Against Dismemberment: Relationality and the Re-membering of Documentary Heritage

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Abstract

Since the late nineteenth century, many archivists and other custodians of documentary heritage have referred to aggregated records as 'organic wholes,' emerging from and reflecting the lives and work of people, families, and organisations. As a result, this heritage is often managed in silos that are arranged and described by archivists, records managers, librarians and related professionals using particular standards, systems, and sector-specific ways of working. Such practices, carried out in the name of 'memory,' often result in a dismembering, a dissociation of records and the information they contain from their contexts. In this paper, we focus on archives and documentary heritage, not as organic wholes, but as the essential 'connective tissue' in living, complex, and continually evolving systems of remembering and re-membering meaning. Using museum and anthropological records as case studies, we explore the continuing risks of dissociation and argue for more relational, interdependent ways of working within and beyond memory and heritage institutions. Embracing relationality and the multiple re-membering of archives and collections reveals that the contemporary relevance of documentary heritage lies not just in items themselves, but in their essential connective role within wider cultural, historical, social and political processes.

Keywords

Archives, Museums, Ethnography, Anthropology, Dissociation

Introduction

Egyptologist Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie was a leading figure in the development of systematic approaches to archaeology, and a firm believer in the value of good records. "Recording is the absolute dividing line between plundering and scientific work," Petrie wrote in 1904, likening poorly documented collections to assemblages of remains:

> Our museums are ghastly charnel-houses of murdered evidence; the dry bones of objects are there, bare of all the facts of grouping, locality, and dating which would give them historical life and value. And it is only the self-evident facts of age that we already know, which can be observed in such a useless condition (Petrie, 1904, p. 48).

It is one of many instances of corporeal and biological metaphors used to describe collections of artefacts, specimens, and documentary heritage. The image of the museum as charnel-house seems particularly apt in light of the thousands of individuals (human remains), many

also poorly documented, acquired during this time (Turnbull, 2017), including by Petrie himself (Sheppard, 2010).

One does not have to look far beyond Petrie to find examples of "murdered evidence." In 1976, Thomas Tooth visited the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences in Sydney, Australia, and saw a display case containing several items including "an old marine chronometer. It was without its box and gimbals, and a more uninspiring exhibit would be hard to imagine" (Tooth, 1992, p. 120). But Tooth recognised the maker and serial number, and after investigating further proved that the chronometer—acquired by the museum in 1937 without knowledge of its provenance or history—was one of those carried on board the H.M.S. *Investigator* in the early nineteenth century. The *Investigator* was the first recorded vessel to circumnavigate the Australian continent, commanded by acclaimed navigator and hydrographer Matthew Flinders, Petrie's maternal grandfather. Tooth went on to inform the museum authorities that they unwittingly held one of the most important timepieces in Australian history; but, he was quick to note, "not before they could be presented with some documentary evidence" (Tooth, 1992, p. 121).

The need for museum objects to travel with their context has long been recognised. As Birmingham bookseller William Hutton wrote in 1785, following a disappointing visit to the British Museum: "The history and the object must go together, if one is wanting, the other is of little value" (Hutton, 1785, p. 191). Dissociation is where this relationship has not been maintained and items have become separated from their contexts, related objects, or the intellectual information (including documentary records) needed to preserve their meaning, value, and purpose (R. R. Waller & Cato, 2016). Dissociation takes many forms and may include items separated from closely related collections material; lost item numbers, provenance, or registration details; artefacts separated from cataloguing data; or artefacts and specimens disconnected from documentary records that contain information about their history and context. In the literature of preventative conservation, from which the term 'dissociation' is drawn, the focus is mostly on the impact of these separations on the inherent value and utility of objects, artefacts, artworks, and specimens.

The following article takes a somewhat different perspective, by focusing primarily on the archives, records, and documentary heritage that sits at the other end of these severed relationships. Field notes, letters, photographs, research reports, curatorial files and other records that have relationships with objects and specimens also lose something when cut off from the objects to which they refer. Using case studies primarily drawn from the United States and Australia, we consider the ways in which the institutional treatment of archives, even when associated with some degree of context, can also result in documents becoming dissociated from broader relational ecosystems of knowledge. The first two sections highlight the treatment of archives as self-contained organic wholes, and the role and management of archives and records in museums. This is followed by a more detailed discussion of preservation and dissociation, some of the professional and systemic causes of dissociation, and the impacts of

these processes on archives and documentary heritage as well as on other collected heritage. The final section then explores how more relational, connected ways of working can help to 're-member' dissociated archives and object collections in ways that better support contemporary professional practice and the needs and perspectives of the communities we serve. While the primary focus is on museums, our findings also have broader implications for documentary heritage in many contexts, some of which are briefly highlighted in the conclusion.

