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Postmodernism, Processing, and the Profession: Towards a Theoretical Reading of Minimal Standards

Melanie Griffin

As Frank Burke noted in 1981, evidence-based practice rather than theory tends to dominate professional literature about archives. The papers presented at archival conferences and published in journals often concern themselves with the quotidian functions of archives: processing, description, access, preservation, reference, education, and (in the decades since Burke wrote) digitization. This situation is hardly surprisingly given the fundamentally practical – indeed pragmatic – thrust of archival work. The field is often referred to as a science, not a theory, and abstract concepts neither offer concrete solutions to the immediate questions of daily practice nor provide new techniques for managing collections. Focusing on the practical, however, has its own limitations, and the restrictions of a practice-based literature and profession led Burke to compare archivists to a “large corps of parish priests when no one has bothered to devise a theology under whose standard they can act.”¹

¹ Frank G. Burke, “The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States,” *American Archivist* 44 (1981): 40-46, quotation on 45.

While Burke's criticism of archival literature reflects the professional concerns of nearly three decades previous, in some ways it still appears remarkably current. Consider the flurry of professional literature inspired by Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's 2005 article "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing" (whose recommendations for minimal processing are often referred to as MPLP).² Written in response to an article firmly grounded in exploring and improving upon existing practices, the MPLP studies contribute to the practical body of literature that Burke argued dominates archival discussion. At the same time, however, they are concerned with ideological arguments about the form and function of archives. While the ramifications of minimal standards processing for practice are well-documented, the theoretical questions which MPLP literature raises are not.³ This article seeks to address the broader ideological and theoretical questions involved in recent minimal standards processing recommendations through analysis of Greene and Meissner's original article and the immediate responses and case studies which it generated, in order to relate this body of literature to theory-driven notions of archival administration.⁴ By identifying theoretical issues in

²Mark A. Greene and Dennis Meissner, "More Product, Less Process: Revamping Traditional Archival Processing," *American Archivist* 68 (2005): 208-263.

³ See Matt Gorzalski, "Minimal Processing: Its Context and Influence in the Archival Community," *Journal of Archival Organization* 6 (2008): 186-200, for the implications of MPLP for practice.

⁴ In addition to the case studies published in archival journals which this article analyzes, there have been a number of papers and sessions at the SAA annual conference and the Midwest Archives Conference devoted to MPLP. There have also been numerous conversations on the Archives & Archivists listserv (see, for example, <http://forums.archivists.org/read/search/results?forum=archives&words=mplp&sb=1>, accessed 9 September 2010).

writings on MPLP rather than focusing on practice alone, it is possible to move beyond the pejorative, reductive connotations often associated with the phrase “minimal standards processing” and to view the recommendations as congruent with the more labor-intensive suggestions often associated with theoretical ideas of archival management.

Postmodern Theories of Archives

Before analyzing the ideological implications of minimal standards processing, it is first necessary to address archival theory in general and to trace previous applications of theory in practice. While the relationship between archival practice and theory neither began with nor is limited to the school of thought generally termed “postmodern,” archival theorists have frequently employed postmodern concepts over the last two decades to explore questions of the authenticity, context, and power of archival records. As such, these concepts provide a useful framework for exploring the theoretical implications of minimal standards processing.⁵ Despite its ubiquity, postmodernism is often criticized as being exclusively an academic exercise that is overly concerned with, as Terry Cook writes, a “relativism” that results in “every meaning [hiding] a meaning within an infinite cycle of deconstruction,” leading to the idea that there are no absolutes other than texts themselves.⁶ Additionally, the relevance of postmodernism to everyday tasks is open to question, or, as Mark Greene has written, “[a] pragmatist ... must ask whether postmodernism has anything useful to

⁵ For a thorough bibliography of theoretical approaches to archives, see Terry Adams, “Archival Theory, Notes towards the Beginnings of a Bibliography,” May 2010 <http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/special-collections/papers/theorybb.htm>.

