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Inside and Outside the Archive

Remembering and Forgetting in the Politics
of Memory and Archival Practice

Vita Santoro

*The trouble de l'archive stems from a mal d'archive.
We are en mal d'archive: in need of archives¹.*

This contribution aims to review the monographic number of the «MARTOR» Journal published in 2019 with the title *Politics of Memory: the Collecting, Storage, Ownership and Selective Disclosure of Archival Material*².

The review will also focus on themes and concepts that are of relevance to the debates on the practices of contemporary anthropology. For instance: politics and poetics of memory linked with storing and archiving practices as purposes of remembering and forgetting; reflexions regarding history, power politics and ethics; multifaceted and growing uses of archives and archival practices; complex forms of self- and hetero-representations; right to ownership of individual memory as archived and then institutionalised memory; nexus between ethnographic archives and artistic languages, and the participatory making of exhibitions or ethnographic installations into museums and other heritage institutions.

«MARTOR» is the Museum of the Romanian Peasant Anthropology Journal³.

The peer-reviewed academic journal was established in 1996, with a focus on cultural and visual anthropology, ethnology, museum studies and the dialogue among these disciplines. As reported on the back cover of the Journal's 24th publication and as Corina Iosif and Bogda Iancu explain well in their introduction (pp. 7-10) the idea for this issue:

sprang from the feeling of unease that is already a recurrent feature of the relationship between individual and archive, a feeling complained of by researchers in Eastern Europe working with various kinds of archives both in existence and in the process of being established. This feeling of unease is in the first place methodological in nature and linked to the defining of archived documents and to their political significance, but ultimately has to do with the meaning the documents yield when interrogated (p. 7).

This is a complex topic of unquestionable interest to anthropologists, if we

¹ Derrida, Prenowitz 1995: 57.

² <http://martor.muzeulromanuluiroman.ro/archive/martor-24-2019/>

³ <https://muzeulromanuluiroman.ro>

consider that during ethnographic research they produce data and then have to archive them (Santoro 2022; Zeitlyn 2019). Furthermore, we should consider other questions, for instance: the difficulties and ethical contradictions in complying with the international regulations on data protection produced during scientific and academic research (Bougleux 2021), the «conflicting injunctions» to archive and not to archive anthropological field materials data and the «responsibilities across the time» researchers have to individuals or different groups of people and «how these may conflict» (Zeitlyn 2022).

The question seems to be especially relevant in Eastern Europe, but not only, where the access to memory is a disputed object of «very strong indirect political interest», since the archives would seem to produce knowledge, legitimise political systems and construct identities through the meaning and interpretation of embedded artefacts. It is evident that «the work of archives, which originates in the relationship between recalling and forgetting, between individual and collective remembering, is giving today a new form to the relationship between contemporary societies and their past» (p. 7). Moreover «the growing importance of archives in the dynamic functioning of today's archive-dependent societies makes them the guardian and legitimising court of collective memory» (p. 7).

The journal brings together some outcomes of a 2018 workshop on collection and archives related to the period of the totalitarian regime and on the «ambiguous status» of existence of these archives after the fall of the various communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe. For example, in Romania a number of interesting cases involving archives have recently received public attention and prompted the debate among the various stakeholders.

Two themes emerged during the workshop discussions. On the one hand, there was the realisation of the «discrepancy between institutional policies and private initiatives» with reference to the emergency storage as a way of preserving recent memory, in order to counter that sort of political indifference accustomed to running away from a traumatic past and to protecting the central political authority from «the weakening of the ideological grip of nation-state» (p. 9).

On the other hand, there was an awareness of diversification and multiplication of methods of «selecting, describing, archiving and re-interrogating archived materials as a consequence of information technology». No doubt it is a phenomenon that has not only interesting «social-cultural implications» but also complex «epistemological and not least methodological consequences» (p. 9).

There are six sections that compose this dense and inspiring issue of the «MARTOR». In particular, I will focus on two sections – the first and the fourth – because the topics discussed are related to some of my recent reflections resulting from research activities and collaboration in cultural projects.