Archival organisms

Since the late nineteenth century, many archivists and other custodians of Western documentary heritage have referred to aggregated records as organic and self-contained. The opening of the *Manual for the arrangement and description of archives* (the so-called 'Dutch manual' first published in 1898) stated that an archive is "an organic whole" that "comes into being as the result of the activities of an administrative body or of an official" (Muller et al., 2003, p. 19). British archivist Hilary Jenkinson expanded this to define an Archive Group as "an organic whole, complete in itself, capable of dealing independently, without any added or external authority, with every side of any business which could normally be presented to it" (Jenkinson, 1922, p. 84). American archivist Theodore R. Schellenberg also implied wholeness in his reference to modern archives as "a body of material [singular] that has grown organically" out of an organizational activity (Schellenberg, 1956, p. 114).

These foundational texts proved instrumental to the increasing professionalization of archives and records management in the twentieth century. Over time, paper-based records were increasingly managed and organized by specialist archivists, records managers, and manuscript librarians in dedicated departments and institutions. In keeping with the idea that archives were "organic wholes," these collections of documentary heritage were often treated as distinct from collections of publications, artefacts, artworks, scientific specimens, and other forms of heritage. The UNESCO Memory of the World Programme, established in the early 1990s and focusing specifically on documentary heritage (including digital and audiovisual records), continues in a similar vein (Edmondson, 2020). As outlined in UNESCO's 2015 guidelines, documentary heritage constitutes: "those single documents—or groups of documents—of significant and enduring value to a community, a culture, a country or to humanity generally, and whose deterioration or loss would be a harmful impoverishment" (UNESCO, 2015). The significance of documentary heritage here is treated as largely self-contained, valued for its informational content and contribution to world memory rather than for its role in broader systems of culture and heritage.

This is not to say that archives and documents are separated entirely. At one level archival and records practice place a high value on context and relationships. As James Lambert wrote in 1995: "No document [has] evidentiary value—and they would add, I believe, precious little real informational value—unless the context of its creation could be determined, including

the identification of its creator … The context *is* all" (Lambert, 1995, p. 96). From Jenkinson on, there is a focus on three key relationship types to support archives as evidence: contextual relationships to the activities and places that produced archives; relationships between documents "in a single accumulation"; and external relationships, by which he means external *archival* relationships to items in other Archive Groups (Jenkinson, 1948, pp. 4–6). When professionals speak of managing records and archives in their context it is often with reference to the relatively constrained contextual relationships noted by Jenkinson. Archivists may record information about the organizations, people, or families who have created and kept records; the places where records were made and managed; and the activities to which those records relate. The aggregate nature of archives and archival description often places such information at archives, *fonds* (the entire group of records originating from a single creating person, family, or organization), record group, or series level. Standards such as ISAAR(CPF)—the international archival standard for authority records about corporate bodies, persons, and families, published in 1996—have been specifically designed to capture this type of contextual information.

But at another level, the arrangement and description of archives as distinct units—as "organic wholes"—creates hierarchical archival silos beneath provenance entities. As with Plato's idea of "carving nature at the joints" (explored in Khalidi, 1993) archives and records may be described and managed in ways that involve nested hierarchies and relationships, but they are 'carved off' and expected to function independently, with few (if any) lateral relationships to other forms of heritage, other collections material, or to contexts external to the specifics of the documents, their creation, and their use. This tendency to 'cut off' documentary heritage from other related material, and from broader contextual information about subjects, events, communities, and concepts, is even apparent in institutions like museums, where the management of documentary heritage is often treated as secondary to other activities.

Archival organisms in the museum environment

Museums contain many different types of records. Examples include registers and other accession records, catalogues, and item lists; object-based research and curatorial files; correspondence (for example, with collectors, donors, researchers, and other institutions); collected archives and manuscripts (such as those from anthropologists or artists); photographic collections; conservation and preservation records; exhibition files; administrative records (e.g., financial data, trustee or board meeting minutes, personnel records); loan agreements; and records documenting the particulars of its specialist facilities, to name but a few.

Links between museum archives and their institutional context may remain unusually close. In a recent article in *Archives & Manuscripts*, museum archivist Vanessa Finney writes:

> *Australia's first and oldest cultural-scientific institution, The Australian Museum (AM) in Sydney, was founded in 1827. Its colonial archive documents the museum's own becoming and its developing knowledge practice in surprising detail. Still in use at the museum, it is one of only*

a few Australian colonial archives that continue to function in their original administrative context into the present (Finney, 2024).

Remaining within the institution that created them, and in many cases in some form of active use, museum records sit more comfortably within continuum models of records than they do linear biological 'life cycles.' Museum accession files, donor files, and archival accession files are all "permanently active" (in Demb, 2004, p. 98) and may be maintained by a combination of collections, records, and archival staff. Museum archives are therefore frequently maintained in their administrative context, not just intellectually through arrangement and description practices, but as part of ongoing institutional practice. However, documentary collections are simultaneously seen as peripheral to the primary purpose of these institutions. At Sir John Soane's Museum in London, the archives were not "considered to be part of the Soane collection to which the public has general access under the Soane Museum Act" (Summerson, 1955, p. 51); and at Australia's largest public museum organisation, Museums Victoria, the archives are not considered part of the State Collection—just two of many such examples (see Jones, 2021, pp. 29–34).

