



Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings*

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Abstract. The authors of this essay, coming from very different traditions and modes of archival discourse, explore together archival description as a field of archival thinking and practice. Their shared conviction is that records are always in the process of being made, and that the stories of their making are parts of bigger stories understandable only in the ever-changing broader contexts of society. The exploration begins with an interrogation of the traditional and ever-valid questions of the what and the why of archival description. Thereafter they offer a deconstruction of these questions and of the answers commonly proffered. In these sections of the essay their concern is with descriptive architecture, the analysis covering a number of specific architectures and including only oblique references to descriptive standardization. The concluding section attempts to draw out the implications of their analysis for endeavours – irrespective of the architectures being used – to define, and to justify, descriptive standards. Their call is not to dispense with standardization, but rather to create space for a liberatory approach which engages creatively the many dangers of standardization.

Keywords: deconstruction, description, standards, user needs

Introduction: Making records

What came to be called “archival science” emerged in the nineteenth century, a product of Enlightenment thinking and an ever-more vigorous modernism in the Western world. The focus of this science, in terms of both theory and practice, was on the arrangement and description of archival materials. Not surprisingly, the first substantive articulation of the science’s fundamental ideas, the 1898 *Manual* of the Dutch trio Muller, Feith, and Fruin, was almost entirely devoted to arrangement and description.¹ For practising archivists, this was assumed to be the core of their work. The focus, or pattern, has

* The authors wish to thank David Bearman, Terry Cook, Catherine Johnson, Thea Miller, and Joan M. Schwartz, whose comments and ideas have greatly improved the essay.

¹ S. Muller, J.A. Feith and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* (1898). For an insightful assessment of the *Manual’s* position in the history of archival discourse, see Terry Cook, “What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift”, *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997): 20–22.

proved resilient. Still today, for many if not most archivists and archival institutions, arrangement and description remain the core of both practice and discourse. New elements and dimensions have been introduced to this powerful stream in archival thinking – for instance, increasing attention is being paid to the challenges and opportunities presented by new technologies, and huge energies are being devoted to the development of descriptive standards. However, the questions being posed by the stream’s articulators remain essentially the same: what is archival description? what are the most appropriate units of description? why do archivists describe the materials in their care? how can description be improved? how can control over records best be exercised? how can description best be standardized? And the assumptions informing these questions remain rooted in the stream’s Enlightenment origins. Amongst many such assumptions, the following are the key ones for us. The boundary between text and context is hard and stable. A record’s context is bounded and readily knowable. The archivist’s role in relation to records is to reveal their meaning and significance – not to participate in the construction of meanings – through the exercise of intellectual control. The archival intervention, including arrangement and description, is at once insulated from the processes of records creation and from broader societal processes. And the archivist, who should aspire to the role of impartial craftsman, can remain outside the hurley-burley of power relations.

From the 1940s through the 1990s, this traditional stream was joined in archival discourse by an increasingly influential stream concerned primarily with the archive as always already being a small part of a larger whole. This stream has focused on processes of selection and appraisal, implicitly – and sometimes explicitly – questioning the assumptions informing the traditional stream. In the work of Hans Booms, Helen Samuels, and Terry Cook, for instance, there are direct challenges to the notion that the archival intervention stands outside the construction of meanings and the exercise of power. While there has been engagement between the two streams, and some measure of cross-fertilization, established orthodoxies in the terrain of arrangement and description have remained in place.

The last decade of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new stream, one frequently dubbed “postmodernist” by some of its articulators and most of its detractors. While seldom addressing archival arrangement and description directly, it posed a fundamental challenge to established orthodoxies in this terrain. This stream drew on a discourse far broader than the narrowly archival – although, significantly (and pre-eminently in the work of Terry Cook), it also drew on elements of the “selection/appraisal stream” within archival discourse – and brought to debates around archival description a range of new questions. Again we merely outline what are the key

ones for us. What do archivists mean by the terms “text” and “context”? Is the context to a record finite in its reach? Does the making of a record, ultimately, have a beginning and an ending? Do archivists participate actively in the construction of a record’s meanings and its significances? Is the notion of the archivist maintaining an exteriority from both processes of records creation and broader societal processes a chimera? Do power relations, with their myriad privilegings and exclusions, find expression in archival intervention (or non-intervention)? Does the archivist have a moral obligation to engage the marginalized and excluded voices in records? Is the archivist a storyteller? How do the contingencies of language and narrative shape the work of archival description? Is archival description simply a form of narration? Should archivists disclose their complicity in the processes of record making? And, in light of all the preceding questions, can there be a meaningful standardization of archival description?

Until very recently, the three streams in discourse outlined above have tended to flow past one another. It is our contention that they need to be encouraged to flow in the same channel. They need to churn against one another, find articulations, carve out a new channel, both broader and deeper. This, precisely, has been our intention with this essay. To the collaborative effort, we have brought significant differences, one of us shaped primarily by the traditional stream, the other by that labeled “postmodernist.”² One of us has devoted much effort to the development of descriptive standards both nationally and internationally, while the other has suggested that these standards have “no resonance in South Africa,”³ and has consistently resisted standardization in archival practice. In the process, we have found a mode of exploration at once hospitable to difference and committed to what we would call an integrative instinct. We believe that, by respecting our differences, we have found a commonality centred around a shared conviction that records are always in the process of being made, that “their” stories are never ending, and that the stories of those who are conventionally called records creators, records managers, archivists, users and so on are (shifting, intermingling) parts of bigger stories understandable only in the ever-changing broader contexts of society. Records, in short, open into (and out of) the

² Of course, we brought to the exercise a host of other differences, including gender, global positioning, and culture. Some we are aware of; others we are not. Some seem significant; others not. While we have worked hard at fashioning a coherent “voice” for the essay, we determined not to hide the tensions generated by these differences. It is our hope that the tensions are creative ones. For the record, Verne produced the first drafts of the introductory and concluding sections; Wendy the middle section.

³ Verne Harris, *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa* second edition (Pretoria: National Archives of South Africa, 2000), p. 57.

future.⁴ And archivists are members of a big family of record makers. This shared conviction has enabled us to find acknowledgement of the importance of archival descriptive standards, re-imagined as instruments for calling the future in through a challenging of the instinct merely to replicate existing power relations.

