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Kara Flynn
Augusta University

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Eating in the Archives? A Review of Archival Outreach and Engagement through Food History

Kara Flynn

Introduction

When we think about archives, we rarely think about *encouraging* our users to eat in archival spaces—rather, we do everything in our power to ensure that food and drink does not make its way into the archives. However, food can actually play an important role in archival collections and institutions. Looking at the past through the lens of food can make history more accessible, especially for those unfamiliar with archives, as the idea of food is not only culturally constructed, but has a symbolic power that is closely tied to memory.¹ Through archival documents related to food, we can trace social and political changes, analyze economic and technological developments, and think critically about everything from globalization, to public health, to gender, race, and class. Utilizing food history as archival outreach is a growing trend among archival institutions, and has wide appeal.² Talking about, and consuming food, in the context of the archives provides an accessible and approachable entry point to a space that can seem daunting. Through an exploration of my own experiences with archival food history outreach, as well as research into the practices of other professionals and institutions, I propose that even with the growing number of food history-related activities taking place in archival spaces and online, this particular form of outreach has even greater potential for cooks, students, and community researchers and activists than has yet been fully realized.

¹ Jay Satterfield, "Considering the Present: Special Collections are the Meal, Not the Dessert" in *Forging the Future of Special Collections*, eds. M. Hubbard, R. Jackson, A. Hirshon (Chicago: ALA Neal-Schuman, 2016), 117-129; Jon D. Holtzman, "Food and Memory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 361-378.

² Alexandrina Buchanan and Michelle Bastian, "Activating the Archive: Rethinking the Role of Traditional Archives for Local Activist Projects," *Archival Science* 15, no. 4 (December 2015): 429-451; Erin Lawrimore, "Hop into History: Engaging Community through Archives and Beer" *Archival Outlook* (September/October 2017): 3, 31.

Food history as Archival Outreach: Event Case Studies

My first exploration into the realm of using food history as archival outreach began in the fall of 2015. I was processing a number of the Quaker collections at Haverford College as part of a Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR) Hidden Collections grant, and I needed to come up with a topic for an archival outreach event. At the time, I had been working largely with archival collections from the colonial period through the mid-nineteenth century, and had stumbled across a number of recipe books, which I found intriguing.³ Recipe books differ from published cookbooks, in that they are unpublished, and handwritten by the woman preparing those recipes. Early recipe books often feature not only recipes for food, but also medical instruction, household tips, and recipes for various home goods, like paint or laundry soap. As a result, recipe books feel deeply personal to me, in a way that cookbooks do not.

I so enjoyed looking through these recipe books that I decided to plan an event around them. I combed through the recipes to find the most palatable, and the recipes I thought would be the simplest to translate from a colonial to early-nineteenth-century kitchen to a modern one, and transcribed them. I then recruited library staff to help me recreate the recipes, and provided event participants with the transcribed recipes, and a bit of information about how to translate older measurements, such as a “gill,” and older forms of leavening agents, like potash, to modern equivalents. We invited the campus and local community to taste test the recipes and view the volumes from which we had taken said recipes. While the event itself generated a good turnout, arguably more archival outreach happened after the fact. In the run up to the event, I had written a post on the library blog about the program, and had promoted it on various library social media accounts.⁴ Through the blog post, I was contacted by a member of the Manuscript Cookbooks Survey project, an independent database that collects information about, and provides access to, pre-1865 English

³ Kara Flynn, “Hidden Collections: A Recap,” Haverford College Headlines, last modified December 16, 2015, <https://www.haverford.edu/library/news/hidden-collections-recap>.

⁴ Flynn, “Hidden Collections.”