The professionalisation of museum archives is relatively recent. For much of their histories, documentary material in museums was managed by curators, registrars, librarians, or filing clerks rather than professional archivists and record managers. Once museums became a focus for the archival profession from the 1970s, the distinct requirements of documentary collections were made paramount. The first set of guidelines published in the United States, from the 1979 Conference on Museum Archives at the Smithsonian's Belmont Centre, recommended that archives should become "a separate department," preferably located "in a separate and secure area of the museum" (1979). The history of what happened next in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia has now been well documented (Brunskill & Demb, 2012; Jones, 2021; Wythe, 2004). A growing focus on museum archives led to the creation of separate departments and documentation strategies, sometimes including the extraction and centralisation of distributed records from across the institution, or (particularly in large museums) the development of multiple archives managed separately by different departments and disciplines.

These ways of working were further reinforced by the arrival of collections management and archival management databases. Museum staff, archivists and records managers, and librarians were left to deploy their own systems and standards, creating information silos managed independently by each profession. Today, many institutions continue to prioritise the access and use of their object and specimen collections over the documentary heritage they hold. Susan Hernandez, digital archivist and systems librarian at the Cleveland Museum of Art, writes about the continuing "perception that archival collections are not museum collections or that they are less valuable than object collections," resulting in "resistance to the idea that archival collections should be discoverable alongside object collections" (Hernandez, 2022, p. 42). Where such material is made discoverable, the separation between collections management systems

means the result is a federated set of discrete records. There is little support for users who wish to explore the relationships between items beyond keyword text searches and basic filtering options.

The Smithsonian was one of the few institutions to have a formal archives programme before the 1970s. The Smithsonian Institution Archives (SIA) dates back to 1891. SIA is the repository for archives pertaining to the parent organization, while other archives across the complex—which now includes 21 museums and a National Zoo—contain both records generated or received by their staff in the course of museum business, and documentary material collected from other sources. For example, its National Anthropological Archives (NAA) collections comprise records collected by both Smithsonian and external anthropologists. The records of the Bureau of American Ethnology, a Smithsonian anthropological research unit, are also housed in the NAA, but records pertaining to the nineteenth century proto-Smithsonian US National Museum's anthropology department can be found both in the NAA and the SIA. While the National Museum of Natural History's anthropology department curators work from the main site on the Mall, its ethnographic and archaeological collections, and their accompanying records, are located at offsite repositories and managed by collections staff. This complex also houses the NAA, next to the cultural resources center of the SI's National Museum of the American Indian (another anthropology collection formerly known as the George Heye Museum, acquired by the Institution in 1989).

Divisions between and within institutions, dictated by disciplines and professions, and item formats, offer many examples where archives and other collections material exist in the same overall context but remain intellectually and organisationally separate. Visitors to the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History (NMAH) website can search across its collections and archives. The brief description of its copy of the vinyl record *The Jazz Messengers at the Café Bohemia, Vol. 2*, recorded for the Blue Note label in 1955, states: "The cover art and design were created by American painter and graphic designer John Hermansader (1915-2005). Hermansader was best known for his iconic Blue Note record covers for Jazz Messengers, Miles Davis, and Jay Johnson," and the credit line tells us it was a "Gift of Lucy C. Shain in memory of James Lewis Shain" (*The Jazz Messengers at the Cafe Bohemia, Vol. 2*, n.d.). Some might claim that this item is therefore well connected to its context, including information about the creator of the cover art and its provenance. But in the NMAH Archive Center, the Francis Wolff Jazz Photoprints collection contains a photograph of pianist Horace Silver from these recording sessions—the same image of Silver that appears on the cover of the Jazz Messengers' album. There is no documented link between the two, nor are there shared authority records, and the searchable text for the album does not include a reference to Silver (though the biographical information about Hermansader embedded in the item level description means Miles Davis and Jay Johnson are mentioned, despite not playing on the record). The description and metadata for the album does not reference Wolff, though the photo in the archives provides clear evidence

that he was one of the photographers whose work was used by Hermansader for the album art. The description of the photograph does not mention that the album recorded at the session Wolff photographed is in the collection, let alone that the photograph appears on the cover. In treating the photograph as part of an organic whole—a "body of material," in Schellenberg's terms, with a singular provenance—a piece of documentary heritage has been cut off from a closely-related collection item, both of which were produced in the same time and place. Context may be all, but this way of working does not extend to all the known context. Both items are impoverished as a result.

