since the information that I am suggesting should be included for researchers in description is information that archivists typically gather during their appraisal, acquisition, and processing activities, I again argue that what is required is the formalization of documentation procedures and the redirection of the information gathered to researcher-accessible forms.

Another means of incorporating information about the history of an aggregation into description is to provide opportunities for researchers to contribute their own knowledge to finding aids. The potential of user-contributed content to enhance archival description is a topic of increasing interest in the emergent literature on archives and the World Wide Web. Elizabeth Yakel argued that archivists need to move "from a model of mediation and controlled descriptions to one of collaboration and shared authority,"[93] and she suggested that allowing users to contribute to description through commenting, tagging, and/or annotation is one means of achieving such a move. Early projects like Project Naming at Library and Archives Canada[94] and the Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan[95] demonstrated how users are able to enhance the description of individual items by contributing knowledge of their content or creation, and numerous such projects are currently being undertaken by archivists in different countries and institutional contexts.

During her interview with me, Jennifer Toews explained that she hopes researchers will come to her with information they have about collections that

is not represented in finding aids: "That's a part of the process, too," she said. "You do what you can to make it public and then often people come and tell you all sorts of interesting things. . . . We obviously don't know everything about everything and often [researchers] are specialists in that person or in that subject." Toews added that when she is fairly certain that information provided by researchers is correct, she adds it to the finding aid.[96] The development and evolution of online finding aids is facilitating the addition of user-contributed content to description, and though, as Yakel observed, allowing user-contributed content requires archivists to yield some of their authority over description, it also takes the onus off them to create a definitive description. Instead of being the archivist's final product, description can be seen as a fluid and evolving practice that can continuously incorporate new knowledge about archives as it becomes available from different sources.

Online environments greatly facilitate the addition of user-contributed content to archival description. An additional online tool that might go some way to providing researchers with knowledge about how archives are formed—and particularly the archivist's role in forming them—is the processing blog. Several repositories have experimented with blogging about the processes involved in arranging and describing specific collections. The British Library at one point hosted blogs on the processing of the Harold Pinter collection and of the Ted Hughes collection, though, at the time of writing, both of these seem to have gone offline. To date, these types of blogs have tended to emphasize interesting items uncovered during processing rather than the actual work of processing, and as such, they do not meet the full promise of a processing blog; with an increased focus on the decisions archivists make as they survey the materials, identify or create series, and transform archives into the relatively polished product encountered by researchers in reading rooms, these types of blogs could function as explanatory texts alongside more formal finding aids.

## Conclusion: Admitting and Embracing "Constructedness"

As mentioned, the foregoing section does not claim to be exhaustive, but only suggests some of the many possible ways that description could be made more representative of the processes by which an archives forms. Even without revising existing standards and/or creating additional descriptive tools, better and more consistent use of custodial history elements and arrangement notes, as well as the use of the active voice in scope-and-content elements and throughout finding aids could go a long way toward making description more honest about the different types of shaping that create an archives.

Of the writers' archives I discuss in this article, not one conforms to the idea of the *fonds* as a "pure" and un-self-conscious by-product of a single creator.

The finding aids prepared for them, however, mostly fail to convey precisely how these archives came into being. This is not necessarily a fault of the archivists who processed the *fonds* and compiled the descriptions, but rather of conventions in archival theory and practice that encourage archivists to present a more perfect picture of *fonds*, one that is consistent with traditional notions of archives as impartial and natural and of archivists as objective and neutral.

The archives I consulted are more complex and their histories more richly varied than the finding aids prepared for them let on, and the failure of the finding aids to accurately represent these histories does a disservice both to researchers and to the archives themselves; we might even wish to consider whether this type of failure constitutes a disservice to the discipline and profession. Whatever methods archivists choose to incorporate into their descriptive practices, and *especially* as we begin to conceive of new methods of description,[97] it is imperative that we start to more openly acknowledge—in both our theoretical statements and the embodiment of these in archival description—that the archives is a construction built by many hands and formed over time. Instead of hiding the "constructedness" of the *fonds*, we must begin to actively embrace it. Honest description is the first step toward that aim.

