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**Archival Allegory? Cultural Studies and  
T.R. Schellenberg's *Modern Archives:  
Principles and Techniques***

**Cheryl Beredo**

The archivist's job at all times is to preserve the evidence, impartially, without taint of political or ideological bias, so that on the basis of this evidence those judgments may be pronounced upon men and events by posterity which historians through human failings are momentarily incapable of pronouncing. Archivists are thus the guardians of the truth, or, at least, of the evidence on the basis of which truth can be established.

—Theodore Roosevelt Schellenberg,  
*Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*<sup>1</sup>

**INTRODUCTION**

President Franklin D. Roosevelt established the United States National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) in 1934, the same year that Theodore Roosevelt Schellenberg earned his doctorate in history from the University of Pennsylvania and began a career in archives. Schellenberg slowly and surely climbed the archival ranks, holding federal posts in

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<sup>1</sup> T.R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1998), 236.

Washington, D.C., and teaching archival-training courses at local universities; he later lectured on a variety of topics relating to archives in Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand. In 1950 Schellenberg was appointed to the prestigious position of director of Archival Management at NARA.<sup>2</sup> Schellenberg soon published *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (1956), and in the years before his retirement in 1963 he would go on to publish dozens of works on archival history and practice, both in the United States and overseas. *Modern Archives* is arguably the most enduring of Schellenberg's writings, a kind of textbook for United States archivists that argues the importance and European origins of United States archives, examines the distinguishing characteristics of archival records and institutions, and outlines approaches to primary archival functions, from appraisal to documentary publication. Both records-management and archival-management guidelines are often illustrated by way of contrasting United States principles and techniques with those of other nations, making clear the latter's "essential nature."<sup>3</sup> Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that even fifty years after its original publication *Modern Archives* remains canonical reading for United States archivists.<sup>4</sup>

### ARCHIVAL ALLEGORY

This essay reviews *Modern Archives* to suggest the possibility of a concept of "archival allegory" that clearly draws from James Clifford's work. In his introduction to "On Ethnographic Allegory," Clifford writes:

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<sup>2</sup>"Schellenberg, Theodore Roosevelt" in *American National Biography* 19 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 365.

<sup>3</sup> Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, x.

<sup>4</sup> Since its original publication in 1956, *Modern Archives* has been reprinted several times by the University of Chicago Press. More recently, the Society of American Archivists (SAA), the major professional organization of archivists in the United States, has published the volume as part of its "Archival Classic Reprints" series, the purpose of which is "to re-introduce previously out-of-print classic archival literature."

In what follows I treat ethnography itself as a performance emplotted by powerful stories. Embodied in written reports, these stories simultaneously describe real cultural events and make additional, moral, ideological, and even cosmological statements. Ethnographic writing is allegorical at the level both of its content (what it says about cultures and their histories) and of its form (what is implied by its mode of textualization).<sup>5</sup>

I suggest that archival practice, or the execution of archival techniques, also is a “performance emplotted by ... stories.” Execution of archival techniques, as Schellenberg describes, literally reconstitutes a document into an archive through appraisal, arrangement, and description (i.e., bring a document into an archive, file it in an acid-free folder, and now call it “archival”). Both the content and the form of this reconstitution, of the creation of an archive, are intended to mirror the content and form of the subject (i.e., what a government agency did and how it was organized) that is to be documented. Archival practice is thus a kind of textualization: the archive is a text, the archivist is its author. While Schellenberg’s codification of archival practice may make many “moral, ideological, and even cosmological statements,” this essay will focus on how the “archival allegory” of Schellenberg’s *Modern Archives* makes particular ideological statements about the United States.

To begin a consideration of “archival allegory,” this essay will first outline the conditions and limitations of the archivist, offering a reading of how Schellenberg’s identification of European archives as United States archives’ forebears circumscribes his codification of archival practice. Given that narrative frame of United States archives’ emergence, I will then consider the presence of the archivist, Theodore Roosevelt Schellenberg, in the text, a seemingly unremarkable administrative work that benignly attends to details of file naming or classifying methods. This presence is most pronounced in Schellenberg’s discussions of how new

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<sup>5</sup> James Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory” in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 98.

technologies of reproduction and order enable the departure of modern archival practice from conventional practice. Highlighting how archival practice is necessarily circumscribed by archival studies' inherited vocabulary, and drawing attention to the author's presence in the text, this essay is a modest attempt to begin a discussion of how students of the archive, broadly defined, may better understand the circumstances and limitations of its formation, as well as its promises.