We can identify multiple 'joints' along which such items were dismembered. There is the line drawn by professional archivists and records managers to delineate 'organic wholes,' using constrained relationships to other records and a limited set of provenance entities. There are the practices of curators and collections managers and systems developers, who have treated archives as less significant than 'the collection,' excluding them from central catalogues and online collection searches, therefore reducing the ability to crosslink between types of collections. And there is the visible impact of practical divisions, like storage and preservation requirements for different physical formats. Archivist Terry Cook raised this in the context of Canada's 'total archives' concept, pointing out "the internal divisions of archival institutions along media lines has created a *de facto* fragmentation of the archival whole, as defined by the principle of provenance" (Cook, 1979, p. 142). Together these factors combine to produce widespread intellectual separation of documentary materials from the tangible and intangible heritage to which they often refer.

Preservation and dissociation

Dissociation refers to the separation of items (usually specimens, objects, and material culture) from their context, metadata, and related sources of information (including labels, cataloguing data, and records). The term first emerged as part of conservators' increasing focus on inhibiting damage and loss before it occurs, known as "preventative conservation" (Caple, 2011; Rose, 1991; Staniforth, 2013). From the late 1980s, conservators like Stefan Michalski from the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) began elaborating on how to monitor and control for nine physical threats, including fire, water, pests, contaminants, temperature, and humidity (Michalski, 1990). R. Robert Waller then added a tenth, non-physical threat he termed "custodial neglect," later renamed "dissociation" to avoid apportioning blame (Michalski, personal communication, 1 May 2017; R. Waller & Cato, 2005). Dissociation encompassed: "all the ways that data are dissociated from objects and collections and that objects are dissociated from collections and institutions that are not the result of criminal activity" (R. Waller & Cato, 2005), including "Loss of collection-related documents such as field notes" (R. Waller, 2015, n.p.).

Museums have long been aware of the importance of data associated with items. As Alfred Whiting, Curator of Anthropology at Dartmouth College Museum, wrote: "The essence of a

museum collection is the data associated with the specimens. Specimens without data are at best curios ... A collection so badly catalogued that the data cannot be readily found is more frustrating than no collection at all. Catalogues can be that bad" (1966, p. 85). Archivists often refer to the importance of context in similar ways. Renowned Australian archivist Peter J. Scott wrote with his colleague G. Finlay:

> *Records and archives derive much of their meaning and value from the administrative (or other) context in which they were originally created; furthermore we maintain that preservation of the association between archives and their original historic context is vital to a full and proper understanding of the evidence and information which they contain* (1978, p. 115).

Dissociation in museums (and elsewhere) cuts both ways, impacting as much on the value and utility of documentary heritage as on other materials to which it relates.

An example of the deleterious effects of these splits is found in the Donald Thomson Collection, widely considered one of the most significant collections of Australian Aboriginal cultural heritage in the world. Thomson's life work is now categorised into several parts. The Donald Thomson Ethnohistory Collection, also referred to as Thomson's "literary estate" (Allen, 2008, p. 390), is on the Australian Register of the UNESCO Memory of the World Program. In keeping with that designation, it is comprised of documentary heritage, including photographs, sound recordings, maps, drawings, notebooks and field notes, language lists, correspondence, and illustrations (UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee, 2008). There are also many hundreds of ethnographic objects, donated to the University of Melbourne on Thomson's death in 1970; and natural history specimens, including mammals and fishes (Thomson et al., 1985) and botanical specimens. The significance of the collection and its meaning for Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples is found in the relationships within and between these parts. Anthropologist Nicholas Peterson wrote: "It is in the context of the collection that the minute particulars of his hundreds of pages of fieldnotes come into their own through their close relationship with the objects and images" (Peterson, 2005, p. 43). Thomson's assistant Judith Wiseman spent more than a decade after his death transcribing thousands of pages of handwritten notes, and capturing as many cross-references between parts of the collection as possible with little regard for physical format or disciplinary divisions, reporting on her progress in 1978: "Cross referencing—to continue more or less for ever" (Wiseman, 1978).

And yet, the subsequent management and documentation of the collections has produced numerous problematic separations. Until recently the 'literary estate' remained the property of Thomson's family, the ethnographic artefacts belonged to the University of Melbourne (donated by Thomson's widow), and the natural history specimens were sent to what was then called the National Museum of Victoria (NMV), later Museums Victoria (MV). From 1973 the collections were co-located at MV due to a joint loan agreement between the museum, the university, and the