## Notes

[1] This article is a revised version of the sixth chapter of my doctoral dissertation, "Archiving Authors: Rethinking the Analysis and Representation of Personal Archives" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2013). I wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada; the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies at the University of British Columbia; the Faculty of Information at the University of Toronto; and the York University Archives. I would also like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers whose comments helped strengthen the article and especially the archivists and librarians who permitted me to interview and quote them: thank you Catherine Hobbs, Monique Ostiguy, Carl Spadoni, Jennifer Toews, John Shoesmith, Richard Landon, Appollonia Steele, Jean Tener, Tony Power, Heather Home, Michael Moosberger, Shelley Sweeney, and Kathy Garay.

[2] Kathy Garay, interview by author, Hamilton, Ontario, October 31, 2010.

[3] Jean Tener, interview by author, Calgary, Alberta, July 9, 2010.

[4] Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London: Percy Lund, Humphries and Co. [1937], 1965), 97.

[5] See for example, Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *The American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer 2002): 24–41; Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Terms of Archival Value," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991): 78–100; Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 14–35; Terry Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 3–24; Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2, nos. 3–4 (2002): 263–85; Eric Ketelaar, "Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 131–41.

[6] Heather MacNeil, "Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor," *The American Archivist* 68 (Fall/Winter 2005): 264–78; Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names," 263–85; Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *The American Archivist* 65 (Fall/Winter 2002): 216–30.

[7] MacNeil, "Picking Our Text," 269.

[8] Douglas, "Archiving Authors."

[9] I studied writers' archives as a subset of the broader category of personal archives. Writers' archives provide a good starting point for the study of personal archives; they are ubiquitous in libraries and archives and are frequently discussed in academic literature and popular news and magazines. They are also widely discussed in the archival literature to date. At the same time, as Adrian Cunningham noted, by virtue of their occupation "creative writers create more records and are better recordkeepers" than many other types of records creators, and writers' archives are more likely than many other types of personal archives to be preserved in large quantities by archival repositories; as such, there may be differences between writers' archives as a *type* of archives and those of other creators: future studies might investigate these differences. See Adrian Cunningham, "The Mysterious Outside Reader," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24 (May 1996): 132.

[10] The research in writers' archives is discussed in more detail in "The Archiving I: A Closer Look," *Archivaria* 79 (Spring 2015): 53–89. The writers' archives I consulted include Margaret Atwood *fonds*, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario; Douglas Coupland *fonds*, Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia; Marian Engel *fonds*, The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario; Margaret Laurence *fonds*, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, York University, Toronto, Ontario; Dorothy Livesay *fonds*, Archives and Special Collections, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba; L. M. Montgomery collection, Archival and Special Collections, University of Guelph, Guelph Ontario; Alice Munro *fonds*, Archives and Special Collections, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta; Sylvia Plath collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts; Sylvia Plath collection MSS II, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

[11] These interviews are discussed in more detail in Jennifer Douglas, "What We Talk about When We Talk about Original Order in Writers' Archives," *Archivaria* 76 (Fall 2013): 7–25.

[12] Douglas, "The Archiving I"; Douglas, "What We Talk About."

[13] Jenkinson, *A Manual for Archive Administration*, 11–12.

[14] Cunningham, "Outside Reader," 133–34.

[15] See Douglas, "The Archiving I" and Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, "Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers' Archives," *Archivaria* 67 (Spring 2009): 25–39. My conceptualization of the archiving I is heavily influenced by the work of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, who posit a taxonomy of selves involved in autobiographical writing. These include: 1) the "'real' or historical 'I,'" who is a "real" person, the author, whose identity can be verified, but who is ultimately "unknown and unknowable" via a text since his or her life is necessarily "more diverse and dispersed than the story . . . being told"; 2) the "narrating 'I,'" which is the I available and knowable to readers, the I who "calls forth . . . that part of the experiential history linked to the story he is telling"; and 3) the "narrated 'I,'" which is "the version of the self that that narrating 'I' chooses to constitute . . . for the reader." See Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2001), 50–53.

[16] See Douglas, "The Archiving I."

[17] L. M. Montgomery, *The Selected Journals of L. M. Montgomery*, vol. 2, ed. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 341.

[18] L. M. Montgomery, *The Selected Journals of L. M. Montgomery*, vol. 3, ed. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 51.

[19] Montgomery's son Stuart Macdonald explained that in her later years, Montgomery burned "quantities of papers" she no longer wished to keep. Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston, Introduction, in *The Selected Journals of L. M. Montgomery*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), xxiv.

