

The Materiality of the Archive: Creative Practice in Context

Edited by Sue Breakell and Wendy Russell. London: Routledge, 2023. 336 pp.
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At San José State University Special Collections and Archives, my favorite item among all our holdings is the “Jim Brown jacket” in the Dr. Harry Edwards Papers. A replica of the one worn by athlete-actor-activist Jim Brown in the 1967 movie *The Dirty Dozen*, festooned with civil rights buttons and peace symbols by sociologist-activist Dr. Edwards himself, the jacket opens unconventional avenues for teaching and research. Indirectly, it answers Maryanne Dever’s questions about clothing encountered in archival settings, which she poses in an early chapter of *The Materiality of the Archive*: “What happens when these traces of bodies are set alongside more conventional bodies of archival knowledge? . . . And how can the archiving of such objects potentially unsettle or extend the established terms and tools” (p. 89) for archival research?

Dever’s chapter, which perceptively and touchingly focuses on the “queer intimacy” (p. 90) of a handmade jacket in the literary archives of Sylvia Townsend Warner and Valentine Ackland at the Dorset History Centre in Dorchester, United Kingdom, is one of the highlights of *The Materiality of the Archive: Creative Practice in Context* and only one of the book’s wide range of topics and approaches. The editors of this ambitious, absorbing text are Sue Breakell, archive director and principal research fellow of the University of Brighton Design Archives, and Wendy Russell, an independent researcher and special collections archivist at the British Film Institute. Google searches were necessary to find authorial context in many instances due to a frustrating dearth of biographical information across the volume, apart from brief remarks by the editors in their introduction and what the authors reveal about themselves in their respective chapters. Nevertheless, I found the interdisciplinary approach by the editors, and their aim to connect archives of creative practice with material culture, on the whole comprehensible, relatable, and thought-provoking.

Divided into four parts and sixteen chapters following the introduction, *The Materiality of the Archive* is a by-product of a 2016 symposium at Brighton, which Breakell and Russell attended. (Again, I had to look up the symposium to find its name: *Materiality and the Visual Archive*. Removing “visual” from the book title signals an intent to broaden the book’s scope from the scope of the symposium.) Breakell and Russell’s twofold objective was to publish a book “that would clarify and refine ideas of materiality starting from a practitioner’s definition of the archive,” as well as employ material theory and practice to challenge

established concepts of the archival profession (pp. 1–2). Part 1, titled “In the Archive: Practices and Encounters,” comprises roughly the first quarter of the book and begins with Alexandrina Buchanan’s “Material Evidences Surviving in the Archive,” which functions as a concise summary of the historiography of materialism from antiquity to the present. Buchanan deftly describes an enduring conflict between antiquarians and historians: “Although antiquarianism established a set of tools and a rationale for studying materiality, to detractors, its focus on the material traces of the past could be seen as a distraction, sometimes even an obsession” (p. 17).

I admit to being on the historians’ side of this dichotomy in the use of objects, as I believe collections should be utilized for personal or professional research rather than fetishized as objects to be hoarded, smelled, and caressed. As a veteran special collections librarian once wryly put to me: “Some people want to *use* archival materials, and others want to *pet* them.” That said, Buchanan makes a persuasive case for materiality having always been at the core of archival studies, even as it has been frequently marginalized or dismissed. Breakell herself builds on this idea with her own chapter on the material attributes of archival collections. Although her examples draw from her experience with collections of visual artists and designers, there is compelling universality to her argument that items such as “sketches, notes, and myriad visual and textual manifestations” present enriching engagements for archival researchers by “offering a direct way to the artist and their creative imperative” (p. 35). Liz Bruchet and Constanza Caraffa complete part 1 in their respective chapters by debunking the myth of archivists as objective, passive stewards of collections. Bruchet demonstrates the influence of archivists in making finding aids descriptive manifestations of the physical, material attributes of collections, and Caraffa (the book’s first continental European contributor, from the Art History Institute in Florence) reveals archival interventions in “cutting practices” (p. 64) with scissors and paper-cutters, as well as retouching photographs and glass-plate negatives.