⁶ Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 14-16.

say to archivists.”⁷ Nonetheless, much recent archival literature (discussed below) accepts that postmodernism does provide analysts of archival practice with a constructive tool, especially since, as Cook notes, postmodern theories are “beginning to address archives directly.”⁸ The postmodern theories which address archives directly tend to take their genesis from Michel Foucault’s *Archaeology of Knowledge (L’Archeologie du Savoir, 1969)* and Jacques Derrida’s *Archival Fever: A Freudian Impression (Mal d’Archive: Une Impression Freudienne, 1995)*.

Through analyses of the systems of power which govern speech, writing, and cultural memory, both Foucault and Derrida formulate theoretical questions with direct applications to selecting, processing, and describing archival collections. In *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault explores the relationship between “statements,” which are the basic unit of “discourse,” and “speech acts,” arguing that while a statement is a meaningful unit, its meaning is not predetermined since its existence depends upon the rules and conventions that govern its creation. Speech acts, their meanings, and the truths which these meanings contain are therefore relative to the situation in which the speech act occurs rather than being universals; as a corollary, meaning and truth are historical and historicized concepts, utterly dependent upon context.⁹ By extension, Foucault’s definition of an archive is not simply the collection of documents that have been preserved by a society but rather the “*system of enunciability*” [italics in

⁷Mark A. Greene, “The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age,” *American Archivist* 65 (2002): 53.

⁸Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense,” 20-21.

⁹Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979). See especially pp. 79-113 for a discussion on “speech acts,” “statements,” and “discourse” as well as their relationship to “linguistic performance.”

original] that led to the utterance of certain statements (or texts, or documents).¹⁰ Rather than focusing on the individual speech acts comprising an archive, Derrida is concerned with the archive in its broadest sense(s) in *Archive Fever*. He explores the archive as an abstract idea or “concept,” the personal body (be it individual or corporate) that governs the items in an archive, the items that constitute the archive, and the act of and desire for archiving. Derrida’s exploration of archives is heavily invested in the notion of power, including the power of the documents preserved in an archive and the power assumed by archivists as they speak for and interpret the archive.¹¹ Central to the idea of archival power is the relationship between the documents inside an archive and those left out and the ways in which this selection influences and shapes cultural memory. This is a process that, as Verne Harris has discussed at length, is inextricably tied to political power in its ability to remember and also to forget.¹² The process is not neutral, Derrida argues, but rather reflective of the culture which it seeks to document and the act of archiving “produces as much as it records the event.”¹³ If one accepts the arguments laid out by both Foucault and Derrida, there can be no neutral description or classification, no finding aid or processed collection that does not convey meaning created by the archivist and, by extension, the systems of power that influence the archivist’s decisions. Archival practice, from appraisal to processing to description, adds additional layers of contextualized meaning to the collections being preserved and described and therefore is politicized work.

¹⁰ Ibid, 128-9.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 1-2.

¹² Ibid, 4-11, and Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2006).

¹³ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 11.

While Derrida and Foucault tend toward the abstract, focusing on principles rather than applications, archivists have expanded upon their ideas, exploring the implications that this branch of philosophical reflection holds for archival practice. In his 1999 article, "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice," Preben Mortensen provides a bridge between abstract theory and concrete practice when he argues that "[i]f archival studies are to be taken seriously as a discipline with a theoretical or philosophical basis, they must offer something beyond solutions to problems of description, arrangement, preservation, and so on ... Theories are developed within archival practice and must be understood as a product of this practice itself." In Mortensen's analysis, theory does not simply justify the archival profession or place it on an equal footing with historical inquiry because "theory is not only an *explanation* of practice ... [T]he theoretical point of view influences, as previously explained, the approach to practice" [*italics in original*].¹⁴ This argument posits a reciprocal relationship between theory and practice, with the one informing the other and the conversation between the two inspiring shifts in both practice and thought.