Language manuscript cookbooks held in U.S. institutions.⁵ Through the Manuscript Cookbooks Survey, the finding aids I had written for the recipe books in Haverford's Quakers and Special Collections were able to reach an even larger audience by being linked to a larger database outside of the Quaker & Special Collections website. At the same time, Haverford College's communications department began adapting the recipes as quick cooking videos in a popular style akin to what a viewer might find on BuzzFeed or YouTube, and featuring them on the library website.⁶

When I started as the Special Collections & Institutional Archives Librarian at Augusta University in August of 2017, with just two months to plan an event for Archives Month, I went back to what I knew best—tying together the threads of food history using archival materials. As with the previous event at Haverford College, I selected a series of recipes from a number of different cookbooks and recruited library faculty and staff, as well as history and anthropology faculty members, to help prepare the recipes, which we served prior to presentations. This gave attendees the chance to taste test some of the recipes, and to view an exhibit of the selected cookbooks. Of course, the scope of our collections at Augusta University were significantly different from those at Haverford, but the beauty of an event that focuses on food history is that food is everywhere, in myriad different forms. Our collecting scope focuses largely on the history of the local area, and on the history of the University. For our exhibit, we pulled published cookbooks from 1880 to the present, as well as loose handwritten recipes, food advertisements from the early twentieth century, grocery ledgers, a collection of World War Two ration books from a local family, and a program for a "Million Dollar Luncheon" that took place in Augusta in 1942. We also included historic photographs of grocery stores, bakeries, butchers, and restaurants from Augusta.

⁵ "Manuscript Database," Manuscript Cookbooks Survey, accessed September 23, 2018, <http://www.manuscriptcookbookssurvey.com/collection/index.php/Search/advanced/manuscripts>.

⁶ Rebecca Raber, "Cooking the Collection: Clove Cake," filmed March 17, 2016, video, 01:42, posted March 17, 2016, <https://blogs.haverford.edu/haverblog/2016/03/17/cooking-the-collection-clove-cake/>.

With this event I wanted to expand upon the pop-up display I had done at Haverford College to include a longer-running exhibit and to engage students and faculty with the archives in a more meaningful way. At Augusta University, I play a dual role as both the Special Collections & Institutional Archives Librarian and the Liaison Librarian to the History, Anthropology, and Philosophy department, which provides more opportunities to build relationships with students and faculty. The department offers history and anthropology classes on food history and the anthropology of food, and I was able to recruit two faculty members, one a professor of history, and one a professor of anthropology, to speak at an exhibit opening event. During the month of September, the students in the Anthropology of Food and Culture class, an upper division undergraduate course, were working on a project analyzing cookbooks from four different decades, including one cookbook from Special Collections. The professor selected the top three student papers, and the students each gave a short presentation at the Archives Month exhibit opening.

One of the most important differences between planning an early iteration of this type of event at Haverford College, and expanding upon it at Augusta University, was the integration of faculty and students not simply as attendees, but as participants. For a number of decades now, education has been an integral part of archival outreach, and as teaching is a key component of my own position at Augusta University, I knew I wanted to make this a focus of the project.⁷ The Anthropology of Food and Culture Class offered in the fall of 2017, paired with the interest of the faculty members in presenting at the exhibit opening, provided an excellent opportunity to focus this event around teaching and learning in a more substantial way than I had been able to do at Haverford College. The event not only helped me to forge relationships with history and anthropology faculty and their students, but it also provided a platform for faculty, and more importantly, students, to share their research with both the University and the local community.

⁷ Ken Osborne, "Archives in the Classroom," *Archivaria* 23 (1986): 16-40; Sharon Anne Cook, "Connecting Archives and the Classroom," *Archivaria* 44 (1997): 102-117; Valerie A. Harris, and Ann C. Weller. "Use of Special Collections as an Opportunity for Outreach in the Academic Library," *Journal of Library Administration* 52, no. 3-4 (April 2012): 294-303.

Archivists and special collections librarians have understood the value of including primary sources in teaching for many years, but professionals in the field have only recently begun to understand the impact this has on undergraduates.⁸ In my own experience working with students on their cookbook project, I found that they reported similar learning outcomes as have been found in studies focused on undergraduate engagement with primary sources.⁹ Students who participated in the cookbook project, and who later presented at, or attended, the food history event in October of 2017, talked about their newfound awareness of archives and special collections, as well as the skills they had learned. Students gained experience handling archival materials, reading nineteenth-century handwriting, and thinking critically about how the author and time period of the primary source they analyzed influenced its content.