If part 1 comes across as the book’s strongest section, that is likely because it is the most cohesive. Part 2, “With the Archive: Energy,” features Dever’s aforementioned chapter on the Valentine jacket; a complex yet comprehensible argument by Peter Lester on the difference between “transformational” and “documentary” approaches to a literary archives (p. 110); Lisa Cianci’s “entanglements with entropy” (p. 135); and Elodie Roy’s method of “reading decay” (p. 153) in a film archives. Grouped together, these chapters threaten to give *The Materiality of the Archive* the essence of a disjointed conference panel. The first two chapters, while strong individually, feel shoehorned into an overarching concept of “energy” and could arguably have been placed elsewhere. (For example, Lester, who thoughtfully delves into his shifting interactions with playwright David Compton’s collection,

could have seamlessly followed Breakell in part 1.) Only Cianci and Roy directly address part 2's theme: the former (from the University of Melbourne) by describing "archival and 'anarchival' processes" used by a trio of Australian artists "to work with the inevitable entropic tendencies of diverse media and materials" (p. 122), and the latter (from the University of Glasgow) by positing that "the film archive may offer itself as a more urgent, multi-temporal site of enquiry than the paper archive: it appears as a site of accelerated degradation, a laboratory of decay" (p. 146). Framing the inevitabilities of entropy and decay as forms of energy that have the potential to reveal qualities about material objects and, per Roy's eloquent phrasing, "help us move closer to the grain of the present" (p. 154), serves as a provocative invitation for further study.

"Technologies" is the tenuous, underpinning subject of the four chapters that form part 3: "About the Archive." This section starts with Sarah Cain's example of the filing cabinet as a still-relevant technological system that provides the foundation for digital archives, and it concludes with Athanasios Velios's discussion of the International Committee for Documentation's Conceptual Reference Model (CIDOC-CRM) as a more effective tool for describing the materiality of collection contents than current descriptive tools. In between are chapters by German media theorist Wolfgang Ernst, whose theory-laden materialist approach may be distilled to one question, "To what extent does archival authority still depend on its material, physical embodiment?" and one answer, "Algorithmic access allows for the coexistence of different orders without destroying the record structure itself" (p. 175); and artist-filmmaker Amanda Egbe, a senior lecturer in media production at the University of the West of England, whose intriguing analysis of the "flow of exchange" between film and paper technologies (p. 196) may have been even more impactful had it followed Elodie Roy's earlier chapter on film decay.

It is easy to second-guess the structure of a book and more arduous to envision changing it without yanking a thread until it unspools. With that in mind, I will summarize the contributions in part 4, "Beyond the Archives: Expanding the Frame," as foregrounding disparate challenges to conventional ideas of what archives should be. For me, the strongest chapter is James Lowry and Forget Chaterera-Zambuko's "Lost Unities," which includes a photographic essay of Kenyans demanding that the British government return their archival records that were taken during the colonial era. Other readers may prefer Claire Smith's argument for quilt-making as a vital and revealing form of archival creation; Ben Cranfield's characterization of performance gestures as "archival fragments" of significance to queer history (pp. 245–58); or Sarah Haylett, Lucy Bayley, Cara Courage, Julia LePla, Pip Laurenson, Hélia Marçal, and Kit Webb's discussion about "counter-archiving and socially engaged practice" at Tate Exchange (p. 259), one of the few essays to explicitly identify the authors' location.

Although the insular qualities of *The Materiality of the Archive* make it seem written primarily for attendees of the Brighton symposium (of which Dever, I also discovered from online searching, was the keynote speaker), there are rewards for a wider audience that does not mind occasionally struggling to find its bearings within the structure of the book. The ideas within this book may have started with creative archives, but they need not end there.

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