Though Mortensen is concerned with the functional relationship between theory and practice in a way that Foucault and Derrida are not, his analysis does not include concrete examples of how theory might be applied to or change the daily function of an archivist. As one of the first archivists to explore formally the relationship between postmodernism and the profession, Mortensen's analysis suggests the possibility for cohesion between theory and practice and provides a theoretical framework for later work which exploits the vocabulary of postmodernism in archives. Professional literature exploring appraisal and description provides a way to move beyond the purely

¹⁴ Preben Mortensen, "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 3, 14.

theoretical, for postmodernism highlights the political ramifications of appraisal and selection, the power wielded by memory and the corresponding powerless silence of those who fall outside of history's net, and the impossibility of neutral description. These premises raise further fundamental questions for archivists: Whose history do archives preserve? What role does the archival appraiser play in selecting and shaping social memory? What political functions do archives and archivists serve? What political functions can – or should – they serve? How might an archivist be aware of this power and avoid abusing it? How can description make the function, contents, and context of archival collections more transparent? These are questions which Verne Harris, Randall C. Jimerson, and Mark Greene (to name but a few examples) explore.

Three years before co-publishing “More Product, Less Process,” Mark Greene argued that the “archival paradigm,” as opposed to a “recordkeeping paradigm,” fostered a sense that archives transmit many truths to their users rather than one universal Truth or set of objective facts. He concluded, “[w]hether we knew it or not, those of us who accepted the relativism of the archival paradigm were participating in a larger and seemingly esoteric discussion about what is named post-modernism.”¹⁵ Greene's comment points to a function of postmodernism: rather than providing a new formula for best practices, it provides a lens for interrogating and understanding existing archival practices. Harris, formerly an archivist at the State Archives Service in South Africa during the apartheid era, has been particularly active in discussion about postmodern implications for archives management and influential in suggesting that archives and archivists have a social responsibility in “postmodernity” to “make our work a work of justice” which acknowledges the other, the effect

¹⁵ Greene, “Power of Meaning,” 54.

of political power involved in ascribing the status of the other, and the ever-shifting relationship between linguistic signifiers and the signified, and the archives (in)ability to reflect reality.¹⁶ Similarly, Randall Jimerson has explored archives as a seat of power resulting from their role in the creation of cultural memory.¹⁷ These theoretical pieces take existing practices and explore them through the lens of postmodernism, finding new implications for the ways in which archives are created and curated.

A growing body of archival literature includes discussions of what new archival practices that explicitly acknowledge theoretical considerations might entail. Terry Cook provides a view of what Derrida-inspired postmodern archival practice might look like since, in his view, “[p]ostmodern concepts offer possibilities for enriching the practice of archives.”¹⁸ Cook focuses on the areas of appraisal and description and suggests that, when influenced by postmodern ideas, archival descriptive “discourse would shift from product to process, from structure to function, from archives to archiving, from records to contexts of recording.” In Cook’s model, the relationship between the archivist and the finding aid is particularly important, and in order to address the questions raised by postmodern theory an archivist “would ask what is present in finding aids as a monolith and what is suppressed, and why . . . Archivists would engage openly with their clients and respect their needs, rather than forcing them to accept professional metanarratives of how records should be described.” Descriptive practices, in

¹⁶ Harris, *Archives and Justice* and “The Archival Sliver: A Perspective on the Construction of Social Memory in Archives and the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy” in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002): 135-151.

¹⁷ Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009).

¹⁸ Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense,” 15.

Terry Cook's postmodern world, are flexible, cognizant of user needs, and self-aware, and accomplish these ends by being closely linked to the "appraisal reports that justify why the records, now being described are in the archives in the first place, and make clear their fragmentary nature as trace survivals of a much larger documentary universe."¹⁹ This approach allows finding aids to describe collections in a broad social context rather than treating them as objective summaries of artifacts.

Since it is the vehicle for transmitting the institution's interpretation of the collection, the finding aid is crucial to the archivist inspired by and responding to postmodern theory. In their postmodern analysis of archival practice, Michelle Light and Tom Hyry investigate the subjective nature of the finding aid and analyze the ways in which traditional descriptive practices fail to address the decisions that precede creation of the documents.²⁰ Archivists, Light and Hyry argue, "generally omit extremely important contextual information [from finding aids]: the impact of the processor's work[,] ... leaving researchers to assume falsely that we have no transformative impact or to guess about the nature of the work we have done." At the same time that finding aids omit information about the mediation performed by the archivist, they also "present but one viewpoint" and "represent records in a single way, backed by the inherent authority of the institution in which a collection is housed." Importantly, this viewpoint is presented through the medium of "technical, stylistically neutral" descriptive

¹⁹ Ibid, 29-34. This analysis is not to suggest that Cook is advocating minimal standards processing when, in fact, the opposite is closer to the case. It is, however, to highlight the critical and theoretical framework which Cook delineates for the creation of finding aids and to suggest that this framework is extensible.