In contrast to the previous food history event at Haverford College, this program provided the opportunity for students and faculty to have a kind of prolonged engagement with the archives. This proved beneficial not only for student learning outcomes, but also in building relationships with faculty and students during the months leading up to the exhibit opening. Archival outreach, particularly with event-focused forms of outreach, can frequently overlook engagement—outreach is often framed as a series of distinct activities or events, but ideally, archival outreach should result in archival engagement, which persists after an event ends.¹⁰ In addition to the prolonged engagement with students through their research projects, we also developed a basic digital exhibit using Omeka, which we will continue to add to long after the physical exhibit has closed. As the food history and culture classes are offered

⁸ Osborne, "Archives in the Classroom;" Morgan Daniels and Elizabeth Yakel, "Uncovering Impact: the Influence of Archives on Student Learning," *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 39, no. 5 (2013): 414-422; Wendy M. Duff and Joan M. Cherry, "Archival Orientation for Undergraduate Students: An Exploratory Study of Impact," *American Archivist* 71, 2 (Fall/Winter 2008): 499-529; Magia G. Krause, "It Makes History Alive for Them": the Role of Archivists and Special Collections Librarians in Instructing Undergraduates." *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 36, no. 5 (September 2010): 401-411.

⁹ Duff and Cherry, "Archival Orientation for Undergraduate Students."

¹⁰ Society of American Archivists, "Outreach," *Glossary of Archival and Records Terminology*, accessed September 23, 2018, <https://www2.archivists.org/glossary/terms/o/outreach>.

each year, we also hope that the digital exhibit may serve as a resource in teaching these courses in the future.

I am far from alone in recognizing the value in drawing upon food history as an avenue for archival outreach and engagement. From events and exhibits to online resources, archivists are bringing food into their archival engagement endeavors in a wide variety of forms. In the past few years, archival exhibits and outreach events focusing on food history have begun to gain traction in both the United States and Canada. In the fall of 2016, Erin Lawrimore, University Archivist at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, began creating a series of pop-up exhibits in cooperation with local craft breweries in the city, and with archivists at Wake Forest University. The series of exhibits, entitled “Hop into History,” has grown and evolved, and Lawrimore has continued to recruit area archivists from Guilford College and Elon University to join in the effort. The series has even resulted in a UNCG Libraries’ Innovation and Enrichment Grant (2017-2018), which will allow Lawrimore and her colleagues to further expand the series with an oral history project.¹¹ While the events that Lawrimore has curated do not speak specifically to food history, her approach in engaging various community members, from local craft breweries to other archivists, provides a great model for the types of opportunities available when one pairs the approachable local food or drink establishment with the promotion of archives and archival materials.

McGill University, in Quebec, Canada, also hosted a beer-related food history exhibit in the fall of 2017. The exhibit, entitled, “The Gendered Cultures of Beer and Cheese: The Regulation of Human and Microbial Bodies on the Home and Industrial Scales, 1616-2017,” featured not only cookbooks, but also medical texts, training manuals, and documents from the food industry, all focused around fermentation. The exhibit occurred in conjunction with a conference held at the University at the same time, called “Leavening the Conversation: Food, Feminism, and Fermentation.” The exhibit was on display from September 11, 2017 through October 2, 2017, and is still accessible through an online exhibit

¹¹ Lawrimore, “Hop into History.”

hosted on the Historical Cooking Project site.¹² This project is somewhat unique compared with food history exhibits done elsewhere, as it is one of the few forms of archival outreach that draws upon the scientific aspects of food history and food production, due to its focus on fermentation and the inclusion of medical texts in the exhibit. As much of early food production and preparation was medicinal in many ways, food history outreach that can draw these kinds of connections have the potential to engage those outside the humanities disciplines.¹³ Within academic settings, STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) students are a particularly underserved group when it comes to archival outreach, but because of its interdisciplinary nature, food history has the potential to bridge the gap between STEM and the archives.¹⁴ There are a number of potential obstacles related to faculty and student buy-in to incorporating the archives into STEM education, including but not limited to skepticism of the utility of archival research in STEM and time constraints due to class and lab schedules. However, pointing to existing examples of how one might tie together STEM and the archives, such as the McGill University exhibit, may open new avenues for archival outreach and interdisciplinary collaboration.¹⁵

While the previously outlined outreach exhibits and events focused on a single local community, there have also been a number of national outreach endeavors in recent years that hope to engage a national audience with archives through a focus on food history. The Scottish Council on Archives began an “edible archive” in 2015, in conjunction with Scotland’s “year of food and drink,” an initiative

¹² Alex Ketchum, “Digitized Exhibit: The Gendered Cultures of Beer and Cheese: The Regulation of Human and Microbial Bodies on the Home and Industrial Scales, 1616-2017,” *The Historical Cooking Project*, published September 29, 2017, <http://www.historicalcookingproject.com/2017/09/digitized-exhibit-gendered-cultures-of.html>.