[20] The journals were first published in five selected volumes edited by Mary Rubio and Elizabeth Waterston between 1985 and 2004, which led to a renewal of interest in L. M. Montgomery and recognition of her work and life as worthy of scholarly attention. Numerous books and articles have since been published that draw on the journals. See for example Margaret E. Turner, "'I mean to try as far as in me lies, to paint my life and deeds truthfully': Autobiographical Process in the L. M. Montgomery Journals," in *Harvesting Thistles: The Textual Garden of L. M. Montgomery*, ed. Mary

Henley Rubio (Guelph, Ontario: Canadian Children's Press, 1994), 93–100; Cecily Devereux, "'See my Journal for the full story': Fictions of Truth in *Anne of Green Gables* and L. M. Montgomery's Journals," in *The Intimate Life of L. M. Montgomery*, ed. Irene Gammel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 241–57; Mary Rubio, "'A Dusting Off': An Anecdotal Account of Editing the L. M. Montgomery Journals," in *Working in Women's Archives: Researching Women's Private Literature and Archival Documents*, ed. Helen M. Buss and Marlene Kadar (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2001), 51–78.

[21] University of Guelph Archival and Special Collections, "L. M. Montgomery," http://lib.uoguelph.ca/find/find-type-resource/archival-special-collections/lm-montgomery.

[22] The Marian Engel *fonds* is housed at the William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Libraries, Hamilton, Ontario; the Alice Munro *fonds* is held at Archives and Special Collections, University of Calgary Libraries, Calgary, Alberta; the Douglas Coupland *fonds* is at Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia Libraries, Vancouver, British Columbia.

[23] K. E. Garay and Norma Smith, comps., "The Marian Engel Archive," Archives and Research Collections McMaster University Library, Hamilton, Ontario, 1984, vii–x.

[24] Jean M. Moore and Jean F. Tener, comps., "Archival Introduction," in *The Alice Munro Papers First Accession: An Inventory of the Archive at the University of Calgary Libraries*, ed. Appollonia Steele and Jean F. Tener (Calgary, Alberta: University of Calgary Press, 1986), xxix.

[25] Stephen Russo, comp., "Douglas Coupland Fonds Finding Aid," Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2009, 6, http://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/uploads/r/university-of-british-columbia-library-rare-books-and-special-collections/1/1/11109/guides.pdf. Information from this inventory has since been extracted to fill in the elements of a *RAD*-compliant online description using AtoM archival description software. See University of British Columbia Library, http://rbscarchives.library.ubc.ca/index.php/douglas-coupland-fonds.

[26] Catherine Hobbs, comp., "Alistair MacLeod fonds LMS-0263 Acc. 2005-01," Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, March 2006, 4. This finding aid was provided to me by Hobbs and referred to by her during our interview in July 2010.

[27] Unfortunately, the Web-based finding aids that have superseded the paper-based inventories for the Munro and Engel *fonds* do not include the discussions about the physical state of the materials prior to their processing.

[28] Douglas, "The Archiving I," 68–73.

[29] Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, "Atwood (Margaret) Papers, MSColl 200," 1, http://fisher.library.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/atwood200.pdf.

[30] Jennifer Stevenson-Zerkee, comp., "Larissa Lai fonds," Simon Fraser University Special Collections and Rare Books, Burnaby, British Columbia, Summer 2009, 32, http://www.lib.sfu.ca/system/files/28909/LaiLFonds.

[31] In *ISAD(G)*, rule 3.3.2 provides guidelines for recording appraisal, destruction, and scheduling information. In *DACS*, information about appraisal decisions can be optionally recorded in accordance with rule 5.3, appraisal, destruction, and scheduling information.

[32] Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1990, rev. 2008), rule 1.7A1.

[33] *ISAD(G)*, rule 3.2.3.

[34] Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*, 50–53.

[35] Karen V. Kukil, comp., "Guide to the Sylvia Plath Collection," Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College Library, Northampton, Massachusetts, December 2006, 9.

[36] Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home by Sylvia Plath, Correspondence 1950–1963*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (Toronto, New York, and London: Bantam, 1975). For discussion about the efforts by Ted Hughes, the Plath estate, and Aurelia Schober Plath to exert control over the posthumous representation of Plath's work and personal life see, for example, Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (London: Pearson Education, 2001); Tracy Brain, "Sylvia Plath's Letters and Journals," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 139–55; Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991).

[37] Ted Hughes, "Sylvia Plath and Her Journals," in *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath*, ed. Paul Alexander (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 156.