Thomson family, though the natural history specimens were housed in a separate department due to disciplinary splits in the institution. Despite Wiseman's work in the 1970s and 1980s (see Jones, 2018), in more recent years other splits have emerged. For example, though a published microfiche catalogue of the artefacts contained many cross-references (Ramsay, 1987), now that they are documented in the MV CMS these references are no longer publicly visible, and are only found in an internal notes field. A print catalogue of the mammal and fish specimens (drawn almost entirely from Thomson's registration cards, notes, and diaries) fails to mention any of the material culture collection; and the Memory of the World entry for the Ethnohistory Collection does not even mention artefacts or natural history specimens. To take a single example, there are photographs and field notes about dugong hunting on Cape York Peninsula in the ethnohistory collection, including descriptions and images of the making of a dugong hunting rope. The rope (and others like it) are in the material culture collection, and there are dugong skulls and associated specimens in the natural history collection, all collected by the same person in the same context. For Indigenous community members or other users interested in the culture and practice of dugong hunting on the Cape, divisions between documentary heritage, natural science, and ethnographic collections and their different ways of preserving and cataloguing collections are not just irrelevant, they complicate the generation of meaning and understanding. The umbrella provenance of 'Donald Thomson' does little to surface the many significant relationships between collection items so prized by Peterson and Wiseman.

Whether considering objects, specimens, cataloguing data, or archives, there are different types and degrees of dissociation. When the Flinders' chronometer was registered in 1937 it was already dissociated from its history, and from any documentation or metadata that might confirm its provenance. There are also many artefacts in museums that were apparently not registered on acquisition, like the 'Gweagal shield' in the British Museum. Some argue it is the shield collected by Captain James Cook and Joseph Banks on the east coast of Australia during their voyage to the South Pacific in 1770, while others remain unconvinced. The shield was finally registered in 1978; but, with no definitive evidence and no paper trail to follow, debate continues (Nugent & Sculthorpe, 2018; *Shield*, n.d.; Thomas, 2018). By comparison, the Jazz Messengers album and photograph discussed earlier are registered, documented, and managed in their own right; but the separate institutional and technological silos used for the collection and archives mean every subsequent user has to rediscover the association between material that sits on either side of the divide. This work becomes even harder when archives are not documented and searchable, particularly where institutional processes have resulted in artefacts and their associated archives being split across different departments. This is exemplified in Jones' (2021) introductory discussion of Aboriginal stone tools sent to the British Museum in 1901 by Tasmanian amateur collector Reverend Christopher George Wilkinson. Due to institutional restructuring in the twentieth century, the tools are now held in a different department from the bound correspondence files containing Wilkinson's extensive and evocative letters (Jones, 2021,

pp. 1–2). Similarly, in more recent decades, developments such as the move away from shared central files for digital records can silo and fragment organisational documentation in ways that hinder discovery, access, and use.

Even more challenging is where archives and associated collection materials end up in different institutions. There are several factors that contribute to this kind of fragmentation. Many pre-registrar documenters (collectors, curators, source community members) moved between institutions as they pursued careers in the sector, while others relied on non-salaried incomes (or worked without pay, as in the case of women who were assumed to be financially supported by male family members). Curator-collectors moved from institution to institution, much as their modern counterparts, to secure jobs and advance their careers, often taking their field notes and research with them, and moving further away from source community relationships over time. Records tended to end up in the archives of whichever institution was home at career's end, or wherever family members felt the curator had the strongest ties. Meanwhile, national and international networks of amateur and professional collectors sold objects to multiple institutions that could not or would not purchase whole collections, resulting in their (often arbitrary) break up along with documentation. Federated cross-institutional catalogues and linked data have improved this situation to some degree, but it remains a problem, not just for researchers, curators, collections managers, registrars, and archivists but for those source communities whose tangible and intangible heritage was collected and traded by institutions around the world.

Locating layers of information pertaining to collections is dependent on the implementation of common institutional practices. While most museums maintain a catalogue in one form or another, effective use requires attention to the histories of its production. William Sturtevant (1973, p. 45), Smithsonian anthropologist and curator, called for the need to interview museum staff about "specific systems of record-keeping" in order to understand "what lies behind" typical descriptive records such as catalogues—just one example of the over-reliance on implicit knowledge in managing collections (Jones, 2021, p. 102). There is a need to understand how catalogues have been arranged and indexed, whether the information has been sourced from surrogate catalogues in other formats, what additional information has been added, and where this information has come from—also known as data provenance: "where a piece of data came from and the process by which it arrived in the database" (Buneman et al., 2001, p. 316). The process of locating information beyond the catalogue is akin to an organizational 'scavenger hunt' as relevant documents (papers, photographs) may be kept, "in more than one location: near the catalogs, or in the library, archives, department office, registrar's office, old safes and closets" (Sturtevant, 1973, p. 45).

The impact of dissociation and the effort required to locate relevant information is significant. At a broad level they result in a loss of meaning (Greene, 2002). Archival and object files function simultaneously as evidence and memory. They are evidence of the most basic function of the

museum (to collect and interpret objects) and of the legal ownership of the collection, and as such remain active from a records management perspective. At Museums Victoria, for example, the archives program was developed to address the requirements of State Records and Freedom of Information legislation (McNulty, 2000). But, as with all archives, there are a multitude of other possible uses, only some of which relate to why the records were created and kept. As recognized by UNESCO, documents support engagement with and understanding of the past, providing: "the means for understanding social, political, collective as well as personal history" (2015).