²⁰ Michelle Light and Tom Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations: New Directions for the Finding Aid," *American Archivist* 65 (2002): 216-230.

standards that “mask [the] subjectivity and influence” of appraisal, processing, and arrangement.²¹ In addition to this theoretical discussion of the finding aid influenced by postmodern literature on power and subjectivity, Light and Hyry use their analysis in order to make suggestions regarding practice, advocating for the addition of colophons and annotations to finding aids. The addition of colophons, or short “statements regarding the creation of a work,” would “provide contextual information” regarding the acquisition, appraisal, and processing of the collection as well as the production of the finding aid. Ultimately, they would “acknowledge [the archivist’s] editorial contributions.” Light and Hyry take their suggestions a step further than Cook’s discussion of theoretically-inspired practice by including concrete suggestions for implementation. They suggest appropriate tags for a colophon in EAD markup, for example, and compare their suggestions to ISAD(G) (General International Standard Archival Description) and RAD (Canada’s Rules for Archival Description) elements.²²

As Light and Hyry note, their interpretation of processing and the finding aid “presupposes” the idea that archivists are editors, and they ultimately argue that the addition of a colophon might “call a researcher’s attention to the mediating ‘I’ present in both the finding aid and the materials it describes.” In a postmodern view of description, the “mediating ‘I’” is inescapable, as is the fact that the finding aid is a cultural artifact. In order to counter-balance the one-sided nature of the finding aid that “privileges the first reading of a collection,” Light and Hyry suggest the inclusion of user-written annotations. Again, they offer specific ideas for implementation, such as web platforms and digital projects that incorporate user comments, with the idea that annotations would “capture

²¹ Ibid, 217, 221.

²² Ibid, 224-25.

increasing amounts of detail about a collection or offer different perspectives on it.”²³ As an alternative or supplement to user annotations, Heather MacNeil, who also reads the finding aid as a “socio-historical text” that is “shaped by particular ideologies and intentionalities, which in turn shape what they include and exclude, what they emphasize and what they ignore,” suggests a system of archival description that finds its inspiration in new textual scholarship. Rather than attempting to present a romanticized notion of archival control that mirrors previous generations’ search for authorial intent in textual editing, archival management inspired by new textual criticism would instead highlight the various attestations, contexts, and voices involved in the acquisition, processing, and description of a collection.²⁴

Theorizing Minimal Standards Processing

These examples of theoretical approaches to archival management differ from recent literature on minimal standards processing in important ways. First, while the literature surveyed above may include suggestions for implementation, these suggestions remain theoretical in nature. To date, no archivists have formally tested the effects of adding colophons to finding aids or explored the ways in which user annotations to a finding aid lead subsequent researchers to view collections differently. Greene and Meissner’s “More Product, Less Process” and the articles it inspired about implementing minimal standards processing follow a different paradigm than the theoretical pieces above, featuring concrete case studies that explore best practices and standards. Second, when the more abstract, theory-driven literature does make

²³ Ibid, 223, 226, 228.

²⁴ Heather MacNeil, “Picking Our Text: Archival Description, Authenticity, and the Archivist as Editor,” *American Archivist* 68 (2005): 264-278.

recommendations for practice, it tends to call for additional information to be added to already lengthy finding aids. Such suggestions stand in direct opposition to the search for what Greene and Meissner call “the Golden Minimum.”²⁵ Third, and perhaps most importantly, the work of archival theory employs a different vocabulary than that found in MPLP literature. The former tends to utilize the rhetoric of philosophy, the latter that of historical precedent and utilitarianism. Despite these fundamental structural and methodological differences, the substance of minimal standards processing literature is not as radically different from the more overtly theoretical discussions as those differences would at first suggest. This utilitarian literature addresses the ideological implications of the practices adopted and reflects a concern with the function of archives, defining the role of the archivist, and fostering a community that encourages multiple interpretations of archival collections. Ultimately, the MPLP literature reflects a postmodern sensibility and addresses the concerns about archival activity that postmodernism raises.