[38] The description for the Personal Papers series and for the School Papers series indicates that Aurelia Plath annotated several items contained within them, and, though the finding aid does not indicate that she donated these, it seems likely that they were in her possession rather than in Hughes's prior to becoming part of the collection at Smith because the majority are annotated in her hand. Kukil, "Guide to the Sylvia Plath Collection."

[39] Lilly Library, Sylvia Plath Collection, MSS II, box 6, file 21, Sylvia Plath, letter to Aurelia Plath, January 1, 1961, annotated by Aurelia Plath, annotations undated.

[40] Indiana University Bloomington, Lilly Library, "Guide to the Sylvia Plath Materials in the Lilly Library," http://www.indiana.edu/~liblilly/guides/plath/plath2.shtml.

[41] The staff at Rare Books and Special Collections, University of British Columbia, made the packing-box list for the Douglas Coupland materials and the accompanying notes available to me. They are part of the accession file for the Douglas Coupland *fonds* and are available to researchers upon request.

[42] John Shoesmith, interview by author, Toronto, Ontario, August 27, 2010.

[43] McMaster University, William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, "Engel, Marian," https://library.mcmaster.ca/archives/findaids/fonds/e/engel.htm.

[44] Carl Spadoni, interview by author, Hamilton, Ontario, May 7, 2010.

[45] These include Margaret Atwood, Graeme Gibson, Margaret Laurence, Dennis Lee, Gwendolyn MacEwen, Hugh Maclennan, Farley Mowat, Alice Munro, Jane Rule, Aritha van Herk, Phyllis Webb, Rudy Wiebe, Adele Wiseman, and George Woodcock.

[46] See Christl Verduyn, "Personal Papers: Putting Lives on the Line—Working with the Marian Engel Archive," in *Working in Women's Archives*, 91.

[47] Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002): 12.

[48] See the recent revisions to the American descriptive standard, *Describing Archives: A Content Standard*, where the custodial history element (5.1) is identified as a "value added" option, Society of American Archivists, http://www2.archivists.org/groups/technical-subcommittee-on-describing-archives-a-content-standard-dacs/dacs.

[49] Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth," 35.

[50] Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth," 34.

[51] Light and Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations," 226.

[52] Nesmith, "Reopening Archives," 271–72.

[53] Heather MacNeil, "Trusting Description: Authenticity, Accountability, and Archival Description Standards," *Journal of Archival Organization* 7 (2009): 99–101.

[54] Garay, interview by author.

[55] Hobbs, comp., "Alistair MacLeod fonds LMS-0263 Acc. 2005-01," 5.

[56] Catherine Hobbs, comp., "Carol Shield fonds LMS-0212 Second Accession 1997-04," March 1999, rev. May 2006, 6.

[57] Moore and Tener, "Archival Introduction," xxxii.

[58] Terry Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape," *The American Archivist* 74 (Fall/Winter 2011): 608–9.

[59] Cook, "The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country," 610.

[60] John Shoesmith, comp., "McKay (Don) Papers, MS Coll 00518," 5, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, www.library.utoronto.ca/fisher/collections/findaids/mckay518.pdf; John Shoesmith, interview by author, Toronto, Ontario, August 27, 2010.

[61] McKay Papers, page 21, page 25.

[62] Athanasios Velios, "Creative Archiving: A Case Study from the John Latham Archive," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 32 (2011): 261.

[63] Duff and Harris, "Stories and Names,"282.

[64] Geoffrey Yeo, "The Conceptual Fonds and the Physical Collection," *Archivaria* 73 (Spring 2012): 52.

[65] Catherine Hobbs, "Personal Ethics: Being an Archivist of Writers," in *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Archives*, ed. Linda Morra and Jessica Schagerl (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 181–92.

[66] Catherine Hobbs, interview by author, Ottawa, Ontario, July 6, 2010.

[67] Appollonia Steele and Jean Tener, interview by author, Calgary, Alberta, July 9, 2010.

[68] Heather Home, interview by author, Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 10, 2010.

[69] Monique Ostiguy, interview by author, Ottawa, Ontario, July 7, 2010.

[70] Spadoni, interview by author; Michael Moosberger, interview by author, Halifax, Nova Scotia, June 11, 2010; Richard Landon, interview by author, Toronto, Ontario, August 26, 2010.

[71] Hobbs, interview by author.

[72] This particular example should not be read as criticism of Hobbs; the wording she uses is the conventional wording used by Canadian archivists.

[73] Home, interview by author.

[74] Steele and Tener, interview by author.