In addition to UNESCO's focus on state memory and history, dissociation also impacts the discoverability and use of museum collections and archives for Indigenous communities who see their ancestors, cultural heritage, and intangible knowledge collected, traded, bought, plundered, dug up, and stolen by generations of collectors. Fragmented documentation is one reason institutional inventories prepared under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) can take so long to compile, slowing the return process for ancestral remains. Writing about the process at the Peabody Museum, Barbara Isaac lists some of the reasons why an extension was sought, including the dissociation of human remains and related archaeological material, the need to navigate multiple (often outdated) cataloguing systems, and:

> The documents that contain information relevant to identifying and collating these assemblages are scattered not only through the Peabody Museum but also across other Harvard archives, and at times are actually to be found in the archives of other entirely autonomous institutions that at one time had shared expeditions and interests (Isaac, 2002, p. 161).

Similar issues face those engaged in other repatriation and reparation work, including in response to growing calls for broader data and archival sovereignty and the return of associated archival records, photographs, audiovisual records, and other documentary heritage (Booker, 2023; Evans et al., 2018; Thorpe, 2021; Thorpe et al., 2020). Diana Marsh's study of Indigenous community members' barriers to archival use, discovery, and access calls attention to considerations of archives' organization, contents, and users (Marsh, 2023, pp. 90–92). Using archives is a labor-intensive process that depends on knowledge and stamina as well as qualities of the archival material, which may be challenging due to the contents (such as handwriting or discipline-specific language), organization, and idiosyncratic documentation conventions. Source communities also face the problem of navigating dispersed records, or "archival diasporas" (Punzalan, 2014), reporting difficulties locating which archival repositories contain records of interest and understanding the complexities of diverse search interfaces.

As documentation surrounding the context of museum objects fragments, so does our understanding of the relationships among the people associated with objects. This makes it

increasingly difficult to surface the many relationships with various actors over time, resulting in incomplete or inaccurate finding aids—often at the expense of the participation of source communities, marginalized individuals, and counter-narratives. This disassociated provenance knowledge has a narrowing effect on opportunities for deeper research and creates barriers to reconstructing the broad impact of exchange practices and networks of actors or, in extreme cases, even provenance itself.

A pertinent case study here is the relationship between Harvard University's Peabody Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology (PM) and the Harvard University Archives (HUA). In comparison with many other coeval collections, the PM has an extraordinarily complete run of accession files, dating almost all the way back to its founding in 1866. The key actors of the PM's earliest collections (1866 – 1909) were its curator/directors, responsible not only for the administration of the organization, but also for building its collections through donations and purchase. Jeffries Wyman and Frederic W. Putnam also published on the collections and taught courses in Harvard's nascent Anthropology program while helping to establish the field as an academic and professional discipline in North America. Both also were active in archaeological expeditions (Wyman in Maine/Massachusetts/Florida and Putnam in Ohio) that added to the museum's collections (Wyman, 1868; Putnam, 1884). Putnam's collection development resulted in voluminous correspondence with commercial collector/scavengers, his assistants and bursary-supported associates (such as Zelia Nuttall, and siblings Francis and Susette La Flesche) as well as many amateur archaeologists. As the museum profession developed and matured, and registration became more standardized, staff had to contend with how best to organize the mass of provenances contained in ledgers, correspondence, (extraordinarily detailed) annual reports, trustee meeting minutes, and field notes. The principles of museum registration (which focuses on transfer of legal title) and archival original order are often at odds when it comes to these permanently active records (Demb, 2011).

Over the past twenty-five years a series of projects have been undertaken to arrange, describe, and make accessible accession files and other documentation. This included digitizing the PM's earliest catalogue ledgers and attaching them to its CMS (Demb, 1998); and digitizing much of the accession file materials and linking them to the CMS (Simmons University, 2019), though the completeness of each original file and its digital proxy is not yet (and may never be) complete, due to privacy and confidentiality requirements pertaining to content of the files, the sheer volume of related dissociated documentation, and the complexities of its organizational and actor histories. It is unclear when the Peabody's accession files were organized as a central file series, although they have certainly existed as such for many decades. Up until the late 1990s, they were held in file cabinets and some still included collections materials such as glass plate negatives and prints. It was common to find field notes and field notebooks in the files along with deeds of gift, correspondence, print-outs of catalogue records from earlier collections management systems, and registrarial forms. They were re-housed with funding

from an Institute of Museum and Library Services (ILMS) grant. Materials documenting the larger context of the acquisition, such as field notes and field notebooks, were removed to the archives, documented by 'separation sheets' tracking their location; and materials considered museum collections 'proper' were removed to object storage. The first database inventory of the accession files was created, as the CMS' registration module did not include this information. Prior to this exercise, the registrar had relied on cover sheets in each file. The preservation benefits to the project were significant, as were efforts to retain an audit trail of any removals to other locations within the museum.