### **OVERVIEW OF MODERN ARCHIVES**

In T. R. Schellenberg's formulation, government records begin as "current," useful insofar as they document (provide evidence of) a function of a government agency and its interaction with an individual, corporate body, or another government agency. After a "current record" has served its original purpose, the archivist must determine its disposition: a record may be destroyed outright, microfilmed and then destroyed, transferred to a records center (which allows for the postponement of a disposition determination), or transferred to an archival institution.

Disposition renders a "current record" into a "non-current record"; moreover, if a record is transferred to an archival institution, it is then considered an "archival record." Beyond a record's value in documenting the function and transaction of an agency, which Schellenberg calls "evidential value," a record also has "informational value." Schellenberg clarifies: "Informational values derive, as is evident from the very term, from the information that is in public records on persons, places, subjects, and the like with which public agencies deal; not from the information that is in such records or the public agencies themselves."<sup>6</sup> Once material is held in an archive, the archivist's responsibility is to appraise both the "evidential value" and the "informational value" of the record (which may be considered to be the second round of disposition), preserve the record, arrange

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<sup>6</sup> Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 148.

and describe the record, publish the record, and provide access to the record.<sup>7</sup>

*Modern Archives* describes this process in three parts: First, Schellenberg discusses the origins and importance of modern archives. He also defines the “nature of archives” and the relationships between archives and libraries, and between archives and records management. The second part is devoted to records management: “Essentials of Record Management,” “Production Controls,” “Classification Principles,” “Registry Systems,” “American Filing Systems,” and “Disposition Practices.” The final part of *Modern Archives* focuses on archival management which Schellenberg discusses in seven chapters: “Essential Conditions of Archival Management,” “Appraisal Standards,” “Preservation Practices,” “Principles of Arrangement,” “Description Practices,” “Publication Programs,” and “Reference Service.” Schellenberg’s *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* remains true to its title, describing the origins, structure, and proper administration, or “best practices,” of categorically modern archives.

### **ARCHIVES BEFORE MODERN ARCHIVES**

The proper administration of modern archives is necessarily delimited by the vocabulary—linguistic and conceptual—available to describe those practices. At the center of Schellenberg’s account of the emergence of modern archives is the nation-state and its attendant lexicon. Indeed, his narrative of modern archives’ emergence relies upon narratives of nation in France, England, and the United States, and in so doing foregrounds a tradition of archives’ service to national projects. Understanding archives’ *raison d’être* and their ongoing development in this way, Schellenberg’s prescription of archival techniques expresses the politics and poetics of the role of “modern archives” in nation-building.

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<sup>7</sup> Schellenberg’s formulation is now a truism of archival practice, the most crucial aspect being that far more records will be destroyed than transferred to archival institutions. He emphasizes: “The archivist’s role, moreover, should be that of moderator. Archivists dealing with modern records realize that not all of them can be preserved, that some of them have to be destroyed, and that, in fact, a discriminating destruction of a portion of them is a service to scholarship.” *Ibid.*, 152.

In the case of modern archives in the United States, Schellenberg's account makes rhetorical use of the fundamental differences between archives in different countries:

Archival principles and techniques have evolved in all countries in relation to the ways in which public records are kept while they are in current use by the government. The ways of the United States government are basically different from those of the governments of other countries. In the United States public records are kept according to various new filing systems; in practically all other countries they are kept according to a registry system. This book, then, is in some degree a study of contrasts: contrasts between the principles and techniques evolved in relation to new filing systems in the United States and those evolved in relation to the registry system abroad.<sup>8</sup>

Logical and benign is one reading of Schellenberg's pronouncement of the basic differences between the governance of different countries and, consequently, the archives that document them; however, another reading, especially given the emphasis on the "new" in "modern archives," suggests the politically meaningful ways that organization of an archive—either through new filing systems of the United States or implicitly outdated registry systems of the "Old World"—reflects the structure of the government it serves. The above excerpt from *Modern Archives's* introduction lays the groundwork for a study of how the archives of the United States are exceptional, reflective of the nation's exceptional government, and dialectically related to that exceptional government. Given the both descriptive and prescriptive orientation of *Modern Archives*, Schellenberg's opening pages set up a discussion of not only how to build an archive, but how also, by extension, to maintain a particular understanding of the United States.

