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Rearranging the Files: On Interpretation in Media History

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In this essay the author argues for the necessity of self-conscious interpretation in historical scholarship. Historical documents are traces, to use Jacques Derrida's term. They point to absences, events that once were but now are not. Building on Derrida's concepts (without accepting his entire theory of language), alongside historiographic theory and ideas about method from the critical sociology tradition, the author argues that the work of classification and transversal thought offers an alternative to realist historiographies, one that allows for attention to the process of interpretation while affirming the need to continue writing history that makes claims on truth.

Shortly after defending my dissertation prospectus, I took up residence as a graduate fellow at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History. I had received a grant to study ideas of sound fidelity in their vast collections of commercial ephemera and technological documents. As fellows do, some of us formed a group to read each other's work and comment upon it. Nobody wanted to go first. Foolhardily, I volunteered even though I was only freshly All But Dissertation (ABD). By the time of our first meeting, I had spent maybe 5 or 10 days doing actual archival research on my project. I submitted some material that was full of hypotheses, research questions, and unsupportable conclusions, along with a photocopy or two of some documents I'd found. I was fully aware that the project had just started and that whatever I would find would transform my initial project into something else. The

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document, long lost as a faded magnetic pattern on a floppy disc, was a product of someone who had read a lot of history and written just a little, whose graduate training was in cultural studies and continental philosophy. I liked to interpret things and I viewed the archive as a rich store of texts for interpretation. Whatever I wrote no doubt reflected that orientation.

The actual flow of the conversation is also lost to me, but I remember it as something akin to Tasmanian devils devouring a cow; I had not found a friendly audience. My readers treated the thing as a finished work. Each assertion was taken apart on evidentiary grounds. Each interpretation was shown to be impossible or inappropriate, and the entire premise of my project was put into question. Certainly, nobody much liked my method. In truth, my memory is foggy, and I may not have my facts correct; however, I tell the story as if I was the only person in that group not currently enrolled in a PhD program in history. (Among the fellows that year, there were at least two other fellows who were from not from history disciplines: one was from Santa Cruz's History of Consciousness program and another was from Duke's English department. There were some historians of science around as well.) "Anecdotes need not be true," wrote Meaghan Morris (1990, p. 15), "but they must be functional in a given exchange."

I am not trying to win your pity through an account of a graduate student being subject to the criticisms of other graduate students (or, more likely, demonstrating my own cluelessness at the time as to the ways of actual cultural historians) or trying to cast myself in a heroic role. The point of this story lies in what happens next: after listening to everyone's criticisms, I posed a question to the group, probably in less articulate form than I reproduce it here: "You have disputed every interpretation I have offered of my materials in this piece. But how do you interpret historical documents as more than just empirical evidence in something akin to a court case?" I was greeted with silence. After a moment, someone said, "We all struggle with that." I tried to follow up, but the conversation moved on to something else. Those five words still reverberate in my memory.

Methodologically, the writing of history is perhaps the most mystified of the humanities and soft social sciences. There are really two mysteries perpetuated: one regards *interpretation* ("We all struggle with that") and the other regards *archives*. Another graduate school story: I once gave a paper at the Marxist Literary Group on the politics of historical preservation and the racial geography of Urbana-Champaign, Illinois (where I lived at the time). After the panel was over, a literature scholar came up to me and said, "That was great. I wish I had someone to do archival research for me." I was blown away. To research the piece, I had gone to exactly two libraries—the local library down my street, which had clippings from local news, and my university's library. Granted, the University of Illinois's library

claimed to be the third largest research library in the country at the time, so it was a good library, but there was nothing exotic or difficult in what I had done. People mystify archival research as fundamentally different from library research, but in both cases, one simply finds bundles of documents of possible relevance and starts going through them. As modes of exploration, both library and archival research are somewhere between textual fishing and looking for buried treasure. In a library, they are more likely to be itemized and cataloged as individual entries accessible to the researcher, whereas in the archive, they are likely housed in boxes and files for the researcher. (In this particular case, the librarians had directed me to folders of press clippings housed in file drawers.) But the literature scholar's comment also represented the flip side of the historians who did not wish to speak of interpretation: she interpreted texts; she didn't find them. That was someone else's job.

Anthropologists will sometimes minimize their work by claiming that ethnography is just "hanging out and paying attention," as one of my teachers said. But the truth is that there is a vast literature on how to interact with one's subjects in the field (and after), the ethics of ethnographic recording, transcription and writing, and the challenges of converting one's live observations in the field into a document which speaks for or as others. Every ethnographer has a favorite book on the doing of ethnography. Until recently, the same could not be said for historiography, at least not in the cultural history of media.

Outside of the discipline of history, there certainly are well-known books and articles on the writing of history, but they tend to take the form of either overtures to the profession, such as Marc Bloch's *The Historian's Craft* (1959), or, more recently, as forms of metacriticism (e.g., Jenkins, 1997; Lacapra, 1985; Scott, 1988; White, 1973).¹ One might say that, as a field, the historians are more honest, because to learn to write history (or ethnography or literary criticism or, or, or) is to learn a "feel for the game" of one's own field. In this sense, methodology is not a lofty pursuit but rather a simple one. Writing in a field that is perhaps overburdened by methodological discussions, radical sociologists have made this point well, in both lofty and practical terms. At the end of *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills derided the aspiration toward formal methodology and argues for a craft-based model of research: "Only by conversations in which experienced thinkers exchange information about their actual way of working can a useful sense of method and theory be imparted to the beginning student (1959, p. 195). In concrete struggles, the grandest problems of method are confronted. Perhaps my reading group mates had it right: I was looking for a master methodological discourse. But what I really needed was practice.