We turn our exploration next to descriptive architecture, the analysis covering a number of specific architectures and including only oblique references to descriptive standardization. Thereafter, we suggest ways to deconstruct description in order to draw out the implications of our analysis for archival descriptive endeavours – irrespective of the architecture(s) being used – and for any continued utility of descriptive standards in our new “postmodern” environment.

Descriptive architecture and architectures

There is much to represent in any archives, and much representing takes place. Abstracts, calendars, inventories, repository guides, accession records, biographical sketches, authority records, and a host of other descriptive tools describe the context, structure, and content of records, and provide access to archival material. Over the last twenty years, many individuals and teams have expended immense professional effort discussing archival description and related principles, as well as promulgating standards and guidelines to codify this process. Recent literature on archival description suggests that archivists agree on the importance of documenting and preserving both information about creation and use of the records, and their documentary structures, but they disagree on the best method for doing so. Disagreement has issued in the emergence of two dominant approaches – and concomitant descriptive architectures – to capturing and presenting information about records.⁵

Traditionally archivists sought to preserve both the internal and external structure of a group of records by following the archival precept of *respect des fonds*. According to the *Canadian Rules for Archival Description*, the

⁴ In finding this commonality we note our indebtedness to articulators of so-called post-modernist ideas, as well as to the records continuum thinking which dominates Australian archival discourse. But it was Jacques Derrida who coined the phrase, “the archive opens out of the future.” Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 68.

⁵ This essay presents two different points of view on description: one based on the principle of *respect des fonds*, and the other focused on the series. It presents these approaches as opposites to tease out and explain the different perspectives that underlie and influence much of the debate. In reality many archival descriptive systems contain some elements of, and are influenced by, the perspectives of both.

principle of *respect des fonds* directs that “the records of a person, family, or corporate body must be kept together in their original order, if it exists or has been maintained, and not be mixed or combined with the records of another individual or corporate body.”⁶ The principle incorporates two sub-principles: provenance and original order. The principle of provenance requires the identification of the whole of the records created and/or accumulated and used by one individual, family, or organization, and that these be preserved and described as one fonds. Provenance thereby protects the evidential value of records and makes visible the acts and deeds from which the records emanate. Original order refers to the internal or documentary structure of records. Maintaining “the documents as they were organized by the agent accumulating them”⁷ fixes the relationships among records, and preserves evidence of their original use. The focus of arrangement and description is on intellectual ordering, rather than the physical order at the time of accessioning. Terry Eastwood points out that arranging records by their accession unit “fails altogether to solve the problem of identifying records with the grouping to which they belong.” Furthermore, he suggests, “all contemporary authors agree on this matter.”⁸ There is, however, less agreement on how to preserve and represent the provenance of records or on what constitutes the fonds.

In modern bureaucracies, it is common for the same records to be created, accumulated, and used by numerous, different, successor or parallel agencies. Records emanate from business activities and in turn are used to support and carry out other business activities. Moreover, series of records move from the control or custody of one organization to another. Terry Cook explains that modern organizations “composed of tens of thousands of employees, subdivided into a thousand administrative units or offices, encompassing hundreds of functions and involving scores of records-keeping systems, all with a disturbing tendency to appear, disappear, merge, or migrate at a moment’s notice to other agencies, offices systems or function . . . makes it very difficult to identify the creator and thus to draw reasonably consistent boundaries around the resultant fonds.”⁹ This reality has led numerous archivists to suggest that the multi-faceted aspects of provenance are eroded when archival practice dictates the creation of fonds-level descrip-

⁶ Bureau of Canadian Archivists, *Rules for Archival Description* (hereafter RAD), D-5.

⁷ Terry Eastwood (ed.), *The Archival Fonds: from Theory to Practice* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, 1992), p. 4.

⁸ Terry Eastwood, “Putting the Parts of the Whole Together: Systematic Arrangement of Archives”, *Archivaria* 50 (Fall 2000): 97.

⁹ Terry Cook, “The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era”, in Terry Eastwood (ed.), *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, 1992), pp. 42–43.

tion and credits the creation of the records (and thus provenance) to one, and only one, individual or organization.¹⁰ For example, advocates of the series system challenge the notion that archivists require fonds-level descriptions to preserve the evidential value of records.¹¹

The series system came out of the record-keeping culture of the National Archives of Australia (then Australian Archives). The system as described in Peter Scott's article, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," bases the "arrangement of archives on the record series as an independent element not bound to the administrative context. The series is the primary level of classification, and the item the secondary level."¹² The original order of items within the series is maintained, and the administrative context of the series is documented by linking the description of the records series to the description of the agency or person who created them, and identifying relationships between the record entity and the context entity. Furthermore, the agency descriptions are linked to descriptions of organizations that controlled them, and descriptions of families are linked to descriptions of persons who make up the family. The system does not relate only to (older or "historical") records in archival custody, describing together active, inactive, and archival records. It seeks to describe records series in their totality and links descriptions of records to all the contextual entities that created, accumulated, used, controlled, owned, or transferred the records in the series. This system emphasizes the importance of linking a record entity to its various contextual entities and stresses the importance of inter-relationships, thereby representing fully the multi-provenancial nature of records. Since its inception almost fifty years ago, archivists have made many refinements to the system. Today it describes various units of records, including fonds, series, transfers sets, consignments, accessions, items, folios, etc., as well as all

¹⁰ For some of the writing on this topic see Peter J. Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment", *American Archivist* 29 (October 1966): 493–504; C. Hurley, "The Australian ('Series') System: An Exposition", in Sue McKemish and Michael Piggott (eds.), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (Clayton: Ancora Press, 1994), pp. 150–172; Terry Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds: Theory, Description, and Provenance in the Post-Custodial Era", 42–43; David Bearman, "Item Level Control and Electronic Recordkeeping", *Archives and Museum Informatics* 10(3) (1996): 207–245; David Bearman, "Documenting Documentation", *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992): 33–49; Bob Krawczyk, "Cross Reference Heaven: The Abandonment of the Fonds as the Primary Level of Arrangement for Ontario Government Records", *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999): 131–153.

