

Preserving Collective History (in small-scale ecological and environmental archives and local communities): Posing the beginning of a solution for further debate

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Dr Harriet Lander

Abstract

This paper hopes to pose the beginning of a solution for further debate and discussion, that of how to preserve collective history. It will begin to start thinking about the age-old problem of how does the collective collectively maintain the archive when there is no one left to maintain the archive.

This work will function as a jumping off point to interrogate this question and actively engage with it, rather than the needless cycle of worrying, cataloguing and archiving which takes up most of our daily lives.¹ By taking an example of a local small-scale ecological and environmental archive (the street plants of South Manchester) and understanding the archivists desires and constraints (the principal archivist is Harriet Lander with a collection of community-based local archivists) I hope to shine a light on the conversation about how to maintain such archives and local, community knowledge.² This paper will provide a framework through which larger archives can be maintained (such as the Heritage Seed Library, the vault in Svalbard, NOGS Potato Day³) and it will inform helpful terms and questions which can be used when thinking about this complex problem. Once again, how does the collective collectively maintain the archive when there is no one left to maintain the archive?

The research for this topic will start by a series of questions that need answers (as always) and from that a series of terms will emerge that will form a framework for further discussion around this complex issue. Working from First Principles⁴ this paper will attempt to define what an archive is, what a collective is, and what they look like when they are alive and what do they look like when they are dead. The central research question will propose definitions and pose the beginning of the solution for further debate. By using a discrete ecological-environmental archive (the street plants of

¹ Philochorus F 67.

² Graeber (2001): 49.

³ Garden Organic (2023), Crop Trust (2023), Nottingham Organic Gardeners (2023).

⁴ Aristotle, *Physics* VIII 4-6.

South Manchester) and a discrete archivist (Harriet Lander and the archive collective) it will be useful to ask these questions and provide terms based on a real-life example.⁵

If the archive is what it purports to be (archives of course can change over time) and the archive collective is what it purports to be also (collectives of course can change over time) then this example can lead the way in examining more thoroughly the question 'how does the collective collectively maintain the archive when there is no one left to maintain the archive?'

⁵ Mabey (2016).

Research question

This paper will pose the beginning of a solution for further debate, the central problem being how collective history or archives can be maintained and preserved when the very collective which has produced the history or archive is no longer able to be the caretaker of community-based knowledge. This issue at hand which this paper will surely attempt to begin to solve has long been overlooked, turned-over and cast aside, an issue that is going to come to fruition after our lifetime. How does the collective collectively maintain the archive when there is no one left to maintain the archive?¹

Introduction

This problem can seem, at first, to be too complex for us to consider, or to pose a solution to. This discussion paper will serve to look at the issues around the problem of maintaining an archive when there is no one left to maintain an archive and create the groundwork out of which future ideas and opportunities can be erected. It will foster a questioning attitude and hopes to encourage engagement in the issue.² It will define terms and objectives, forming the basis of ongoing conversations.³ Whilst the ideas in this paper can be applied to a variety of archives (see section below) in this case it relates directly to ecological and environmental heritage within local communities. The archive in question is The Street Plants of South Manchester Archive 2023 [TSPoSMA23], and the principal archivist is Harriet Lander who is working with a collective of community-based local archivists. In this example, both the archive itself and the community that maintains it are both small scale and short term. This increases the complexity of maintaining the archive of plants' and places' heritage where those who maintain the archive are themselves more than just list-makers but also function in a variety of ways within and without the archive.⁴

How the archive in question relates to other archives (the Universality Principle)⁵

The archive in question (TSPoSMA23) is an example used here as it is easily defined, a good size to use (neither too big nor too small) and is overlooked by a principal archivist as part of a collective.⁶ By using this archive as a discrete example to examine the research question posed in the current paper it will allow the formation of definitions of an archive and a collective and pose further questions, which can be applied to other ecological and environmental heritage and archive

¹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 250. 'No wisdom without pain / fore-knowledge is fore-sorrow'.

² If after reading this essay you would like to be involved in developing this archive please email the author.

³ Underwood (2018).

⁴ Please see additional lists that have been complied in whichever form you choose (recipe books, books of days, almanacs *et cetera*)

⁵ Kant (1993): 30.

⁶ Southey (1856): 327, Harriet Lander and the Archive Collective.

contexts. Some of these contexts are large (the seed vault in Svalbard or the MSB)⁷ or small (NOGS Potato Day)⁸ but by using the principal structures which are explored here, the preservation of other archives and their community knowledge will be able to be interrogated as part of future work. This is termed here as the Universality Principle.⁹

Definitions

There are two strands within this research question, both of which act as individual terms that need definition. The first is that of the archive itself (comprised of a fluid series of objects which is influenced by external factors such as seasons, global weather patterns, local events and the macro and micro scale of the categorised items within the archive), and the second is the constantly shifting collective of archivists and their relation to the material (their location, dedication, other interests, knowledge). Both of these strands of the research question are themselves unstable due to the flux of time in addition to their inherent instability.¹⁰ Therefore, the intrinsic nature of the problem described by the research question is a many-layered and interconnected issue which is a simulacrum itself of the very thing that is attempting to be archived.