In their original article “More Product, Less Process,” Greene and Meissner begin with a practice-based problem statement: “[p]rocessing is not keeping up with acquisitions and has not been for decades, resulting in massive backlogs of inaccessible collections.”²⁶ The tools employed to investigate this problem are historiographical (an extensive literature review of past processing practices and metrics) and social-scientific (observation of current practice and surveys of both users and archivists) rather than theoretical. The end result is a set of recommendations that seeks to help repositories process their backlogs more efficiently and allow for collections to be used: when possible, process large, modern collections at the series level; if series-level processing is not adequate for a

²⁵ Greene and Meissner, “More Product, Less Process,” 255.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.

collection or a series within a collection, process that collection or series to an appropriate level; rely on environmental controls for preservation rather than item-level conservation, such as removing all paper clips.²⁷

While the article's recommendations are grounded in a review of best practices, Greene and Meissner also spend considerable time investigating the underlying ideology that results in processing backlogs. Their "call for change" in the article's final pages is informed and directed by ideological principles that reflect a theoretical concern with the purpose of archives and archivists.²⁸ The authors conclude that there has been a "persistent failure of archivists to agree in any broad way on the important components of records processing and the labor inputs necessary to achieve them" as well as an inability "to distinguish what we really need to do from what we only believe we need to do." To explain the difference which they uncovered between published processing metrics and existing practices of granular processing, Greene and Meissner hypothesize that the "profession awards a higher priority to serving the perceived needs of our collections than to serving the demonstrated needs of our constituents."²⁹ The symptoms of this problem include extensive paper clip removal, re-foldering, and the composition of lengthy historical notes for finding aids.

Greene and Meissner's arguments attribute the ultimate cause of processing backlogs to professional identity and values, identifying two related areas of archival ideology: the creation of finding aids and the purpose of archivists. In analyzing finding aids, Greene and Meissner reflect on the "unfortunate tendency on the part of

²⁷ For a succinct statement of MPLP principles, see Mark A. Greene, "MPLP: It's Not Just for Processing Anymore," *American Archivist* 73 (2010): 175-203.

²⁸ "More Product, Less Process," 236ff.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 212.

processing archivists ... to use the preparation of [biographical and historical notes] as an excuse to demonstrate their own knowledge (of both collection and historical context) and writing ability.” Instead of nuanced, extensively researched mini-essays, Greene and Meissner argue that the “goal” of description “should always be to convey such narrative content and contextual information as briefly as possible and with as little recourse to outside sources as possible” and that a “crisp, simple presentation with minimal verbiage often provides the most effective representation of collection materials.”³⁰ Although the primary concern that drives these recommendations is expediency, Greene and Meissner’s skeptical view of the value added by historical notes is also an ideological stance that bears comparison to postmodern concepts. By advocating a descriptive focus on the collection as a whole rather than the individual pieces that comprise it, “More Product, Less Process” underscores the importance of context and the meanings conveyed through an item’s relationships to other items. This reflects the postmodern concern of understanding documents within their cultural framework and as culturally created information packages. Furthermore, regardless of their length, all finding aids remain cultural products and interpretive acts. The brief form of minimal standards description de-privileges the institution’s first reading of a collection by setting it up not as an authority, but rather as an introduction. As Greene and Meissner assert, the goal of minimal standards description is to “[l]et researchers create significant essays out of or about the collection at hand. *The archivist’s job is simply to represent the materials sufficient to affording acceptable access*” [italics in original].³¹

These comments on the purpose of the finding aid point to a larger ideological concept relating to the identity

³⁰ Ibid, 246-47.