¹¹ We chose not to label the series system the "Australian" system for two reasons: it is not applied universally in Australia; and many non-Australians are supportive of the series system, have written about it, and have influenced its development. Of course, "series system" is also inadequate as a label, for as it is being elaborated today by people like Sue McKemish and Chris Hurley, it embraces far more than the idea of the series.

¹² Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment", 496.

inter-related creators, functions, and record-keeping systems. Many North American archivists, especially those dealing with the records of large bureaucracies or electronic records, have suggested that this system deals with the complexity of modern records in a more meaningful and holistic manner. For example, Terry Cook and David Bearman have both been influenced by the series system and have, in turn, influenced Australian archivists' thinking about it.

The system is more than just a method of description and is grounded in the belief that records creation is only one aspect of provenance and that "contextual entities may be of very many different kinds and that the relationship each has with various records entities is manifold." The scope of contextual information encompasses many different dimensions. Chris Hurley, an Australian archivist who has often written about the "series" approach, admits that "[w]e are still thinking through (and in many ways only just beginning to realize) how much further ideas about context and provenance must go beyond mere records creation."¹³ Australian archival educator Sue McKemmish and her colleagues have developed a model that focuses on the role that functions, activities, and record-keeping systems play in the creation of records. They are also delineating the various types of relationships among creators, functions, record-keeping systems, and records entities.¹⁴ In summary, the series system is based on the notion that records are multi-provenancial in nature and that "creation is only one aspect of provenance."¹⁵

Many advocates of fonds-based approaches agree that creating entities should be described in archival authority records that are separate from, but linked to, descriptions of actual series of records or items. However, there is still disagreement over the practicality and wisdom of creating a single multi-level description to represent all the records of a modern bureaucracy. For example, Cook suggests that the fonds should be seen as "an intellectual construct" rather than a "physical entity."¹⁶ For followers of the series system, the series, not the fonds, provides the highest level of physical arrangement that should be described and then linked to other related record series, and to multiple creators, functions, record-keeping systems, etc., in order to give the clearest picture of the creation, accumulation, and use of the records. Supporters of this system suggest that focusing on the

¹³ Hurley, "The Australian ('Series') System", 155.

¹⁴ Sue McKemmish, Glenda Acland, Nigel Ward and Barbara Reed, "Describing Records in Context in the Continuum: The Australian Recordkeeping Metadata Schema", *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999): 3–43.

¹⁵ Hurley, "The Australian (Series) System", 155.

¹⁶ Cook, "The Concept of the Archival Fonds", 73.

fonds constrains description and obfuscates important contextual relationships. Describing only the fonds is too limiting. Sue McKemmish posits that “the physical reconstruction of the fonds in a record group, while providing one view of what is a multiple reality, obscures or obliterates other views.”¹⁷ Uni-dimensional multi-level descriptions foreground one interpretation while blocking others.

Some advocates of fonds-based approaches agree that the fonds is multi-provenancial, but reject the notion that the fonds is merely an intellectual construct. Terry Eastwood, a strong defender of the fonds as the heart of archival description, agrees that the fonds should be conceived as “divorced from the sense that records can be seen in one and only one context and documented only in that way.”¹⁸ However, he rejects the notion that provenance goes beyond records creation and states that a record “has only one provenance, that of the office that generated it. All the records generated by the office constitute its fonds within, if you like, the hierarchy of fonds.”¹⁹ However, he admits that the operational transfer of records to other offices, that take over some or all of the functional competencies of the “original” creating office, make it difficult “to characterize precisely which records belong to which agency and/or office.” He concludes that “such so-called multiple-provenance series virtually every authority agrees, need to be attributed to all their successive creators.”²⁰ However, Eastwood still casts doubts on the series system’s ability to reconstruct an appropriate view of the fonds.²¹ These doubts are fostered by the views of other fonds-based advocates. Michel Duchein, for example, the principle modern articulator of *respect des fonds* a generation ago, stressed the importance of always reconstructing the fonds through finding aids.²² Heather MacNeil also prefers a fonds-based approach to description. She states that “the reason why records must remain in the fonds from which they originate and, within the fonds, in their place of origin, is to ensure that the records being preserved provide authentic and adequate documentation of the functions and associated activities of their creator. The records being described should represent a distinct and coherent whole, one that will illuminate, and not obscure, the context of activities out of which the

¹⁷ Sue McKemmish, “Are Records Ever Actual?”, in McKemmish and Piggot (eds.), *The Records Continuum*, p. 192.

¹⁸ Eastwood, “Putting the Parts of the Whole Together”, 108.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

²² Michel Duchein, “Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science”, *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 64–82.

records were created and maintained during their active life.”²³ For MacNeil and other supporters of the fonds concept, arranging records as a fonds, and then describing the result at the fonds level, provides the clearest articulation of the context of records creation.

Both the series system and fonds-based approaches appear to pursue the same goals, namely the illumination of the context to records and the preservation of the evidential value of records. Yet the differences between them are significant. Eastwood suggests that the fundamental difference is in their definitions of agency. However, they also differ in how they conceptualize records creation, provenance, the nature of archival records, and the purpose of description. Eastwood posits that the provenance of a record is the office that generated it, while supporters of the series system argue that the provenance includes the office that generated it *as well as* the agencies that subsequently added to it, controlled it, used it, even had mere custody of it. Each such new layer or generation of use adds to the provenance and changes the context of the record. All actors are part of its creation, and, therefore, all need to be documented. Relationships are complex, multi-faceted, and multi-dimensional. Information about record-keeping systems, functions, and activities also plays an essential role in understanding the deeper contextual meaning of records.

Many North American archival writers have contributed to our renewed understanding of context and its various facets. As we have argued, their insights have informed the writings of Australian archivists and they, in turn, have been influenced by Australian archival theory. For example, Terry Cook suggests that “the mere act of creating records alone does not necessarily define a fonds. The administrative context in which the creation occurred, the nature of the function performed which caused the records to be created and the control exercised over the record-keeping systems are other relevant factors.”²⁴ David Bearman goes further to suggest that archivists and archival systems also affect their evidential value. “The fact of processing, exhibiting, citing, publishing and otherwise managing records become significant to their meaning as records.”²⁵ Moreover, Tom Nesmith points out that the very act of describing the record itself changes the record’s meaning. He states that “[a]rchivists help make and remake the records through representation made when putting the record on the archival pedestal, realigning the context in which they may be understood through arrangement by centralized storage

²³ Heather MacNeil, “The Context is All: Describing a Fonds and Its Parts in Accordance with the Rules for Archival Description”, in Eastwood (ed.), *The Archival Fonds: From Theory to Practice*, p. 202.