Schellenberg asserts, for example, that the archival institutions of "France, England, and the United States will best serve to illustrate the importance accorded to the preservation of national archival resources," rather than those of ancient

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

civilizations, the Middle Ages, Germany, Italy, Spain, and “other countries.”<sup>9</sup> He goes on to describe the origins of the first national archives in the world, the Archives Nationales in Paris. Established in the wake of the French Revolution, the archive was formed to keep “the records of the New France—records that signified its gains and displayed its glories.” By contrast, England’s Public Records Office was created for the “practical reason” that the records of government were in disrepair and the “cultural reason” that historians lobbied for the creation of an archive.<sup>10</sup>

Schellenberg continues, connecting the origins of the United States National Archives and Records Administration with those of the Archives Nationales and Public Records Office. As in England, United States governmental records were generally neglected; many were destroyed in fires throughout the nineteenth century. Moreover, between 1900 and 1912, the Public Archives Commission of the American Historical Association argued for the creation of a national archive in the interest of historical scholarship. As in France, the national archive would house the records of a new nation. Taking this constellation of archives in England, France, and the United States as his starting point, Schellenberg concludes with the four major reasons for the establishment of archival institutions: government efficiency, personal interest (to protect the rights of citizens), official record, and cultural purposes.

At first, of these four reasons, the final—“cultural”—seems vaguely to indicate the importance of archives to national projects, as well as scholars’ participation in such projects, but Schellenberg explains: “In England and the United States historians were the first to recognize the importance of public records, and largely through their insistence national archives were established in the two countries. Historians saw that such records in their entirety reflect not only the growth and functioning of government, but also the development of a nation.”<sup>11</sup> Notably, the height of the Public Archives

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



Commission's activities coincided with the height of the United States' initial forays into the realm of imperial conquest; at the end of the nineteenth century and into the first decades of the twentieth century, the government necessarily created a record of its acquisitions on the continental United States, Caribbean, and the Pacific.<sup>12</sup>

Schellenberg thus constructs a particular frame of reference for understanding the origins and purposes of the archive in the United States. Such a construct foregrounds national interests (though Schellenberg never fully defines those interests) and in so doing precludes understandings of the archive that provide an alternative narrative of its emergence in the United States. Coupled with the above-cited transformation of a "current record" into an "archival record," Schellenberg's analysis does not invite a definition of another form of archive. A modern archive is constituted by culling non-current records and is inherently borne of government bureaucracy. In the interest of streamlining archival practice, and in the expediency of understanding the French and English origins of modern archives, acceptance of Schellenberg's articulation of archival principles limits the vocabulary for understanding how archives are constituted, and how they function and to what effect. As Schellenberg both describes and prescribes the "essential nature," the varied functions, etc., of archives, he is also stating what an archive is not and cannot be; evident in these tacit omissions is the ideology of American exceptionalism and the allegory of the archive.

### **EXCEPTIONAL TECHNOLOGIES IN MODERN ARCHIVES**

As mentioned above, one of the crucial mechanisms for signaling the modern character of United States archives is the use of technologies therein. Given the enormous volume

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the challenge that disparate colonial archives present to both archivists and historians, see Jeannette Allis Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003). Also, NARA has published documentary editions of records (twenty-eight volumes!) relating to the United States' continental expansion, *Territorial Papers of the United States*. Government commissions on new territorial acquisitions in the Pacific, including the Committee on Pacific Islands and Puerto Rico and the Committee on the Philippines, also generated reports and correspondence, now housed at NARA.

of records characteristic of modern government bureaucracy, various technologies facilitate and streamline the work of the archivist. Schellenberg explains that “Certain physical conditions for the creation and maintenance of records had to exist before modern filing systems could be developed.”<sup>13</sup> In other words, these conditions and the technologies responsive to their demands help to define a modern archive. Schellenberg focuses on two technologies developed in the United States: duplication and filing systems. More readily incorporated into the work of a recently established archive in the United States (1934) than in archives long ago established in, for example, France (1790) or England (1838), these technologies enable the creation of archives that are uniquely American.