However, dissociation of accession file materials had already occurred at the University, as the relationship of the Museum to central administration strengthened and became more formalized over time. Some years prior to the re-housing of the accession files, a sub-set of early director records were transferred to HUA with the best of intentions, to document the institution's administrative relationship to the larger organization (Harvard University Archives, 1866-1942; 1851-1968). While laudatory in its approach to ensuring that its 'associated' or 'affiliated' organizations are documented centrally as part of the HUA mandate, this called into question whether the archival principle of original order was upheld; but perhaps even more saliently, the nature of the early curator/directors' work, unlike their more recent successors, meant that the correspondence documented not only the founding and ongoing management of the museum, but also its collecting activities. The accession correspondence that had not previously made its way into the accession files is part of the director records now held at HUA. The volume of the correspondence and the archival practice of group level cataloging means that this correspondence remains divorced from the objects it documents, continuing the dissociation that already existed before its transfer. The only way to reconstruct the provenience of the objects documented in this correspondence is to review each page, noting where an object is mentioned, and then cross-check its descriptive elements, collector and donor name, and letter date against the PM's online CMS and the digitized web versions of early Peabody Museum annual reports (which list many acquisitions at the item level with their accession numbers)—a labor intensive process made slightly less complicated by the recent digitization and cataloging of the PM's accession files. It does not address the ongoing complexity of access to early fieldnotes, which are often in bound volumes too fragile to be consulted on a regular basis or digitized in a cost-effective manner.

While reassemblage may be a worthy undertaking when researching objects at their holding institutions, the separations of object and information is further complicated when viewed from the vantage point of objects in transit. The exchange of museum specimens was a regular part of administrative and curatorial operations between most natural history museums, scientists, and collectors in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While specimens (objects) were deemed mobile based on their status as duplicates (Nichols, 2021), relatively limited descriptive (catalogue) information tended to accompany objects (Nichols, 2022). At the

Smithsonian Institution, a 'Distribution of Specimens' form was the primary document for recording basic descriptive information for specimens sent in exchange. While a collector name and Smithsonian catalogue number was commonly listed, there was no systematic transfer of the collector's associated papers or field notes. The result of this practice led to widespread redistribution of objects, but extraordinary dissociation from their documentary contexts.

In an exchange from the Smithsonian to the PM in 1889, the Smithsonian sent a pair of moccasins described by their Distribution of Specimens form simply as "[Nature of Object] Moccasins, [Locality] Zuni, Ariz., [Collector] Col. J. Stevenson, [Catalogue Number] 41723, [No. of Specimens] 1 pr" (*Woman's Moccasins*, 2023). While these moccasins remain in the PM collection, and the PM online CMS lists James Stevenson as collector and Smithsonian Institution as exchange participant (or donor), there is no reference to the extensive archives or publications of the Bureau of American Ethnology, which organized Stevenson's collecting and research efforts, and whose records are held at the NAA in Washington, D.C.

Dissociation has many impacts. These include: breaking the relationship between items and evidence, potentially affecting the ability to establish provenance and legal ownership; disrupting the generation of meaning and understanding from distributed collections and archives; increasing the labour required to work with collections for curators, collections staff, and researchers (including an increased requirement for duplicated work); and complicating collections repatriation and reparation work to improve accessibility and usability by source communities.

From dismemberment to re-membering

Addressing these issues requires a cross-disciplinary response that recognises and helps to preserve the value of documentary heritage through its many complex relationships with other collected heritage.

First, we need to recognise that dissociation is not directional or hierarchical. There is little value in limiting discussion of dissociation to the separation of documents and data *from* objects, artworks, and specimens; or to talk about lost knowledge in terms of *meta*data, supplementary materials, and supporting records. Preserved knowledge and memory are comprised of complex networks of meaning, made up of many things—material, textual, documental, digital, and conceptual—which are in danger of disintegrating over time, or being dismembered along disciplinary, institutional, practical, or technological joints. Which is not to say disciplines and professions *do not* have a role to play. But as Muhammad Ali Khalidi points out scientists (and, by extension, researchers and practitioners in many domains, including museums) "are constantly recarving the world in accordance with their explanatory purposes and a number of these carvings can criss-cross without being rivals" (Khalidi, 1993, p. 113).

Embracing these criss-crossing lateral relationships between different views of the world means accepting multiplicity. Archivists have been grappling with these ideas for some time,

through explorations of concepts like parallel and societal provenance (Hurley, 2005a, 2005b; Nesmith, 2006; Piggott, 2012), and the development of standards or models that explicitly preference documenting archives, records and diverse related things in *contexts*, plural (Expert Group on Archival Description, 2023). Meanwhile, other fields are exploring varied knowledge systems and historicities, including Indigenous knowledges, and starting to grapple with the ways in which the entanglement of multiple perspectives can enrich as well as challenge existing ways of knowing and seeing (for example, Ballard, 2020; Hokari, 2011; Rademaker & Silverstein, 2022).