²⁴ Cook, “The Concept of the Archival Fonds”, 42.

²⁵ Bearman, “Documenting Documentation”, 237.

(which makes it easier to explore new contextual linkages between them than if they were scattered), by describing them in a different way at different times.”²⁶ The power to describe is the power to make and remake records and to determine how they will be used and remade in the future. Each story we tell about our records, each description we compile, changes the meaning of the records and re-creates them. These different views of provenance significantly affect the type of descriptive architecture proposed by their advocates. Equally influential are their assumptions about what archival description is, when description takes place, and its purpose.

Much of the work of developing fonds-based descriptive rules in Canada has been guided by the assumption that archival description is comparable to bibliographic description²⁷ and produces information objects, or finding aids, that are predominantly static objects which describe a pre-existing order centred on one predominant provenance. (A few of the pioneers of archival descriptive standards in Canada in fact had a library science background, with its bibliographic focus on static books.) These descriptive information objects are designed to represent equally static objects, that is, the record entity being described: the fonds, the series, or the collection.²⁸ Descriptions are to lead researchers to objects of study – the records found in fonds, series, or collections – but are not in themselves objects of study.²⁹ They provide “information about the structure, functions and content of records.”³⁰ These descriptive objects are created by archivists and represent archival material that has crossed the archival threshold and is under the physical control of an archives. New accruals may be added to the unit on a piece-meal basis, but the basic archival descriptive unit – the fonds – is, for the most part, at least conceptually, fixed and static.

Adherents of the series system, by contrast, believe that records series are dynamic and constantly changing and that archival description must represent multiple-horizontal as well as poly-hierarchical vertical relation-

²⁶ Tom Nesmith, “What is a Postmodern Archivist?: Can Douglas Brymner, an Unmuzzled Ox, and Star Trek Tell Us?”, paper given to the Association of Canadian Archivists Annual Conference, Halifax, 29 May 1998.

²⁷ Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, *Toward Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1985), p. 10.

²⁸ The Canadian *Rules of Archival Description* uses the term for the level of unit being described (e.g., fonds, series, file, item) while the American *Archives, Personal Papers, and Manuscripts* uses the term collection to denote the object of description. In both standards, the assumption is that the rules relate to the description of static, previously arranged groupings of records.

²⁹ EAD Design Guidelines (adopted July 1995), available at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/ead/tglib/tlprinc.html>, accessed 2 July 2001.

³⁰ RAD, Glossary, definition of “description.”

ships surrounding the creation and operational uses of records. The series approach is “post-custodial” in orientation and describes records throughout the entire records continuum. Its roots, as we have already suggested, lie with the Australian National Archives, an institution that, in its early years at least, dealt predominantly with records from still-current records systems. “For obvious practical reasons, therefore, it was necessary to classify and describe records in a manner which allowed for continuing and sometimes frequent changes in status (whether of location, arrangement and record-keeping system, or provenance or control). There simply were no archives in the old-fashioned sense (a stable, finite, physical body of records held outside the continuum) to be described.”³¹ The series system requires and facilitates the establishment of multiple relationships between records and their context entities, “to represent complex and dynamic realities”³² because it describes complex dynamic, not static, creating entities. Cook’s main critique of fonds-based approaches is their inability to deal with dynamic fonds and series.³³ Working within a post-custodial milieu, archivists should describe active government and institutional records in the same manner as records transferred to the archives, because archival control does not depend on physical custody. In the fonds-based approach common in Canada, description takes place after archives have physical custody of the records and after the records are arranged.

Debate also arises over the reasons for describing archival material. For example, MacNeil suggests that the purpose of description “is to preserve, perpetuate, and authenticate meaning over time so that it is available and comprehensible to all users – present and potential.”³⁴ Hurley disagrees, and suggests that “the primary purpose of documentation and finding aids is not repository control or the facilitation of access, but as an indispensable component in the making and keeping of records.”³⁵ Bearman highlights the importance of documenting over describing and depicts documenting as “focused on activity in the records-generating institution or the creator of the records in the case of manuscripts. . . . It seeks to capture data about the relationship between the activity and the document created or received in that activity which is necessary in order for the document to serve as evidence.”³⁶ He suggests that the development of standards must consider use and users.

³¹ Hurley, “The Australian (‘Series’) System”, 151.

³² McKemmish, “Is the Record Ever Actual”, 195.

³³ Cook, “The Concept of the Archival Fonds”, *passim*.

³⁴ Heather MacNeil, “Metadata Strategies and Archival Description: Comparing Apples to Oranges”, *Archivaria* 39 (Spring 1995): 30.

³⁵ Chris Hurley, “The Making and the Keeping of Records (2): The Tyranny of Listing”, *Archives and Manuscripts* 28 (May 2000): 8–23.

³⁶ Bearman, “Documenting Documentation”, 34.

However, he states “that content and data representation requirements ought to be derived from analysis of the uses to which such systems must be put and should satisfy the day-to-day information requirements of archivists who are the primary users of archives, and of researchers using archives for their primary evidential purposes.”³⁷

Users of the system must be considered, but for Bearman, the concerns of certain users, for example those seeking evidence, take priority. McKemish acknowledges that the concerns of users have not played a role in the development of the series system; and Hurley admits that “researchers complain that the volume and complexity of contextual documentation raises barriers to getting at the records.”³⁸ Users’ opinions of the series system are not directly known.³⁹ Eastwood criticizes the modified series system developed at the Archives of Ontario by Bob Krawczyk for its complexity, and suggests researchers “may find Krawczyk’s ‘cross-reference heaven’ to be a nightmare.”⁴⁰ Archivists have not invested much effort in seeking to understand the needs of records users. The few user studies that have investigated fonds-based approaches to description have found that finding aids based on the *Canadian Rules for Archival Description* are also confusing to researchers.⁴¹ Research is needed to develop a user-friendly descriptive architecture – or at least interface with it – that eloquently represents relationships and contextual information in a clear, understandable fashion.