¹³ Jean-Louis Flandrin, “Introduction: The Early Modern Period,” in *Food: a Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present*, ed. Jean-Louis Flandrin, Massimo Montanari, Albert Sonnenfeld, trans. Clarissa Botsford (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 313-334.

¹⁴ Lindsay Anderberg, “STEM Undergraduates and Archival Instruction: A Case Study at NYU Polytechnic School of Engineering,” *American Archivist* 78, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2015): 548-566.

¹⁵ Anderberg, “STEM Undergraduates and Archival Instruction.”

intended to focus on the importance of food and drink and its role in Scotland's economic and cultural history.¹⁶ In addition to live events during 2015, the Edible Archive continues to grow as an interactive online exhibit, with digitized recipes, cooking videos of historic dishes, and the creation of a First World War Cookbook, using recipes, documents, and photographs from archival collections in Scotland. The Edible Archive also solicits digital donations of online recipe cards, which individuals can fill out with their own family recipes. While the archive does not accept donations of original physical materials, they do direct site visitors to their local archives through links provided on their page. In the United States, the National Archives hosted an exhibit on government involvement in food history, entitled "What's Cooking, Uncle Sam?"¹⁷ The exhibit was originally on display from June 2011 through January 2012 at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and subsequently went on a national tour from 2014 through August of 2017. The exhibit continues to live on in digital form and features four different ways visitors can navigate the content: via the farm, the factory, the kitchen, and the table. Although the Scottish Edible Archive and the National Archives' exhibits have different focuses, both hope to encourage archival engagement with food history at the national level, which speaks to the perceived appeal of this kind of outreach.

Food history as Online Archival Outreach

In addition to events and exhibits, the creation of online resources like Michigan State University's "Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project," the independent Manuscript Cookbooks Survey database, and "The Historical Cooking Project" offer opportunities for research into the history of food in a searchable, publicly accessible form.¹⁸ The Feeding America project,

¹⁶ Scottish Council on Archives, "The Edible Archive," accessed September 23, 2018, <http://www.scottisharchives.org.uk/discover/awareness/ediblearchive>.

¹⁷ National Archives and Records Administration. "What's cooking Uncle Sam?" Exhibition, accessed September 23, 2018, <http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/whats-cooking/>.

¹⁸ "Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project," Michigan State University, accessed September 23, 2018, <https://digital.lib.msu.edu/projects/cookbooks/index>; "Manuscript Cookbooks

funded by a 2001 IMLS National Leadership Grant, acts as a digital library of early American cookbooks, features museum objects related to early cooking, and includes a glossary of cooking terms that have since fallen out of use.¹⁹ The Manuscript Cookbooks Survey presents another option for online outreach with food history, as a database that includes manuscripts from archives, libraries, and museums from across America. This resource not only connects researchers and educators with a number of archival resources on food history, but it also serves to connect archivists from around the United States to discover what other institutions have in their collections related to this topic.²⁰ In addition to the database, the Manuscript Cookbooks Survey also runs a Twitter account and regularly writes blog posts, further expanding their outreach beyond academia into the public sphere. Karen Dunn, an Information Services Librarian at the University of Wisconsin, has done similar work in her Library Guide, “Cookbooks, Culinary Arts, Culinary History: Cookbook Collections,” which connects users not only with cookbook collections from around the United States, but also with local resource and various culinary history groups, thereby moving engagement with food history beyond the library and into the broader community. The guide also includes information on local cooking classes, cooking schools, and community food resource groups, pulling together archival resources, food history and local amateur and professional cooks.²¹ By bringing local cooks into the food history conversation, this resource, and others like it, lay the groundwork for cooks to potentially become involved in food history as users of archives, and as participants in food history and activism using archival resources. The Historical Cooking Project, an independent and interdisciplinary online publication, “showcases new scholarship on the study of food throughout history,” and aims to challenge the divide between academia and the exploration of

Survey;” “The Historical Cooking Project,” The Historical Cooking Project, accessed September 23, 2018, <http://www.historicalcookingproject.com>.