[75] I want to be clear here that I do understand the difficulties archivists face in terms of processing backlogs and decreasing funds, and I do not intend to suggest a large amount of extra work be added to that; in the interviews I conducted, and in my own interactions with reference archivists as a researcher, I consistently noted that archivists know things about the records that are not recorded in finding aids. My fundamental suggestion here is that everything we know, and can disclose, should be formally recorded. I suggest that if we make space in our finding aids for this type of information, the work of filling them in when the information is available will not be too onerous.

[76] Certainly, some information about the shaping of an archives an archivist cannot legally or ethically disclose, including financial details and any information a creator or donor insists remain confidential. For example, Kristan Cook and Heather Dean discussed how the researchers' needs for access and donors' needs for privacy are balanced in both the public and private sphere in the United States and Canada. See Cook and Dean, "Our Records, Ourselves: Documenting Archives and Archivists," in *Archival Narratives for Canada: Re-Telling Stories in a Changing Landscape*, ed. Kathleen Garay and Christl Verduyn (Halifax and Winnipeg: Fernwood, 2011), 65–69.

[77] Jennifer Toews, comp., "Marom, Malka Papers, Ms Coll 377," 4, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, www.library.utoronto.ca/fisher/collections/findaids/marom2000.pdf.

[78] Toews, comp., "Marom, Malka Papers, Ms Coll 377," 12.

[79] Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, "Atwood (Margaret) Papers, Ms Coll 335 finding aid Atwood 335," 82, http://fisher.library.utoronto.ca/sites/default/files/atwood335.pdf.

[80] Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, "Atwood (Margaret) Papers, Ms Coll 335 finding aid Atwood 335," 83.

[81] Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, "Atwood (Margaret) Papers, Ms Coll 335 finding aid Atwood 335," 82.

[82] Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, "Atwood (Margaret) Papers, Ms Coll 335 finding aid Atwood 335," 84.

[83] Interviewees explained that not all of the information they gather through donor interviews is captured in writing, and that, when it is, it is typically kept in note form in either an accession file or a processing file, neither of which are commonly made available to researchers.

[84] Cook and Dean, "Our Records, Ourselves," 60–61.

[85] MacNeil, "Trusting Description," 99.

[86] MacNeil, "Trusting Description," 101.

[87] MacNeil, "Trusting Description," 100.

[88] Douglas, "What We Talk About."

[89] MacNeil, "Trusting Description," 100.

[90] Gabrielle Dean, "The Archeology of Archival Practice: Disciplinarity and Disorder," *Archive Journal* 1 (April 2011).

[91] Velios, "Creative Archiving," 260.

[92] Velios, "Creative Archiving," 261.

[93] Elizabeth Yakel, "Who Represents the Past? Archives, Records, and the Social Web," in *Controlling the Past: Documenting Society and Institutions*, ed. Terry Cook (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), 259. See also Elizabeth Yakel, "Balancing Archival Authority with Encouraging Authentic Voices to Engage with Records," in *A Different Kind of Web: New Connections between Archives and Our Users*, ed. Kate Theimer (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), 75–101.

[94] "Project Naming," Library and Archives Canada, http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/inuit/index-e.html.

[95] Polar Bear Expedition Digital Collections, "About," http://quod.lib.umich.edu/p/polaread/about.html.

[96] Jennifer Toews, interview by author, Toronto, Ontario, May 10, 2010.

[97] An interesting example of the development of archival description is the employment of visualization techniques. See for example Victoria L. Lemieux, "Toward a 'Third Order' Archival Interface: Research Notes on Some Theoretical and Practical Implications of Visual Explorations in the Canadian Context of Financial Electronic Records," *Archivaria* 78 (Fall 2014): 53–93; and Jefferson Bailey, "Disrespect des Fonds: Rethinking Arrangement and Description in Born-Digital Archives," *Archive Journal* 3 (Summer 2013), http://www.archivejournal.net/issue/3/archives-remixed/disrespect-des-fonds-rethinking-arrangement-and-description-in-born-digital-archives/.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Jennifer Douglas** is currently assistant professor in the master of archival studies program at the School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, University of British Columbia. Her doctoral research, completed at the University of Toronto, studied the nature and representation of writers' archives in an attempt to better understand the larger category of personal archives. She has published on the concepts of provenance and original order, on writers' archives, on archival description as rhetorical genre, and on medieval women's letter writing. Her current research focuses on the role of recordkeeping in grieving, on online grief communities, and on the affective and aspirational nature of archives.