Our own view is that archival descriptive architectures should not dictate only one way of describing. Both the series system and fonds-based approaches are opening up avenues for exploration as they engage each other and broader discourses on description and classification. We need to investigate differences with a desire for inclusivity, rather than exclusivity. Acknowledging one type of provenance, one act of creation, or one method of describing, will fail to capture the rich complexities of the records in our care. We need to move the debate beyond discussions of what provenance *really* is by problematizing the word “provenance” and the concepts archived in it, and by accepting that there always have been and always will be many provenances, multiple voices, hundreds of relationships, multiple layers of context, all needing to be documented. Furthermore, we need to incorporate

³⁷ Ibid., p. 237.

³⁸ Hurley, “The Australian (‘Series’) System”, 154.

³⁹ This statement is not to suggest that all supporters of the series system are opposed to studying users. Many supporters of this system, including Terry Cook, Adrian Cunningham, and David Bearman have promoted the importance of understanding how users seek information and the how they use descriptive tools.

⁴⁰ Eastwood, “Putting the Parts of the Whole Together”, 105.

⁴¹ Wendy Duff and Penka Stoyanova, “Transforming the Crazy Quilt: Archival Displays from a User’s Point of View”, *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998): 44–79.

into our descriptive architectures a far greater receptivity to the views and activities of records users.

In the following section we attempt to open further the approaches we have been discussing. No approach to archival description, no descriptive system or architecture, can escape the reality that it is a way of constructing knowledge through processes of inscription, mediation, and narration. No architecture can escape the biases of its developers. Disclosing the lines of construction is critical both to professional integrity and to meeting the demands of accountability to the users of records.

Deconstructing description

Our decisions to document, to describe, to make visible, to remember, or to forget are “positioned within and are shaped by larger forces which contest the terrain of social memory.”⁴² Personal histories, institutional cultures, gender dynamics, class relations, and many other dimensions of meaning-construction are always already at play in processes of records description. Every representation, every model of description, is biased because it reflects a particular world-view and is constructed to meet specific purposes.⁴³ No representation can be complete. The representer’s value system, shaped by and expressing a configuration of the forces mentioned above, is the final arbitrator on the content of a representation. Each archivist must decide what information about which records to highlight; what transitory data to capture and make visible. When describing records archivists will remember certain aspects and hide or forget others. They will highlight some relationships and ignore others. As Michael Buckland points out, “every representation can be expected to be more or less incomplete in some regard. A photograph does not indicate movement and may not depict color. . . . A written narrative will reflect the viewpoint of the writer and the limitations of the language.” Something in the event being represented is always lost. There is always some distortion, even if only through incompleteness.⁴⁴ What we choose to stress and what we choose to ignore is always and unavoidably subjective, and the value judgments that archivists make affect in turn how our researchers find, perceive, and use records. Cook reminds us that “the traditional notion of the impartiality of the archivist is no longer acceptable –

⁴² Verne Harris, “Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1900–1996”, *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996): 7.

⁴³ Godfrey Rust, “Metadata: The Right Approach, an Integrated Model for Descriptive and Rights Metadata in E-commerce”, *Dlib Magazine* (1998), available at: <http://www.dlib.org/dlib/july98/rust/07rust.html>.

⁴⁴ Michael K. Buckland, “Information as Thing”, *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 42(2) (1991): 358.

if it ever was. Archivists inevitably will inject their own values into all such activities, as indeed they will by their very choice, in eras of limited resources and overwhelming volumes of records, of which creators, which systems, which functions, which transactions, which descriptive and diffusion mechanism, indeed which records, will get full, partial, or no archival attention."⁴⁵ Archivists cannot describe records in an unbiased, neutral, or objective way. "There is no representation without intention and interpretation."⁴⁶ Description tells a story. Description is always story telling – intertwining facts with narratives, observation with interpretation.

In describing records, archivists are working with context, continually locating it, constructing it, figuring and refiguring it. Context, in principle, is infinite. The describer selects certain layers for inclusion, and decides which of those to foreground. In this process, there is analysis, listing, reproduction, and so on, but its primary medium is narrative. The telling of a story. In archival description archivists tell stories about stories; they tell stories with stories. Whether they employ a fonds-based approach, or the series system, or a more eclectic approach, they cannot escape this reality. They are in the realm of narrativity. And narrativity – as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Paul Ricoeur, Hayden White, and others have convincingly demonstrated, as much as it might strive to work with actual events, processes, structures, and characters (the "facts"), must in its form alone – structurally, to say nothing of its content, inevitably brings a certain fictionalization of what Ricoeur calls these immediate referents.⁴⁷ For the form of narrativity – like all forms – is not merely a neutral container. It shapes, even determines, the narrative content in significant ways. Every narrative construction of the past is by definition creative, a work of the imagination – it recalls referents which, in all their particularity, their uniqueness, are irrecoverable, and which flow in a chaotic open-endedness. The narrative construction attempts to give to them a shape, a pattern, a closure – to end their inevitable openness, close off their referents.

Archivists, then, should come to terms with the reality of story telling in their descriptive work. Attempting to deny it, by insisting that they merely marshal facts rather than construct a narrative with a selection of facts, or by insisting that they are merely a conduit for a story which tells itself, leads to sterility and professional disingenuousness, and makes them vulnerable

⁴⁵ Cook, "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898", 46.

⁴⁶ David R. Olson, *The World on Paper* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 197. In this paragraph, we are consciously deploying the word "represent" with the "post-modern" resonances it now carries. We see archival description as a form, or mode, of re-presentation.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

to the dangers of story. For story invites – some would say cannot avoid – moralizing judgements and becoming itself an instrument for social control. This is seen most starkly in the metanarrative, or the big story. Hayden White argues compellingly that the big story steals from history and from the world their confusion, their lack of “a meaning,” and imposes meaning on them, and therefore on people, on society. In doing so, it steals from individuals what they need – space, confusion, a sense of meaninglessness – to construct their own meanings.⁴⁸ Arguably, metanarrative has dominated the realm of archival description for nearly two centuries – in the form of such big stories such as the impartial custodian, *respect des fonds*, the principle of provenance, original order, the series, and records as evidence – expressed in the last few decades most powerfully in a range of thinking and activity concerning descriptive standards.