The first one (*In the Beginning Was the Archive: Storing as Production of Memory*) proposes two studies on the origin of image archives and the different historical, cultural, ideological and political implications of their specific creation. The

article of Mădălina Vârtejanu-Joubert (pp. 13-26) presents the establishment of the Maison Bonfils photographic collection focused on ‘The Holy Land’ and its transformation into a museum archive by the Harvard Semitic Museum.

Whereas Viviana Jacob (pp. 27- 42) writes about some Aurel Bauth’s prints and negatives from the visual collection of the Ethnological Archive of the Romanian Peasant Museum as a part of a digitalisation and curation project of the museum.

In addition to these, there is a theoretical and historically essay by Alexandru Iorga (pp. 43-54) on a benchmark definition of the concept of archive, the ethnographic archives and their relevance in the contemporary world. Iorga discusses some possible answers to questions such as the manners in which archives are and could be «instrumentalized» and «the meanings of the archives and museums in the post-colonial era, neo-colonial and national environments» (p. 43). Starting with the complex and troubling history of some archives and their context in the East European countries, related to what Derrida called «archive fever» (Derrida, Prenowitz 1995), he argues that «the archives – as both processes and practices and specific places in which various documents with a sort of historical meaning are stored – are the products of specific context and also the instruments of power through which the governing of particular populations is ensured by centralized political structures» (p. 45).

Building on to the archives, Iorga continues, the past can be «reshaped by the present», sometimes including those memories of the past and some historical facts recorded and collected at a non-mainstream level. Essentially it is necessary to look at the archives as «ruins» and as «evidence of an undetermined past», or rather as «the process through which the past (whether nationalistic in its various forms, colonial, bureaucratic, ethnographic, and so on) occupies and inhabits the present, or through which the past is silenced» (p. 52).

I have recently been engaged in a number of projects within the framework of Matera European Capital of Culture 2019. Some of these projects concerning archives of anthropological interest, allowed me to reflect on archival poetics and practices and also to participate in interdisciplinary discussions.

For instance, in 2018 I organised the International Conference *Food for Art – Archives as driver for 2019 creative communities*⁴ to share practices and knowledge useful for the start-up I-DEA Project on behalf of the University of Basilicata and Matera Basilicata Foundation 2019 (Santoro 2019; Mirizzi 2019; Clemente 2019). This was a pillar project of Matera 2019 focused on the explorations of the archives and collections of Basilicata Region from an artistic perspective, through the form of exhibitions, performances, workshops, publications, and a growing online platform⁵.

Furthermore, in the same year I had the opportunity to collaborate in another

⁴ See the monographic issue of the scientific Journal «Archivio di Etnografia» dedicated to the outcomes of the International Conference organized in Matera on 17 and 18 September 2018. https://www.paginasc.it/articolo_desc.php?id_art=907&t=lt-p-gt-archivio-di-etnografia-lt-p-gt-

⁵ <https://idea.matera-basilicata2019.it/en/about>

project, called *Architecture of Shame*, where I not only investigated a few of case studies about «shame and cultural heritage» (Santoro 2020) but also I participated into and moderated roundtable discussions on the topic of social housing archives⁶.

Why the archives interest so much the anthropologist?

What should we do or produce with the kaleidoscopic, overabundant, and often dissonant content of the archives?

Should archives be interrogated and interpreted only for their content or become the object of mere ‘subversion’ of the scientific-epistemological status of the archive and its internal logic within the postmodern attitude of redefining memory practices and policies?

According to Francesco Faeta (2019: 29) anthropologists

have been poorly involved in archives, committed, as they mostly have been, to the synchronic investigation related to the field and its theoretical-methodological stresses. This does not mean, however, that anthropologists do not have full legitimacy to reason about archives, as instruments for the construction of contemporary representations, cultural elaboration and social practice. As repositories of memory; which remains an indispensable field of reflection and study within the broader decipherment of the behaviour of human groups (p. 29).