¹⁹ “Feeding America.”

²⁰ “Manuscript database.”

²¹ Karen Dunn, “Research Guides: Cookbooks, Culinary Arts, Culinary History: Cookbook Collections,” University of Wisconsin-Madison Libraries, accessed September 23, 2018, https://researchguides.library.wisc.edu/cookbooks/books_blogs_recipes.

public history.²² The publication, presented in a blog-like style, covers a wide variety of topics related to food history.

In addition to sites that provide information on and access to resources on food history, Duke University's Rubenstein Library Test Kitchen blog provides readers with an exploration of the process of recreating historical recipes from the David M. Rubenstein Rare Books & Manuscript Library's cookbooks and manuscript collections.²³ As Rubenstein's Research Services Director Elizabeth Dunn pointed out in a September 2017 interview with National Public Radio, the blog is not just an entertaining read about historic cooking failures or unpalatable recipes, but also speaks to important historical areas of research, including, but not limited to, trade and the economy and race, medicine, and gender in diverse regions throughout history.²⁴ Duke's own blog was modeled after an earlier project from the University of Pennsylvania, entitled "Cooking in the Archives: Updating Early Modern Recipes (1600-1800) in a Modern Kitchen."²⁵ The University of Pennsylvania project aims not only to provide access to historical recipes for study as archival texts; they also want to encourage the use of archival recipes in the modern kitchen. One of the most important aspects of the initiative for the project leaders, Alyssa Connell and Marissa Nicosia, is access, and the steps they took reflect this emphasis. Their process includes not only digitizing, but also transcribing the recipes to make them more accessible to readers who may not have any background working with archival materials. As both Connell and Nicosia point out, simply digitizing manuscripts does not necessarily equal accessibility.²⁶ In addition to providing free access to digitized and

²² "Historical Cooking Project."

²³ "Category: Rubenstein Library Test Kitchen," The Devil's Tale blog, Duke University Libraries, last modified, May 31, 2018, <https://blogs.library.duke.edu/rubenstein/category/rubenstein-library-test-kitchen/>.

²⁴ Cynthia Greenlee, "At Duke University, a Bizarre Tour through American History and Palates" *National Public Radio: Food and Culture*, September 21, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2017/09/21/547308048/atduke-university-a-bizarre-tour-through-american-history-and-palates>.

²⁵ Greenlee, "At Duke University"; "Cooking in the Archives: Updating Early Modern Recipes (1600-1800) in a Modern Kitchen," last modified August 7, 2018, <https://rarecooking.com/>.

²⁶ Alyssa Connell and Marissa Nicosia, "Cooking in the Archives: Bringing Early Modern Manuscript Recipes into a Twenty-First Century Kitchen," *Archive*

transcribed manuscripts, Connell and Nicosia include clear citations to the manuscripts and to any cataloging information, definitions for unfamiliar ingredients, a version of the recipe presented in a modern format, and notes and photographs from their attempt at preparing each recipe. The inclusion of photographs and recipes, and the fact that both the Duke University project and the University of Pennsylvania project use a blogging platform make the projects much more accessible to readers from diverse backgrounds, who may not come from, or may simply be uncomfortable within the academic sphere.