What we are marking here are the dangers of story; the power of the metanarrative; and the capacities to privilege or to marginalize, to construct knowledge, to exercise control. Pulsing insistently beneath these formulations is the reality of power. Many archivists, perhaps most, naively imagine that they can stand outside the exercise of power – even when they use records to hold power to account. And those of us who do concede that there can be no “standing outside,” usually hold to the notion that the power we wield as archivists is a constructive, as opposed to an oppressive, power. Our own view is that archivists are, from the beginning and always, political players; that they are active participants in the dynamics of power relations; and that the boundary between constructive and oppressive power is always shifting and porous. This is not an original view. It is one that has been made from different perspectives and in different disciplines by numerous commentators, from Michel Foucault to Bruno Latour, from Jacques Derrida to Ann Stoler.⁴⁹

So archival description is a fraught terrain. How should archivists respond to it? Can they resist the systemic imperatives to privilege, to exclude, to control? The first step, as we have already intimated, is to acknowledge the nature of the terrain. Such acknowledgement breaches a circle of knowledge, allows in, invites in, fresh and disturbing energies. As archival descriptions reflect the values of the archivists who create them, it is imper-

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 72.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1992); Bruno Latour, “Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands”, *Knowledge and Society* 6 (1986); Derrida, *Archive Fever*; and Ann Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form”, in Carolyn Hamilton et al. (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002). These commentators have influenced, and are influencing, a growing number of “postmodern” archivists. In terms of discourse, the most prolific of the latter are the Canadians Terry Cook, Brien Brothman, Joan Schwartz, Tom Nesmith, and Richard Brown.

ative that we document and make visible these biases. Users should have access to information about the world-views of the archivists who appraised, acquired, arranged, and described archival records. Archivists need to state upfront from where they are coming and what they are doing. They need to disclose their assumptions, their biases, and their interpretations. Just as archivists document the historical background, internal organizational or personal cultures, and various biases or emphases of record creators, they need also to highlight their own preconceptions that influence and shape the descriptions and consequently the meanings of the records they re-present to researchers.

Descriptions inevitably privilege some views and diminish others. When archivists describe records, they can only represent a slice, or a slice of a slice, or a slice of a slice of a slice, of a record's reality. Therefore, it is imperative that we expose our biases and investigate how they shape and obscure the meaning of records. We need to move beyond the debate over whether to adopt a fonds-based approach or the series system, because both obscure the fraught terrain we have delineated and both tie us into the strictures of metanarrative. Both privilege the evidential value of records and foreground corporate and legal perspectives. The debate should move beyond its present narrow discourse and begin to investigate the aspects of records that are not being described, and the voices that are not being heard. What values are we systematically ignoring, and therefore obscuring in our descriptions? How can we resist continuing our present ways of describing which privilege certain ways of knowing, but ignore others? Since our biases will always shape and distort the records, archivists need to discuss which attributes in records require greater emphasis and which can be diminished. Some voices have been silenced in archives, but our descriptions should strive to respect the rights of all voices. However, if we try to give voice to the marginalized, will we misrepresent, will we negatively bias the interpretation of the records, and will our own biases do more damage than good? Can the mainstream ever accurately represent the marginal? How can we invite in what is always beyond our limits of understanding? How can we avoid the danger of speaking *for* these voices? How can we avoid reinforcing marginalization by naming "the marginalized" as marginal? How can we invite in what we wish to resist – the voices, for instance, of white supremacists, or of hard drug dealers, of paedophiles, rapists, pimps, and so on, and on, and on? In the memorable words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: "Let us, then, for the moment at least, arrest the understandable need to fix and diagnose the identity of the most deserving marginal. Let us also suspend the mood of

self-congratulation as saviors of marginality.”⁵⁰ It is imperative that we not romanticize “otherness.” We need to fear it even as we respect it. We need to understand that it is as much “inside” as it is “outside.” We need to engage it, without blueprint, without solution, without answers.

Our call, in a word, is for hospitality. We should be exploring new ways to open up archival description to other ways of representing records or naming the information in the records. We need, therefore, to understand the limits of both the fonds-based and series approaches in order to open up our archives to other forms of representing in other descriptive architectures. For instance, we need to resist the temptation to privilege text and to describe all records uniformly. The zeal for uniformity and consistency has imposed a textual bias on other media and has underplayed the powers and attributes of visual materials, sound recordings, and other “non-textual” records.⁵¹ We need to create descriptive systems that are more permeable. In doing so archivists will have to relinquish some of their power to control access to, and interpretation of, their records with which the current descriptive approaches invest them. Hope Olson reminds us that giving up the sole power to name or represent is risky to information professionals who are steeped “in the tradition of the presumption of universality of naming. The reason for this dis-ease is that making space for the voice of the other means that we must relinquish some of our power to the other – power of voice, construction and definition. Instead of possessing this power exclusively, we who are on the inside of the information structures must create holes in our structures through which the power can leak.”⁵²

We need to create holes that allow in the voices of our users. We need descriptive architectures that allow our users to speak to and in them. Architectures, for instance, which invite genealogists, historians, students, and other users to annotate the finding aids or to add their own descriptions would encourage the leaking of power. Unfortunately, we have failed to investigate seriously the degree to which descriptive systems meet our users’ needs. We need to understand better the users of our records. We need to identify all the different types of existing and potential users of archives. Our present descriptive systems facilitate the needs of certain types of users, but give short shrift to others. To date archivists have created systems based on their view of record values, and their use of records. When studying users, they will

⁵⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 61.

⁵¹ For an fascinating discussion on archival practice and photographs, see Joan Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us:’ Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats”, *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995): 40–74.