Archives, including those so-called of anthropological interest, constitute in themselves an «interesting kind of property» and «places for things worthy of preservation», or also a «site of slowness» evidently in contrast to the unstoppable and changing world outside of it (Bendix 2015). They can also be considered multiform ‘places of memory’ and complex ‘arenas of power’. As David Zeitlyn (2019) writes: archives can become «instrument of subversion» because they position themselves in a «liminal phase between memory and oblivion».

In line with Arjun Appadurai (2012) we start from the assumption that an archive cannot be considered exclusively as an «empty box, a place, a site or an institution, whose special role is the guardianship of the document».

The archive is instead «less as a container of the accidental trace» and is more as «a site of a deliberate project». In other words, we can state the following:

Recognizing that the archive is not just a way to preserve accidental, but precious traces of collective memory, we need also to see that perhaps Foucault had too dark a vision of the panoptical functions of the archive, of its roles as an accessory to policing, surveillance and governmentality. The creation of documents and their aggregation into archives is also a part of everyday life outside the purview of the state. The personal diary, the family photo album, the community museum, the libraries of individuals are all examples of popular archives and, of course, oral archives have been repositories of intentional remembering for most of human history (Appadurai 2012).

⁶ <https://www.architectureofshame.org>

Given the growing importance of archives and archival practices in the contemporary dynamics of the production and re-production of memories, as well as the awareness that an archive is never ‘neutral’, but is a place of ‘power’ and relations, a careful reflection is needed, first of all, on their legitimacy and authority as producers of knowledge and builders of identity and social memory, but also on the complex processes related to the practices of remembering and forgetting, in both individual and collective terms. If we understand archival practices as part of a «collective project», it is clear that agency, potential and intentionality can only derive primarily from «the uses we make of the archive, not from the archive itself» and from the relationships between processes of objectivity and subjectivity (Santoro 2022).

In this regard Appadurai argues that in the age of the electronic archive

with the capability of interactive users to more easily enter and edit the archive, and for the archive itself to be expanded by the nature and distribution of its users [...], the active, interventionist and opened collective building of archives is a growing reality. [...] Instead of presenting itself as the accidental repository of default communities, (like the nation), the archive returns to its more general status of being a deliberate site for the production of anticipated memories by intentional communities (Appadurai 2012).

Above all, in the contemporary context, where the relation between memory and archives can evolve in two opposite directions, such collective memory and archives can have some mutually formative possibilities.

On the one hand, the newer forms of electronic archiving restore the deep link of the archive to popular memory and its practices, returning to the non-official actor the capability to choose the way in which traces and documents shall be formed into archives, whether at the level of the family, the neighbourhood, the community or other sorts of groupings outside the demography of the state. On the other hand, the electronic archive, by allowing the formation of new prosthetic socialities, denaturalizes the relationship of memory and the archive, making the (interactive) archive the basis of collective memory, rather than leaving memory as the substrate which guarantees the ethical value of the archive (Appadurai 2012).

Currently archival practices (i.e. selecting, storing, accessioning, choosing devices) have been embedded as a sort of ‘habitus’ on the side of both archivists and users. This can only lead all, including anthropologists, to an awareness of

the implications, not only theoretical, but also and above all ethical and legal in their construction, implementation and management. In times of generalised dissemination of data due to widespread digital technologies and to regulations that are not yet adequately understood and incorporated by public bodies and institutions entrusted with the preservation of research data; it is the firm responsibility of researchers to ensure that the rights of the informants involved in research are respected and used correctly (Santoro 2022).

In a recent paper, David Zeitlyn (2022: 2), discusses some ethic contradiction on archiving ethnographic material «where it may be argued both that archiving is unethical and that not archiving is unethical (so archiving is an ethical obligation)».