³¹ Ibid, 247.

and function of the archivists and situate MPLP within a conversation that questions the relationship between archivists, librarians, historians, information managers, and the various interpretive roles adopted by each profession. As Luke Gilliland-Swetland notes, “[t]he development of the American archival profession can best be understood as the continuing interaction of two broadly conceived outlooks, those of the public archives and the historical manuscripts traditions.”³² Modern American processing practice of the former largely derives from the European, provenance-driven method for arrangement and description, the latter from the library tradition of item-level description, subject analysis, and classification. These distinctions influence processing and descriptive practices as well as professional identity, and in their broadest (and most reductive) sense align archivists with records managers, or those who preserve records, and the curators of personal papers more closely with historians, or those who interpret records.³³ While never specifically alluding to this long-standing debate, Greene and Meissner argue that the item-level, interpretive practices, derived from the historical manuscripts tradition, “make no sense in an era where acquisitions comprise a huge amount of frequently redundant material, in myriad forms, with no inherent appeal apart from their informational content.”³⁴ MPLP argues against a curatorial approach that focuses on content and fosters close examination of each object, advocating

³² Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, “The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Traditions in American Archival History,” *American Archivist* 54 (Spring 1991): 160-175.

³³ See, Gilliland-Swetland, “Provenance of a Profession,” 163-172; George Bolotenko, “Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well,” *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 5-25; and Richard Cox, “Archivists and Historians: A View from the United States,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-1985): 185-190.

³⁴ “More Product, Less Process,” 234-5.

instead for processing and description that acknowledges the broad cultural implications of the collection. It suggests that the primary role of archivists is not to interpret the documents in their care but rather to facilitate access so that others might formulate their own individual understanding.

It is within this ideological framework of the information manager / historian debate that Andrew Mangravite published the first formal response to “More Product, Less Process” and MPLP principles in the form of a letter to the editor of *American Archivist* in 2006. In his critique of MPLP, Mangravite argues that there is a fundamental difference between personal papers and institutional records. Personal papers are different from institutional records due to the varied nature of their contents, and “[l]etters buried by [an] accurate but nondescript label may hold reams of useful information concerning the subject’s career or personal life.”³⁵ Due to these differences, Mangravite argues that personal papers require a different level of processing than organizational records. One might call the approach that Mangravite advocates, with its deeper levels of processing and description, a reflection of a “modernist” understanding of archival practice. In this paradigm, careful processing and detailed descriptions create a product that helps researchers navigate a collection by bringing order to chaos. The act of processing, analyzing, and describing primary source material plays a much larger role in this definition of an archivist’s purpose than it does in Greene and Meissner’s, and researching and writing finding aids is a part of that purpose. It is in the realm of the finding aid, Mangravite argues, that archivists provide a “value-added contribution. The ability to create a finding aid that sums up a potentially

³⁵ Andrew Mangravite, “More Product, Less Process,” letter to the editor, *American Archivist* 69 (Spring/Summer 2006): 12-13.

unwieldy sum of knowledge making it both useful and accessible is our special skill.”³⁶

In a postmodern view, this value comes at a price: that of the imposition of the archivist's interpretation of the collection, as well as the assumption that the archivist's “mediating ‘I’” is crucial. Without mentioning Foucault or the cultural construction of language, Greene and Meissner respond to the idea of the archivist's editorial imposition in their 2006 letter to the editor of *American Archivist* that answers Mangravite's.³⁷ Researchers, Greene and Meissner argued in their original article, have come to use collections and formulate their own interpretations, not read those crafted by archivists. In their response to Mangravite, they reiterate this point and add the statement that “we add value most effectively and efficiently by managing our whole enterprise so that we make all of our collection materials available at some fundamental level to all researchers.”³⁸ Minimal standards processing advocates a more holistic approach to an archives' holdings than does item-level processing, and it provides a method to describe all collections, not the select few containing items of particular monetary, ideological, or cultural value that justify a prohibitively time-intensive approach.

While Mangravite's letter previews the resistance offered by many archivists to the suggestions put forth in “More Product, Less Process,” other archivists embraced MPLP concepts and put them into practice. In the two years following the publication of the article, a number of practicing archivists published case studies exploring their implementation of minimal standards processing principles. By nature these articles are hyper-practical, highlighting how minimal standards were implemented at particular

³⁶ Ibid, 12.

³⁷ Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner, “To the Editor,” *American Archivist* 69 (Spring/Summer 2006): 14.