Our memory institutions also need to become 're-membering' institutions. Rather than trying to stabilise things in their current state by preventing dissociation, archivists, records managers, curators, and communities can work to reconnect items cut off by 'custodial neglect' or by intentional practices in collections and archives management and documentation. The archive is not only never complete, it is exponential, each strand branching and re-branching out across different timelines and sets of actors, all of whom could be treated equally rather than privileging only those creators who sit at the top of hierarchical provenance and structures of power. Addressing intra-institutional dissociation enhances provenance and expands original order, helping to place objects within their fuller contextual continuum of actors and relationships (in opposition to or surpassing Jenkinson's beloved *respect du fonds*). Further still, they can explore and capture new associations about items and the complex institutional, socio-cultural, and scientific networks through which they accrue and help to generate meaning.

Organizations and professionals have a key role to play here. Archivists, curators and registrars can redress the historic custodial neglect inherent in dissociated documentation by creating (or extending) stewardship relationships both with colleagues across museum departments, inter-institutionally, and through outreach to source communities by focusing on the goals of reducing inequities and lowering risk to the organization. Tools such as risk registers can be used to demonstrate the impact of dissociation on reputation, stewardship, and resources—an approach that might bring the museum's strategic goals into alignment with its ethical obligations while recontextualizing records and archives work and its role within the museum.

Technology allows many things here that were once either impossible or deeply impractical. The physical and intellectual separation of materials by formats, disciplines, professions, departments, and institutions were previously justifiable (at least in part) due to the constraints of physical storage and manual cataloguing. But though digital information systems now support much more complex knowledge structures, many ways of working still seem constrained by where the old joints lie. As Clay Shirky writes:

> *Many of the ways we're attempting to apply categorization to the electronic world are actually a bad fit, because we've adopted habits of mind that are left over from earlier strategies … People have been freaking out about the virtuality of data for decades, and you'd think we'd have internalized the obvious truth: there is no shelf. In the digital world, there is no physical*

constraint that's forcing this kind of organization on us any longer. We can do without it, and you'd think we'd have learned that lesson by now.
And yet (Shirky, 2005).

This does not mean the removal of categorisation, the abandonment of the key principles of archival description, or the federation of millions of discrete individual records into a single digital bucket. Archival arrangement and description based on provenance and original order remain an essential view of documentary heritage; but this should be considered just one of many possible views, alongside lateral and intersecting relationships with other people, places, events, concepts, and objects that provide many alternative perspectives on these complex networks of knowledge resources.

Nor do we suggest that institutions pour resources into document level description and the capture of a galaxy of relationships, either from the outset or retrospectively, as an end in itself. Aggregate description remains vital for making material available for discovery, access, and use in a timely fashion, and for providing explanatory information about groups of material. It is an aspect of archival work that museums, galleries, and other memory institutions could well learn from to improve the efficiency and utility of their own data structures. But the exploration of individual items, pathways through collections, and complex networks within and beyond organisational boundaries frequently occur as part of curatorial research, partnerships with source communities, education and engagement program development, online dissemination of collections knowledge, or through internal and external research projects. Capturing and preserving more of this intersecting knowledge will cumulatively build associations between items, collections, and records, some of which have been lost and many of which are entirely new.

Finally, we need to consider the value of such work, not only for institutional efficiencies and knowledge management, but also for source communities and other publics. Throughout their existence collectors and so-called 'memory institutions' have taken belongings from communities, often without informed consent, and frequently through acts of dispossession, violence, or genocide. This has been followed by a form of epistemic violence, dismembering and separating human and non-human beings, cultural knowledge, and folkways using Western scientific and disciplinary ontologies and modes of arrangement and classification. New systems and structures are required that can support communities and their descendants to re-member this knowledge, restoring living archives and relationships to community and place in ways that recognise sovereignty and value cultural authority.

Conclusion

These issues and the methods proposed for addressing new approaches and ways of thinking are not confined to museums and other memory institutions. Constrained ideas of archival provenance, a focus on internal relationships, and the creation of information silos based on

disciplines, departments, resources, and professions are problems that manifest in multiple environments, from universities and community organisations to government departments and large corporations. In all these contexts, knowledge and information management practices can benefit by moving away from the idea that accumulations of documents (using that term in its broadest sense) are whole, self-contained, or able to function independently. Instead, professionals should pursue the potential of digital technologies and emerging standards to explore how best to capture and preserve complex networks of information resources in ways that support multiple perspectives and processes. The power of documentary heritage lies not just in the items themselves, but as essential connective tissue within broader cultural, historical, social and political systems of meaning.

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Conflicts of interest

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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