The second section of the «MARTOR» Journal (*Archives: the Purposes of Remembering, the Purposes of Forgetting*) contains four articles on processes by which archived memory is constructed. Maria Cristache (pp. 57-68) connects a digital online archive related to the visual representations of modernist architecture with the production of knowledge and history of Central and Eastern Europe, offering a reflection on the built environment in socialism and its post-socialist transformation. Iris Skhreli (pp. 69-84) focuses on strategies for preserving memory through archiving and the relations with forms of power, identity and cultural politics, institutional and political structures within the post-communist Albania. Finally, the remaining two articles of the section, edited by Astride Cambose (pp. 85-96) and Raluca Mateoc (pp. 97-108), reflect on specific documents in certain private archives (collection of letters the first and records of emigration the latter) and on related practices of preserving, recalling and forgetting and their strong implications in the production of history. Mateoc writes that the archives are «vehicles of memory» and of «individual and group responses to historical transformation» (p. 97).

Three texts in section number three (*People and the Never-Ending Archive*) focus on archives as «place of memories» that have a pre-defined structure and use. Claudia Câmpeanu and Mara Mărăcinescu (pp. 111- 126) present an article on the *Americanii* project, a curated oral archive that aims to preserve personal stories gathered in the field and create new narratives from them. Further Iris Șerban, Ioana Popescu and Andra Tarara (pp. 127-150) describe the Ethnological Archive of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, kept alive by the people who managed and contributed to its growth and development over time. The text written by Rucsandra Pop and Alexandru Iorga (pp. 151-170) is about the Romanian ethnologist Mihai Pop Fonds, a private fund part of Image Archive at the Romanian Peasant Museum, and the possibilities of managing and enhancing it thanks to the efforts of an interdisciplinary team of researcher and artists as well as of targeted research projects (Pop 2011).

The fourth section (*The Archive as Artistic Language*) introduces the theme of the complex and discussed relationship between art and documents with two contributions of the artists Iosif Király and Szilárd Miklós. These articles move within the framework of museum theory and discuss archives in their visual and narrative form. Specifically Király (pp. 173-182) discusses some of his projects in which photographic documents become art and art becomes document. Miklós instead (pp. 183-192) writes on Minerva Archive collecting negatives belonging to several Romanian and Hungarian newspapers digitised in 2015 and now available online in its entirety.

The field of poetics and practices at the intersection of art and society also involves forms of artistic expression inspired by archives. In addition archive materials can be interpreted from an artistic perspective. In this regard, multiple cultural, political and social meanings of archives have been widely highlighted by scholars, artist and anthropologists, above all artist-anthropologists (Marano 2013) that have hybridised approaches and practices with interesting results.

With respect to the issue of archival practices and the use of archival materials of anthropological interest in an interpretative, interdisciplinary, artistic and performative manner, it is important to question such practices in times when we are increasingly witnessing actions of «appropriation» – for example of artefacts, themes or ethnographic methods – of anthropology by art (Marano 2019).

As the artist and anthropologist Francesco Marano (2019: 19) explains, looking reflexively at actual ethno-artistic practices, ways of appropriation and the forms of ethnographic authorship – when two cultures meet in the work of art, that of the artist and that of the ‘Others’ – one should «verify and analyse to what extent and in what ways appropriation and relation dialogue within contemporary poetics of reflexivity».

There is a material and «semantic dislocation of the artification of the popular» and this is one of the results of the trend towards «generalised aesthetisation» of our contemporary society⁷, in other words, a sort of ‘transit’ (and thus a redefinition of perspectives and resources from the documentary to the artistic), a «becoming artistic» of multiple social fields, which also affects the economy, politics, and even the relational and intimate life of people. In a society in which so-called ‘artistic capitalism’ prevails, «aesthetisation becomes the way subjectivities are structured», but also «of the formation of many patrimonial sensibilities, of the generalisation of museum gestures and of imaginaries entirely sympathetic to the phantasmagoria of commodities» (Padiglione, Bargna 2019: 7).