Government agencies of the United States held voluminous records, both original documents and mechanical reproductions from press-copying machines. Invented by James Watt in 1780, the press-copying machine was used in some government agencies, but “came into general use in the War Department during the Civil War and in the rest of the Federal agencies about a decade later.”<sup>14</sup> The invention of the typewriter in 1868, its first use in the federal government (including the War Department), and its later use for making carbon copies, also translated into an increased production of records for later disposition.<sup>15</sup>

This increased volume of records prompted the adoption of new systems that made use of recent file-related inventions. Products of the necessity to manage the growth in government documents, these new filing systems’ “critical elements” were their capacity for “easy insertion and expansion”; such ease in insertion and expansion freed government agencies from maintaining their records in outmoded ledgers or registries. The first of these was a 3.5 inch x 8 inch wooden box invented by E. W. Woodruff, allowing the “sequential arrangement” of folded documents. The second of these inventions was the

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<sup>13</sup> Schellenberg, *Modern Archives*, 81.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 82. Schellenberg also notes the importance of other duplication technologies for the development of United States archival practice, namely the mimeograph, hectograph, and photostat (83).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

vertical file, an invention of Nathaniel S. Rosenau, allowing—as the Woodruff box did—the easy insertion and expansion of files.<sup>16</sup>

Schellenberg suggests that, taken together, new technologies of reproduction and order revolutionized the ways that United States archival practice would develop. The form of the archive—flexible and with room for expansion—indicated the ways that United States archival practice would and could adapt to changing conditions and specific agencies' needs. (Indeed, Schellenberg's discussions of appraisal and description of archival records, beyond the scope of this paper, especially emphasize the importance of both expert historical knowledge and attention to the particularities of the agency whose records were in question. Especially lively is his discussion of Melvil Dewey's decimal system's shortcomings when applied to archival records.<sup>17</sup>)

These technologies seem, to the present-day reader, rather quaint insofar as it is difficult to imagine that no one previous to Woodruff had thought to fold documents and file them in a box. Nevertheless, the quaintness (or perhaps even the veracity) of Schellenberg's account of technological innovations matters less than the weight given to them by, and in, his narrative of the emergence of modern archives. Suffice it to say that in Schellenberg's explanation of the dialectical relationship between modern government and modern archive, the wooden box, press-copying machine, and typewriter are indispensable, and the importance attributed to these inventions merit further consideration.

More precisely, the fact that these new technologies were first incorporated into the federal government's War Department raises questions about which agencies most required the use of new technologies and why. The incidence of new technologies of duplication and filing (of reproduction and order) in those federal agencies mandated, in United States overseas projects, to reproduce select state apparatuses enjoyed in the United States (such as democracy and Christianity) and

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-84. Rosenau's invention was promoted under the auspices of librarian Melvil Dewey's Library Bureau and was later featured at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago (84).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

to re-order the populations of new overseas territories may be read as inconsequential. Another understanding of that incidence, however, is possible: the content and form of the modern archive both animates and embodies ideology endorsed and promoted by the War Department, an ideology of American exceptionalism that elided the imperial characteristics of the United States' foreign policy. If the differences in maintenance of records reflect the differences in operation of governments, the modern technologies of United States archives reflect the new global power that the United States, at the end of the nineteenth-century, was coming to wield.

### **ARCHIVAL ALLEGORY OF MODERN ARCHIVES**

Apparent by this point in my consideration of “archival allegory” is the occasional conflation of modern archives and archival practice therein. Analytical movement between these two discrete, if related, concepts is meant to highlight the allegorical relationship between the modern archive (the object), archival practice (the act), the archivist (the subject), the text (the object once-removed, a text that purports to stand outside of ideological and political bias to deliver a prescription for the formation of modern archives), and ideology (that encompasses all, in this case, American exceptionalism). To put it another way, analysis that centers the mutually constitutive relationship between the archive and archiving suggests the ways that both are ideologically contained as well as ideologically productive: Archives and archivists are products and producers of history, categories, and categorizers. It suggests, as in Clifford's discussion of ethnographic allegory, that both the modern archive and archival practice therein are allegorical both in “content (what it says about cultures and their histories)” and “form (what is implied by its mode of textualization).”<sup>18</sup>

The (sometimes tedious and rather convoluted) labor of making sense of how Schellenberg's *Modern Archives* could be “archival allegory” raises the simple question, Why? What purpose does such a concept serve? For students of the archive, broadly defined, an understanding of “archival allegory” suggests the conceptual boundaries around the formation of archival institutions in the United States; it also suggests how those