New Directions

The majority of existing food history-centered archival outreach initiatives have focused around analyzing history through the lens of food, but there are projects that illustrate the potential of using archival resources for contemporary activism. The Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project, “Memories of Mr. Seel’s Garden: exploring past and future food systems in Liverpool,” brings history to modern audiences not only for the sake of better understanding the past, but for creating positive change in the present as well.²⁷ This project, which ran from 2012 to 2013, and included four academics, two heritage professionals, and three community groups, aimed to investigate how historical food ways might contribute to modern food movements.²⁸ Through a series of archival workshops, the researchers worked with archival records, historic maps, and oral histories to develop a better understanding of food history in the local context of Liverpool, England. Project leaders also participated in a number of community events outside of the archives to promote the ongoing project and the researchers’ findings at events like Liverpool’s “Big History Weekend” and through an “Eating in the Archives” event. One of the limitations that Buchanan and Bastian point out in their report on this project is that “previous research linking archives and food has primarily been historical, aiming to reconstruct historical diets.”²⁹ Many of the archival

Journal (July 2015), <http://www.archivejournal.net/notes/cooking-in-the-archives-bringing-early-modern-manuscript-recipes-into-atwenty-first-century-kitchen/>.

²⁷ Buchanan and Bastian, “Activating the Archive.”

²⁸ Buchanan and Bastian, “Activating the Archive.”

²⁹ Buchanan and Bastian, “Activating the Archive,” 436.

outreach opportunities that I have pointed to, from outreach events put on by institutions to online resources developed both independently and by institutions, have had this kind of historical focus. While there is value in these types of outreach, as they provide accessible ways into the archives and the possibility of wide-reaching community engagement, there are further opportunities to engage in modern activist concerns through archival food history work that have only just begun to be explored.

The "Memories of Mr. Seel's garden" project makes food history forward-looking with its focus on food and nutrition activism and provides inspiration for archivists who may want to use their resources to inform contemporary issues.³⁰ As research and activism regarding food inequality, food deserts, and community gardens continues to gain traction both within local communities and the academy, archivists and archival institutions have the unique opportunity to not only help researchers look back at the past, but to work reciprocally with community organizations and activists to bring history to bear on modern movements in these areas moving forward.

Conclusions

For decades now, archivists have been working to make archival spaces more approachable and accessible, to leave behind the idea of archivists as the gatekeepers of their collections, and to strive to actively engage with their communities.³¹ Food history provides the opportunity to build archival outreach and engagement opportunities by utilizing materials often already found in archival collections and to open up dialogue with community members about something they are familiar with, even if they have never stepped foot in the archives. Utilizing food history as archival outreach is a growing trend among archival institutions, as evidenced by the increasing numbers of events, exhibits, and online resources being

³⁰ Buchanan and Bastian, "Activating the Archive."

³¹ Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, "Whose memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream," *Archival Science* 9, no. 1-2 (2009): 71; S. Martin, "Inheriting Diversity: Archiving the Past," in: *The Politics of Heritage: The Legacies of 'Race,'* eds. J. Littler and R. Naidoo (Routledge, London, 2015), 196–201.

offered.³² Nonetheless, this particular form of outreach has even greater potential for cooks, students, community researchers and activists than has yet been fully realized. Many of the events and exhibits I have highlighted here come out of archives on college and university campuses, but few have fully tapped into the opportunities that food history has for engaging STEM students with the archives, which can prove to be as beneficial for STEM students as for humanities students, the more traditional users of archives.³³ Moving outside of academia and into the community, projects like the AHRC-funded, “Memories of Mr. Seel’s Garden: exploring past and future food systems in Liverpool,” reveal that in addition to reaching student and casual community users, food history-focused archival outreach also has the potential to translate into food activism. Archival resources related to food history can create positive change in the present as well.³⁴ Given the evidence of community interest in, and the impact of, these kinds of outreach activities, food history presents many additional opportunities to tailor archival outreach endeavors to fit a variety of collections, communities, and institutional outreach goals, beyond simply looking back at history.

Kara Flynn is the Special Collections & Institutional Archives Librarian at Augusta University, where she also serves as the Liaison Librarian for the History, Anthropology, and Philosophy Department. She received her MLIS with a concentration in Archives & Information from the University of Pittsburgh, and her B.A. in English Literature from the University Puget Sound. Her research interests include archival outreach and engagement, teaching with primary sources, and community archiving.

³² Dunn, “Research Guides”; Flynn, “Hidden Collections”; Lawrimore, “Hop into History”; “Feeding America”; “Manuscript database”; “Historical Cooking Project.”

³³ Anderberg, “STEM Undergraduates and Archival Instruction.”

³⁴ Buchanan and Bastian, “Activating the archive.”