³⁸ Ibid, 15.

repositories, assessing the value that the new processing practices added, and pointing out possible pitfalls for reference staff and users. In addition to delineating the nuts and bolts of adopting new practices, however, they also explore the ways in which MPLP principles reflect ideological questions, such as the purpose of a repository or the function of the finding aid. The case studies help to draw the connections between MPLP implementation and more explicitly theoretical approaches to archival management.

A central tenet of the MPLP approach to processing and description is that it increases access, which in postmodern views of archives accompanies institutional transparency. Shortly after Greene and Meissner's article appeared, Michael Strom published a case study in which he examines the application of MPLP principles to a large collection of congressional papers at Texas Christian University. Strom begins his study by analyzing processing literature for congressional collections and arguing that "collectively, we are not processing congressional collections as closely to the minimum-standards processing model as we may think" and that, as a result, Greene and Meissner's recommendations provide the opportunity to revisit processing metrics and practices. Strom focuses on the measurable results of minimal standards processing at his institution, noting that "having processed the first three series [of the collection], the department is able to turn its attention to other collections in the backlog" and that "the finding aid has provided access to the papers. Reference requests have increased and reference service has improved."³⁹ Donna McCrea described the similar reasons for adopting minimal standards processing at the University of Montana's archives. Her justification cites the

³⁹ Michael Strom, "Texas-Sized Progress: Applying Minimal Standards Processing to the Jim Wright Papers," *Archival Issues* 9 (2005): 106, 111.

importance of providing timely access: “I believe that an archivist at a public institution has an obligation to make collections available ... [and] a full-time processor who took eight hours to process each linear foot would just barely keep up with what the archives [at Montana] acquires in a year,” making no headway on describing the institution’s significant unprocessed backlog. Given the experimental nature of McCrea’s project, the bulk of the article is focused on the institutionally-specific; she describes, for instance, how the archives has “shortened our historical, biographical, and scope notes, leaving more of the burden of discovery on the user rather than on the archives staff.”⁴⁰

Both Strom and McCrea explore the practical implications and benefits of MPLP principles as well as the underlying ideologies which support the adoption of a new processing plan, but their observations also relate to postmodern concerns about the representation of archival collections. As Derrida and Harris have argued, archives will always be exclusionary and never capable of collecting every document or representing every experience; processing and describing all collections that are held, however, makes institutional holdings, as well as any gaps in coverage, more transparent. Not only does this activity facilitate research, it helps to enable discovery of the cultural framework for the institution’s collections through what Harris refers to as the “disclosure of context.”⁴¹ The collections do not exist in a vacuum but rather within the archives’ explicit frame of institutional reference, and MPLP principles provide a vehicle through which these institutions can make this frame of reference known in a timely and cost-effective manner.

⁴⁰ Donna McCrea, “Getting More for Less: Testing a New Processing Model at the University of Montana,” *American Archivist* 69 (2006): 285-6, 288.

⁴¹ Harris, *Archives and Justice*, 14.

In addition to encouraging archivists to move away from extensive and overtly interpretive narratives in finding aids and to make institutions' holdings as transparent as possible, MPLP principles also introduce a way in which the process of archival description can become more accessible and less hidden domain of the archival institution. As a result, processing and description move from the institution's single point of view to a more open and inclusive narrative. This is an idea that Christine Weideman explores as she describes how Yale University implemented minimum standards processing to address existing backlogs and prevent the future accumulation of unprocessed materials in the manuscripts division. Like Strom and McCrea, Weideman details the rationale behind the adoption of minimal standards processing and discusses the implications of this decision for descriptive activities at Yale, citing the need to meet the needs of researchers as well as those of donors. Both goals result in the need to "accomplish more processing in less time." As a result, Weideman notes that the manuscripts division has shifted the burden of discovery and extended interpretation from the processing archivist and reference staff to "the researchers themselves." In addition to this refrain, familiar from Strom and McCrea's case studies, Weideman also describes how she involves donors with arrangement and description: "I now ask donors who created the materials to write all or some of the series descriptions for our inventories. Since we are doing less arrangement and description below the series level we have less to say about the research strengths of the materials. The donors who created the materials, however, often have excellent insight into what the materials document."⁴² Instead of a place for the archivist to document his or her own interpretation of the collection, the finding aid becomes a place where an

⁴² Christine Weideman, "Accessioning as Processing," *American Archivist* 69 (2006): 276-82.

individual involved in the creation of the collection can document information about the materials and record a narrative that includes not just information about the items themselves but also about their place in the collection. This activity is reminiscent of Light and Hyry's analysis of annotations in finding aids, for it does not "privilege ... the processor's own context and perspective,"⁴³ but allows for another voice to join that of the institution.