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<sup>18</sup> Clifford, “On Ethnographic Allegory,” 98.

boundaries were delineated by the national projects that national archives always serve. Stated more simply, an understanding of archival allegory historicizes and contextualizes Schellenberg's writing about modern archives. To assert that this canonical text is not outside, beyond, or above ideology is not necessarily to discount all of its arguments. Rather, to suggest the specific logic and conditions of the text indicates the need to review *Modern Archives* periodically; such review of the assumptions underlying prescriptions for archival practice would, one should hope, yield innovations in both theorizations of archives as well as their practical maintenance. On a related note, the proposition of "archival allegory," and *Modern Archives* as an expression of it, simply suggests the need for an expanded vocabulary and dispels any remaining notions of facile objectivity in archives. It implies the need to recognize and grapple with the always politicized nature of archives.

### **CULTURAL STUDIES FOR MODERN ARCHIVES**

That said, the form of such "grappling" remains undetermined, though the importance of doing so is, one hopes, clear. And the challenge is predictable: if the discipline of archival studies employs a vocabulary not easily applied to (or not suitable for) critique of the discipline itself, the vocabulary of another field may be fruitfully enlisted. One such field may be that of cultural studies, perhaps made evident by this essay's attempt to apply James Clifford's work on "ethnographic allegory" to the study of archival theory and practice.

As one narrative, albeit disputed, of the emergence of cultural studies holds, the field was founded in Britain by Marxist scholars concerned, as their theoretical orientation would suggest, with the reproduction of class structure in Europe.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the work of scholars outside of the Birmingham School (including, for example, Michel Foucault's examination of the birth of the prison in France and Walter Benjamin's study of the reproduction of art and film) suggests concern with how

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<sup>19</sup> See Jon Stratton and Ien Ang, "On the Impossibility of a Global Cultural Studies: 'British' Cultural Studies in an 'International' Frame" in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds. (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 361-391. Stratton and Ang's argument may be useful for a critical study of the narrative of the emergence of United States archives.

different technologies enable, or promise to resist, reproduction of power relations, as well as with how reproduction (as both an action and a concept, in both content and form) enables the disruption, or ultimate downfall, of order as is.<sup>20</sup>

Given that Clifford's application of the concept of allegory to anthropological practice introduces the possibility that ethnography makes "moral, ideological, and even cosmological statements," and given that scholarship (such as those examples cited above) in cultural studies focuses on the reproduction of ideology, the concerns addressed in these works clearly resonate with the needed modes of critique of archives. Beginning with the recognition of archives as always politicized, and never transcendent of ideology, and then considering the role of duplication (or reproduction) and filing (or order) in the making and defining of modern archives, the possibility emerges of how questions central in cultural studies may also apply to study of the archive.

## CONCLUSION

This essay began with an idealistic quote from Theodore Roosevelt Schellenberg's *Modern Archives* about the crucial role of the archivist in establishing truth. The work of the archivist, Schellenberg suggests, is "to preserve the evidence, impartially, without taint of political or ideological bias"; though a formidable task, the (implied) virtue of archival work is its commitment to transcending politics and ideology, to building an unbiased historical record. Schellenberg's *Modern Archives* thus attempts both to make a timeless statement about the archivist's place in a modern world and to stake a claim about the importance of the archive to the articulation of modernity.

Review of Schellenberg's writing about archival work, however, belies claims of timelessness, suggesting instead the historical specificity of his scholarship. Indeed, in the fifty years since the publication of *Modern Archives*, the emergence of cultural studies has enabled another way to read work about the archive and archival practice. This essay provides a preliminary review of Schellenberg's canonical text and gestures to further

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<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 1979); Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

application of cultural studies' approaches to archival studies. Cultural studies' analytical tools allow an understanding of the archive as a sociopolitical construct, an institution literally and figuratively contained by the ideological vocabulary available to the archivists who create them. Consideration of the content and form of archives, then, indicates that they are a potentially important site of investigation for cultural studies (not only archival studies, as discussed above); after all, the archive is often both the site and the source for the production of much historical scholarship. To explore how the archive (at least as it is defined by Schellenberg) is at once repressive and ideologically productive—whether through the proposal of a concept of “archival allegory” or otherwise—is to explore how the archive, surprisingly peripheral and taken for granted, both shapes and is shaped by dominant discourse.

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