To understand the beginning steps within the posed possible solution to the problem is to define these complex terms and the terms herein can be unearthed by asking a series of questions so as to ascertain a more thorough understanding of the boundaries of the terms.¹¹ The questions posed here can provide concrete answers to the research question that forms the basis of this paper but the questions also uncover unpredictable aspects of the definitions which will allow this method to support future projects as possibly as possible.¹² A curious and questioning approach will be utilised, and the example of TSPoSMA23 will be employed as an answer to the general questions in order to highlight answers to the complex problem in a discrete example.¹³

Questions of the archive

- The first set of questions is to do with the archive in hand, either physically, digitally or spiritually. What does this archive look like, what space does it hold and crucially what is within the archive that we are preserving?
- This then asks a second question set: how can we manage this; how does it function; and at its core – what is it really?

⁷ Crop Trust (2023), MSB Seed List (2023).

⁸ Nottingham Organic Gardeners (2023).

⁹ of principals

¹⁰ Johnson (1969).

¹¹ Fish (1980): 526.

¹² Rees (2020): 40.

¹³ How does the collective collectively maintain an archive when there is no one left to maintain the archive?

Questions of the archivist collective

- The first questions for this definition are to do with the idea of the collective group, a society, a togetherness, how is this defined and what does it mean to be a part of it?
- Then: what does it mean when that group no longer functions, (or as it has been said 'and we die because the things that matter end').¹⁴ When the whole group has died, what of the group?

Questions of the archive and the archivist collective together

- This question is to do with collective memory, forgetting, and things which hold memory and forgetting that are outside of ourselves, as a group. What is there that is not part of us, as a whole, as a number of parts, which keeps on keeping on?¹⁵

Answers w/r/t to TSPoSMA23 as an archive

- The archive is a physical, digital and spiritual archive, a digital list of plants that grow in the streets of South Manchester, avoiding any specially-planted or maintained verges or other spaces such as roundabouts.¹⁶ In this instance the space it holds is digital and cloud-based. The archive is a list and a location of street plants in south Manchester. What is within the archive that is being preserved is 1) an ecological and environmental catalogue of what exists in an urban and post-industrial but largely residential environment and 2) hope in green spaces.
- The exemplum also has value in a number of different social-cultural spheres. Street-plants enrich cities which are historically places of work, bringing the *negotium* into the *otium* which is defined by warehouses and chimneys.¹⁷
- It can be managed by providing a set of parameters through which to record street plants within the defined locale. It functions with each of the archivists collecting data throughout the month and then uploading it to the online database which can then be accessed through the catalogue. This is overseen by the principal archivist.
- TSPoSMA23 is a reminder that whilst there is more to life than collecting and collating, life can be collated and collected and the community can learn and grow from this.¹⁸

¹⁴ Gaiman and McKean (1992): Part 6.

¹⁵ Cayce (1995): 262 – 7.

¹⁶ South Manchester is defined here as the postcodes of M14 and M16, with parts of M19 and M21. To a lesser extent M20 is also included. Please contact the author to discuss further.

¹⁷ Ennius, *Iphigenia* 241 – 248.

¹⁸ Please ask the author for accompanying ephemera.

Answers w/r/t Harriet Lander as the principal archivist within a collective of community archivists

- The community of archivists is both a collective of community archivists and a community of archivists. The distinction is important as the collective serves the macro community but is also formed as a micro community within the larger community. To decide what it means to be part of the community of archivists please apply to be part of the community.
- Archivists are defined by their desire to maintain the archive, to document, to understand, and to come together in this understanding. This loose association is strengthened by the desire to maintain the archive and our interest in it. The group is defined and self defining by their commitment to and interest in the archive that is being preserved because of its clarity, its dignity, and its importance to the present and its importance to the future.¹⁹
- This group would cease to function under a different framework which is the answer to the Theseus Paradox.^{20,21}

Answers w/r/t both TSPoSMA23 and the collective of community archivists

- Please see the work on ancient rubbish heaps, poetry and eco-heritage contained in *Oxyrhynchus Papyri* volumes 1 – 86, and the application of community knowledge to further community knowledge in www.crowdsourced.micropasts.org.

Conclusion

Is there a way to successfully solve the problem of how does the collective collectively maintain the archive when there is no one left to maintain the archive? Please contact the author for more information.

¹⁹ Cook (2006).

²⁰ This asks further questions which regrettably this paper is not equipped to answer – who is the monster and where are we sailing?

²¹ Plutarch, *Life of Theseus* 23.1.

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Dr Harriet Lander

landerharriet@gmail.com

harrietlander.com