Critics of MPLP often wonder if minimal standards can adequately reflect a collection's varied contents or support sustained research. In a postmodernist view of archives, one might also wonder if a minimally processed collection could be capable of reflecting the web of systems that informed the creation of the records. Anne L. Foster describes the reasons for adopting minimal standards processing to arrange the University of Alaska's extensive photograph collections, and her case study brings to light a method for acknowledging the perspectives that comprise archival collections through the application of MPLP. In addition to bringing MPLP concepts into the discussion of processing standards for image collections, Foster extends the theoretical implications for MPLP through her advocacy for user-driven processing. Instead of processing for a nebulous community or an ideal user, Foster describes how she analyzed the cultural parameters of her institution's constituency and implemented practices that were tailored to the needs of these users. The case study which she offers is the Field Papers, a collection of materials, including 40,000 photographs, compiled by a glaciologist. In this instance, "applying MPLP concepts meant looking at the collections as a resource created by a scientist, with projected scientific users ... There was no need to create item-level descriptions for these materials ... a long list of vaguely listed individual images ... would

⁴³ Light and Hyry, "Colophons and Annotations," 229.

only cause confusion.” As a corollary, Foster projects that “general public researchers would likely not be interested in most of these scientific views, which focused on technical recall and scientific measurement rather than landscapes, historic events or people . . . With this realization, we were able to stop all the item-level processing and focus on getting a workable finding aid written.”⁴⁴ On one level, this is a utilitarian statement driven by reflection about a collection in a specific repository; on another, it is a practical restatement of the postmodern idea that the creators of records, the institutions that house them, and the researchers who use archival documents all assign meanings to a collection. In this instance, minimal standards processing preserves the layers of meaning and understanding already associated with a collection rather than eradicating them during processing.

As a careful reading of Greene and Meissner’s “More Product, Less Process” and case studies from early adopters of MPLP reveals, the focus of minimal standards processing is not necessarily expediency for the sake of expediency. Rather, minimal standards processing asks archivists to think about the actions they take and the resulting consequences, to evaluate the purpose and function of archival collections, to consider the political and social roles that archivists play as they arrange and describe collections, and then to practice their profession in light of these reflections. In the MPLP literature, archival practice provides a testing ground for theoretical questions as well as the opportunity to consider the purpose and implications of theory. This observation returns the present discussion to Frank Burke’s article on the future of archival theory in the United States. After noting the schism dividing theory from the existing body of practice-based archival literature, Burke argues that once philosophers and

⁴⁴ Anne Foster, “Minimum Standards Processing and Photograph Collections,” *Archival Issues* 30 (2006): 110.

academics have formulated theories about archives, the “task for the working archivist will be to test those assumptions against practice.”⁴⁵ Relating the literature of minimal standards to discourse about postmodern theories of archives facilitates a movement toward a corpus of professional thought that incorporates ideas with practice and thought with action and away from a focus on case studies driven by expediency alone. Recognizing these elements in case studies reveals the “theology” under which Burke’s “parish priests” of archives practice, even when this theology is not explicitly stated as a general theory, for as Preben Mortensen asserted, “practice is not independent of theory ... Theory ... becomes an examination of a practice ... aimed at articulating those general principles, ideas, or theories that give these practices their coherence.”⁴⁶ What remains for working archivists is to acknowledge directly the theoretical implications of existing practices and to explore expressly the cohesion between the two.

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⁴⁵ Burke, “Future Course,” 43.

⁴⁶Mortensen, “Place of Theory,” 19-20.