The artification of handicrafts, food, folklore and popular festivals (not only in their outcomes, but also in the very minute production practices, which are often collective and anonymous) can also be considered (as was partly the case in the Romantic era and in consonance with the anthropological notion of culture) as the revenge of the culturally low, the popular, the plebeian, the anonymous and the plural, the necessary and the useful, or what is by definition excluded from the inclined aesthetic enjoyment. This recognition, however, with the material and semantic dislocation it entails, not only implies an inevitable transformation (something that could also be said of the ethnographic museum and anthropological discourse), but also easy-going and ‘creative’ manipulations, which do not distinguish between the use of a work and the interpretation that is given of it. While use is a process of appropriation that finds its limits only in what hinders it, interpretation is bound to the ‘rights’ of the work, of the people and cultures that generated them, in their irreducible autonomy of meaning (Padiglione, Bargna 2019: 10).

⁷ Was the case with the aforementioned I-DEA project for Matera 2019 in which I had the opportunity to collaborate for the University of Basilicata.

Despite these risks, it is evident that the art-culture system is recognised as a central terrain for anthropology to gain a greater understanding of contemporary socio-cultural dynamics.

Concerning the review, the last two sections concern *Fieldnotes and Dialogues* (V section) and *Book Reviews* (VI section), respectively.

In this regard, I would like to add here a quick note on the interesting review by Gabriela Nicolescu (pp. 216-220) with a reference to a small personal memory.

Nicolescu reviews the book *What are exhibition for? An Anthropological Approach* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) written by anthropologist and curator Inge Daniels from Oxford University on the exhibition *At Home in Japan* organised at the Geffrye Museum of the Home in London from March until August 2011.

I visited this exhibition during a summer holiday in London in 2011. I remember my curiosity arousing from the contemporary object and topics exhibited and the fascine they transmitted. There were some life-size photos depicting interiors of Japanese houses and the possibility of touching objects or interacting with ethnographic installation.

As Nicolescu writes in her review of the book, «The importance of everyday objects in museum displays, multisensory exhibitions, theatricality, using photography not as object, but as context and as a facilitator of creating atmosphere, and last but not least, about objects which end up not in museum's stores, but in visitors' homes» (p. 216).

The content of the book is part of the anthropological reflections around the collaborative making of exhibitions and ethnographic installations into museums and heritage institutions. As Daniel's exhibition and other experiences document, anthropologists involved in «making displays allows them to not only show the 'behind the scenes' view of public engagement, but also provide insight into the actual outcomes of the impact and dissemination of anthropological knowledge taking place in various types of museums» (p. 216).

Daniels describes in her book the five ways, «such myth breakers» (p. 216), experimented in her exhibition in London in order to innovate the field of ethnographic museum displays:

- 1) What is a valuable object on display
- 2) How photography is to be used in an exhibition space
- 3) Label writing
- 4) Performance and enjoyment
- 5) Conducting research with the visitors

Regarding the first way, as a new form of experimentation with objects, a raffle was organised at the end of the exhibition and many of the exhibits were given away. «By exhibiting objects with prices on them "(w)e cultivated rather than severed the connection between commodities and artefacts / art [...] by stressing the

importance of consumption practices in the creation of value in people's everyday lives"» (p. 217).

Experimenting with the photography was the second new proposal of the curator. In the exhibition, the images from Japanese domestic spaces were «exhibited as life-size photos» (p. 217). Daniels did not want to «treat photographs as subordinate to objects» or «to exhibit them as 'objects'» because knowledge is formed also «bodily» and museums transmit much more than what the label says. «In order to liberate images, Daniels chose to mount images on MDF boards (A2b) suspended on the wall and to use huge light-boxes for their display. [...] The visitor could feel the spatial dynamics, and the play between rooms made for getting in and other spaces created as visual illusions» (p. 217).

Two important consequences of these choices concern the label writing. They were written in a «less authoritative language», in a language more understandable to visitors and they were short. Daniels argues that «labels need to be short» and «allow for ambiguity», in addition to reducing curatorial authority by allowing visitors to make «their own creative connections» (p. 219).

The point number four concerns the idea of performance and enjoyment as part of the future of exhibitions that aims «to demolish another myth that exhibitions cannot successfully combine scientific findings with spectacle and amusement» (p. 219); through inviting visitors to immerse themselves in the exhibition space.

For Daniels, «art is not reified. [...] we should try to operate with a new conceptualisation of authenticity, based not on the aura of the object but on creating an atmosphere, and on "mimesis," as a faithful reconstruction of reality» (p. 219).