⁵² Hope A. Olson, “The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 26 (Spring 2001): 659.

need to examine each group separately because the needs of genealogists will not be met by creating descriptive systems that meet the needs of historians. Tools designed to meet the needs of archivists or senior scholars will probably not help novice or casual users of archives. PhD students require systems different to those needed by high school students. What other users require different descriptive systems? Do we have an obligation to meet first the needs of our resource allocators, or the creators of the records? What do the media specialists, lawyers, film makers, children, and geographers need? How do we understand what these and many other users want? Can we afford to try to give them what they want, or does the archivist become the final arbitrator of what they need? What are our obligations to them? How accountable to them do we need to be? If we study (or serve primarily) the needs of academic researchers, are we simply studying the elite? We cannot meet the needs of all users, so we must decide which users get preferential treatment, which users do we serve first and foremost. We can develop a number of interfaces to our descriptive systems, but we cannot afford to develop a different system for each type of user. So we will need to decide who we serve first, who we study, and to whom we are accountable. We will also need to consider the importance of future researchers. If we meet the descriptive needs of present users, how will we disadvantage users not yet born? If we emphasize the voices of today's marginalized, will we create barriers to future researchers?

What our descriptions mean, and what the related records mean, will not remain inviolate over time. They will change, because their interpretation is dependent upon the social worlds of their interpreters. Archives, ultimately, are not about the past, but about the future. But can we anticipate the future? Can we meet all the needs of all the users across time? No! But we can respect the future, precisely by respecting "the present" and its many "pasts." To respect, look again, at the complex, messy present, and the pasts it invokes, we would argue, is to open it to the future. We heed a profound call when we engage what is "other;" when we strive to hear voices which are marginalized or silent; when we confront our own story telling and seek ways of telling better, more inclusive stories; when we face our own complicity in the exercise of power; when we refuse to squeeze the concept of accountability to users into a neat, manageable box or descriptive template.

What we have been attempting above is a tentative outline of a deconstructive approach to archival description. Such an approach posits an architecture which will resist adopting only what is manageable, which will resist neat boxing exercises. Is such an architecture amenable to any form of standardization? What does it say to descriptive standards? These are the questions we address in the final section of the essay.

Unmasking the titular

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of standards for archival description. Most of them were the products of initiatives emanating from Europe and North America, the sites also of their increasingly widespread implementation. The standardization of archival description, we would argue, must be seen as part of a more generalized push for standardization – in the view of some analysts, a late modernist endeavour to find order and sanity in increasingly chaotic tumblings of reality. Beyond the scope of this essay is an examination of linkages between this phenomenon and the broader conditions of modernity, bureaucratization, and globalization. Suffice it to say that the linkages are undeniable, and that standardization cannot be understood outside of historical and political processes.

In this essay, we have sought insistently to name the dangers inherent to any process of archival description. These dangers are especially concentrated in moves to standardize. As Bowker and Star have argued, “Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing – indeed it is inescapable. But it *is* an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous – not bad, but dangerous.”⁵³ With standardization, then, archivists are clearly in a realm where power is exercised, and where the dangerous processes of valorization and silencing are unavoidable. When does an approach to description, a system of classification, become a standard? Following Bowker and Star,⁵⁴ we would identify two key characteristics: a set of agreed-upon rules spanning more than one community of practice or site of activity and enduring over time; and the deployment of these rules to make things work together over distance and heterogeneous modes of measurement and description. The wider the span, the greater the distance, the more heterogeneous the modes, then the greater the violence done to the local, the individual, the eccentric, the small, the weak, the unusual, the other, the case which does not fit the conceptual boxes that are unavoidable in any form of standardization. Here we are dealing with degrees of violence. In other words, there can never be an absence of violence. Any approach to, or model of, standardization which claims such an absence is seeking to fool all of the people all of the time. By the same token, the positing of orthodoxy in descriptive standardization, whether it be based on the fonds or the series, marks a considerable presence of violence.

In many of his works, Jacques Derrida has addressed the question of “the name,” seeking always to open up its closed spaces by deconstructing the processes of naming. What we name we declare knowable and control-

⁵³ Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star, *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 1999), pp. 5–6.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

lable. In naming, we bring order to chaos. We tame the wilderness, place everything in boxes, whether standard physical containers or standardized intellectual ones. In the realm of descriptive standardization, using big boxes such as fonds or series, or small boxes such as dates of creation or acquisition, we bring order to wild realities. Derrida's ideas are not a marginal, esoteric exercise. Indeed, it reaches into all of our daily lives, for arguably all use of language is about naming. Brien Brothman argues this point brilliantly in a recent essay,⁵⁵ drawing in technology's infinite expansion of naming spaces: "the world we speak and write, this world upon which we speak and write and name, is not flat. Nor is it round. It is a curved web of endless threads of meaning becoming. With information technology, as Derrida has explained, language has been dislocated from the territorial and the national. Language is a final frontier without boundaries, without edge, without finality."⁵⁶ Naming, then, is always pertinent. But it is particularly pertinent to descriptive standards. As Hope Olson has said to information professionals: "Naming nature is the business of science. Applied in our role as 'neutral' intermediaries between users and information, our theories, methods, models, and descriptions are as presumptuous and controlling as scientists' construction and containment of nature."⁵⁷ With "the standard" we pronounce the titular names, the metanames, the ones which will empower us to use the rest of our words to describe all in our purview.

Of course, metanames come in varying sizes. And the choices which inform their "sizing" are laden by value judgement. For example, a standard's grouping of various elements and the degree of descriptive specificity accorded each grouping expresses a particular view of reality. Some standards strive for simplicity, identifying relatively few distinct groupings. They group similar concepts under the rubric of a broader concept. These standards obscure difference and foreground sameness. Other standards focus on the finer grain by accentuating and reinforcing the distinctiveness of similar concepts. The sharper the focus, the plainer difference becomes. As Bowker and Star explain, "blurring categories means that existing differences are covered up, merged, or removed altogether; while distinction constructs new partitions or reinforcement of differences. This mutual process of constructing and shaping differences through classification systems is crucial in anyone's reality."⁵⁸ A simple example: the ISAD(G) (2nd edition) interna-

⁵⁵ Brien Brothman, "In the Name of the Name: Keeping Archives in the Late Modern Age", in Ethel Kriger (ed.), *Wresting the Archon from the Arkheion: A Question of Right(s) and a Call for Justice to Always Come?* (Pretoria: National Archives of South Africa, 2001), pp. 152–161.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

⁵⁷ Olson, "The Power to Name", 640.

⁵⁸ Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, p. 230.

tional descriptive standard for archival materials provides rules for recording dates of records creation and dates of accumulation in the same descriptive element. It makes no reference to dates of reproduction, receipt, circulation, or transmission, though it does give space for "other dates." However, this space is focused on levels of description (for example, fonds, series, file, or item), thus marginalizing the dating of other processes not tied to these recorded products.