Finally, the book reports fragments from the interview with the visitors. Conducting research with the visitors has been one of the curator's methods who refers to herself as being an anthropologist. The exhibition was essentially an «ethnography of visitors» (Daniels 2014). In fact the interviews, also useful for producing further descriptions or theoretical elaborations, cover «aspects from the experience of the visitors inside the space of the exhibition, the time they have spent in different parts of the exhibitions, people's personal interests, but also, outside of it, following the life of some of the objects visitors collected at the raffle at the end of the display» (p. 219).

Daniels explains that the exhibition *At Home in Japan* was based on ethnography inside contemporary urban Japanese homes⁸ and was experimental in its sourcing, use and recycling of objects exhibited.

The exhibition explores how anthropologists can «communicate the performative, bodily knowledge we experience during fieldwork more effectively towards wider audiences»; and also try to value «the potential of the multi-sensory, spatial context of the museum to question deeply embedded cultural stereotypes» (Dan-

⁸ The anthropological research carried out by Inge Daniels in 30 homes in the Kansai region in 2003, she revisited ten of those homes in 2006 with photographer Susan Andrews from London Metropolitan University, whose work now brings to life the reality of those homes (Daniels 2014).

iels 2014: 514), such as the myth of the Japanese House. The Japanese home has long been associated in the Western consciousness with a 'minimalist ideal' and it has been objectified, 'exoticised' within an 'orientalist thought' like many aspects and elements of Eastern cultures (Said 2013).

Production of 'living ethnographies' requires a thorough rethinking of current anthropological outputs. More specifically, it raises questions about the conventional ethnographic monograph – an example of meta-communication aimed at a professional audience of scholars and students – that continues to be the main medium for disseminating anthropological knowledge (Daniels 2014: 514).

Moreover, it seeks to reveal home life in Japan as it is really lived, showing both similarities and differences between lives on opposite sides of the world thanks to an anthropologically oriented comparative approach. For the exhibition the museum was a «space of encounter», an «immersive space» that visitors could freely discover without diminishing the value of the exhibits or decontextualising them. Visitors did not assume one «mode of 'passive' learning». On the contrary, we «stressed complexity and ambiguity in order to challenge any totalizing view and hopefully foster a more intuitive understanding» (Daniels 2014: 524).

The review of Daniels' book helped me to reflect *a posteriori* on my exhibition experience and to better contextualise objects, images, text, feelings and memories.

I would like to close this review of the «MARTOR» Journal with a question that was left open: considering the many issues that have only been mentioned, what could be or should be the future of archives?

David Zeitlyn (2022: 35) reminds us that we cannot «take for granted that the results of anthropological research will survive into the future. As well as concerns about physical survival, the archiving of anthropological materials is fraught with ethical challenges and beset with contradictions».

Maybe it's worth mentioning what is stated in the Introduction of Iosif and Iancu: «At the interface between the individual-human experience and art, or through a reinterpretation of our understanding of the storing and organising of objects to be archived, the archiving process thus gains the flexibility to transgress its historical and institutional use and become a part of the modern era as a multi-valent socio-cultural practice» (p. 10).

Therefore, archives have to be open and usable, and public if possible.

Alexandru Iorga in his articles about an imaginary alternative of future for archives and collections, argues that «they need to be of public use»; and «making archives public and thus demystifying their contents seems the best way to preserve and learn from them». (p. 52).

As I wrote elsewhere (Santoro 2022), a participatory public archive cannot and should not be considered 'democratic' just because it is oriented towards the circulation of knowledge and especially the heritage stored in an archive remains a more complex question and one that should be reflected upon, considering that archives

are among «the most important instruments for the poetic and political exercise of memory, strongly affected by transformation scenarios» (Faeta 2019: 33).

Archives and archival practices are not only about memory, but also about the «aspiration» and «the work of the imagination», they could also become extraordinary «social projects» (Appadurai 2012), if managed and oriented in a shared and conscious way.

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