For some, the critique of standardization that we have offered thus far might constitute grounds for dismissing descriptive standards as tools of oppression to be avoided at all costs. However, with Bowker and Star, we would argue that their dangers should not be equated with badness. Of course, there are bad standards. And even a good standard can be used badly. Before attempting a depiction of what a good standard might look like, let us make the case for not dismissing descriptive standards out of hand. Our case rests on three arguments. First, purism in this realm invites paralysis. The deconstructionist who eschews naming, or labelling, for the reasons outlined above, but who at the same time argues that all language is about naming, that every word is a sign, and that therefore all writing and all speech is a form of labelling, is bound to silence. Like Derrida, the archetypal deconstructionist, who writes and speaks in volumes unimaginable to most of his detractors, we would choose to engage the messy business of naming rather than to be silent. The silent archivist is an archivist with no story to tell. Surely the imperative driving all of us who call ourselves archivists is precisely that we must tell stories with our records? And like Derrida, while being suspicious of every metanarrative, we would acknowledge the impossibility of ever-transcending metanarrative. For of course the deconstructive suspicion – and concomitant determination to create space for multiple stories – itself becomes a big story. Secondly, early twenty-first-century technological realities make it impossible to build a complex collective project without standards.⁵⁹ For example, every e-mail message relies on over 200 Internet standards for its successful transmission. Thirdly, whatever our view of descriptive standards might be, the dangerous work of naming, of building and applying descriptive architectures, proceeds in a myriad archival sites and localities. More often than not, this work is characterized by an unquestioning replication of the power relations within which these sites and localities are embedded. In our view, the descriptive standard is one of the few direct means available to us for troubling and perhaps challenging this replication. It can be a means of questioning orthodoxies such as the fonds, the series, corporate record keeping, and the pre-eminent focus on the evidential value of records. To classify is

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

human. And to respect the metaname, the standard, is also human. Ironically, and dangerously, this provides us with an opportunity to unmask the titular.

But how to unmask the titular using what is by definition a titular tool? Let us confess upfront that we are not sure that it is possible. We have no blueprint, no final answer. We are cast in the realm of what is (im)possible. Our dream is of a descriptive standard which is liberatory rather than oppressive, one which works as a touchstone for creativity rather than as a straightjacket. What would the attributes of such a standard be?⁶⁰

A liberatory descriptive standard would not seek to hide the movements of its construction. In particular, it would not obscure the dimensions of power which it reflects and expresses. In the words of Bowker and Star, it would resist the temptation to pose as a “naturalized object”, one de-situated and stripped of the contingencies of its creation by the archivist.⁶¹ The traces of its construction would be made explicit. In other words, it would, as far as possible, make known the biases of its creators. It would, in short, be hospitable to deconstruction.

A liberatory descriptive standard cannot emerge from a process which is exclusive, opaque, and beyond the demands of accountability. Enormous as the hurdles might be, as resilient the resistances, standards writers need to seek inclusivity and transparency. The process is as important as the product. The more boundaries – geographical, cultural, class, gender, disciplinary, institutional, medium, and other – crossed by the process, the more liberatory its product is likely to be.

A liberatory descriptive standard would not position archives and records within the numbing strictures of record keeping. These strictures posit “the record” as cocooned in a time-bound layering of meaning, and reduce description to the work of capturing and polishing the cocoon. The work, to shift metaphors, of mere housekeeping. In contrast, a liberatory standard would embrace the work of homemaking. It would posit the record as always in the process of being made, the record opening out of the future. Such a standard would not seek to affirm the keeping of something already made. It would seek to affirm a process of open-ended making and re-making. This would mean, *inter alia*, encouraging the documentation of continuing archival intervention. It would mean finding ways of documenting the continuing use of records. It might mean providing space for researchers

⁶⁰ We do not claim originality in the outline of a liberatory standard which follows. Bowker and Star, explicitly, have influenced our thinking. But a number of “archival” thinkers, notably Terry Cook, have also influenced us. Cook’s ground-breaking ideas are spread through numerous texts, but are concentrated in a text which appeared after we began work on this essay: “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives”, *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 14–35.

⁶¹ Bowker and Star, *Sorting Things Out*, p. 299.

to embed their own stories of use within the descriptive layerings. Such a standard would, in other words, be permeable to the naming work of users, and respect (rather than banish) prior namings when new ones are articulated.

A liberatory descriptive standard would take the needs of records users seriously. Without this attribute, a descriptive standard courts the danger of being oppressive or irrelevant. A standard *with* this attribute would acknowledge that different categories of user deploy different semantics and require different paths into the record. It would seek to allow different ways of searching, different ways of interrogating records, different ways of organizing and manipulating representations. It would, in short, place a premium on flexibility.

A liberatory descriptive standard would encourage archivists to get in under the dominant voices in the processes of record making. Without falling for reductionist formulations, and mindful of the dangers attendant on any attempt to know “otherness,” it would require engagement with the marginalized and the silenced. Space would be given to the sub-narratives and the counter-narratives.

A liberatory descriptive standard would seek ways of troubling its own status and its *de facto* functioning as a medium of metanarrative. It would push the capacity of description to accommodate partial or multiple rather than complete closure. It would strive for an openness to other tellings and re-tellings of competing stories. It would, in the words of Bowker and Star, embrace “a politics of ambiguity and multiplicity.”⁶² Things which do not fit the boxes would not be either discarded or manipulated to size. Rather, cross-box and multiple-box positioning would be encouraged. And, as has already been suggested, the boxes would be given optimal flexibility and permeability. Holes would be created to allow the power to pour out. For, again as Bowker and Star have argued, “the toughest problems in information systems design are increasingly those concerned with modelling cooperation across heterogeneous worlds, of modelling articulation work and multiplicity. If we do not learn to do so, we face the risk of a franchised, dully standardized infrastructure . . . or of an Orwellian nightmare of surveillance.”⁶³

Archivists, we have argued, exercise power. They certainly have the power to choose a better fate for archival description than Bowker and Star’s two-headed monster. Do they have the will?

⁶² Ibid., p. 305.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 308.