According to Pierre Bourdieu,

Historians and philosophers of science, and especially scientists themselves, have often observed that a good part of the craft of the scientist

is acquired via modes of transmission that are thoroughly practical. And the part played by the pedagogy of silence [. . .] is sure all the greater in those sciences where the contents of knowledge and the modes of thinking and of action are themselves less explicit and less codified (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 223).

It seems that the writing of history is a practical knowledge, not a codified one. The student of history learns by watching and doing. The emerging historian develops a style of interpretation and writing not unlike the emerging musician: the most distinctive features of style often begin as failed attempts to imitate those authors whom the student admires. As in music, mastery and style are relative terms in the writing of history, moving targets that shift according to generations, paradigms, and fads. Interpretations come and go; some gather an uncanny staying power.

But to accept Mills and Bourdieu's theses on research-as-craft without asking the deeper questions as to the materials of history and the role of interpretation would be to commit a pragmatic evasion. If there is no answer to the question of how one interprets historical documents as something other than "evidence," does that not still leave "evidence" as the default interpretation and some variant of positivism as the default epistemology? What does it mean to "interpret" (or to struggle with interpretation) when the referent of historical writing and the historical document is supposed to be something different than fiction?

Whatever the merits or problems of his work as a general theory of language or sense, Jacques Derrida's account of textuality exactly describes the condition of the historical document. No author has more clearly or precisely explained the stakes of the encounter between the historian and his or her documents, and no theory of communication better explains the conditions of possibility (or better, the conditions of impossibility) of historical writing. One might imagine that it is just the opposite. After all, the standard complaint about deconstruction is that it paralyzes authors, renders them unable to say anything. But I believe in the specific case of historical writing, Derrida's early work (never mind *Archive Fever*) sets writers free by helping them read more richly, systematically and sympathetically. It accomplishes this by inhibiting the realist impulse that animates so much of the historiographic imaginary.

The state of debate around deconstruction in historical writing pushes one away from this conclusion. Deconstruction is often dismissed by historians as something for literary texts (despite that Derrida was a philosopher of textuality and only occasionally concerned himself with literature) and inappropriate to the hard realism that is necessitated by historical inquiry. The following is an explanation from Georg Iggers, who claimed to provide a careful assessment of poststructuralist approaches to historiography:

This philosophy of language lends itself better to literary criticism than historical writing. For historical accounts, even if they use forms of narrative that are closely patterned on literary models, still claim to portray or reconstruct an actual past to a greater extent than is the case in fictional literature. [. . .] Linguistic analysis has proven to be an important supplementary tool in recent studies of political, social and cultural history. Yet in general, although [some] historians [. . .] emphasized the impact of language, rhetoric and symbolic behavior on political and social consciousness and action, the extreme position that ‘reality does not exist, that only language exists’ (Foucault) has been shared by few. Most historians would agree with Carroll Smith-Rosenberg that “while linguistic differences structure society, social differences structure language.” (Iggers, 2005, pp. 132–133)

If one has read no Derrida (or Foucault, whom Iggers also mischaracterizes), it would be easy to agree with Iggers’s statement of the problem. Of course reality exists. Of course language and society structure one another. But deconstruction is not about the triumph of superstructure over base. It is about the possibility for meaning to emerge, for sense to be made. And because historians spend their time making sense of remains of the past to endow them with meaning, its questions seem entirely relevant.

Perhaps Derrida’s first major incursion into historical thought came through Joan Scott’s *Gender and the Politics of History*. Scott followed other feminist poststructuralists in appropriating deconstruction’s emphasis on exclusion: any positive definition rests on a structuring exclusion that makes it possible. This simple insight provided a powerful intellectual maneuver for feminists to undertake the reconsideration of historical categories and narratives, and the dominance of men and patriarchal perspectives in writing about the past. For Scott, deconstruction allowed feminists to consider previously subjugated terms as actually central to historical discourse (as illustrated in her own “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis” essay), and to find new, more reflexive ethics and politics. Scott wrote,

This theory is, moreover, profoundly political in its implications for it puts conflict at the center of its analysis, assuming that hierarchy and power are inherent in the linguistic processes being analyzed. Although deconstruction has been labeled “nihilistic” and “destructive” by its critics, these epithets seem to me to be substitutes for serious evaluation of its possibilities. It may be that some deconstructive critics pursue an endless exposure of contradiction and are thereby unable to endorse or comfortably advocate a political program of their own. But there are also evident examples of a politics empowered by this approach. (Scott, 1988, p. 9)

The appropriation of deconstruction in history was tremendously productive for feminists and for postcolonial writers because it offered an ethics, an

epistemology and a method for undermining the dominant positions in the field against which they fought. Scott and others have ably used deconstruction as a method or technique for cracking open some of the sealed chambers of historiographic thought. This is hardly the linguistic formalism or super-structural determinism with which Iggers confuses it.

Deconstruction is also useful as a way of thinking about the craft and condition of historical interpretation. It is the absence of the past, the impossibility of finding direct access to it, that makes possible the writing, reading, and contemplation of history. History's condition of impossibility—the irreducible distance of finitude—is thus its condition of possibility. In his many critiques of the metaphysics of presence in his early work, Derrida makes this point repeatedly: humans have no direct access to reality outside of signification, that as humans, we are trapped in a web of signifying chains and that any dream of mimesis is just that, a dream. Now, there are other theories of language and signification to be sure; and by virtue of inhabiting Saussure's semiotics to take it apart, Derrida does not really deal with its alternatives. But regardless of whether Derrida's grammatology is an adequate theory of language or textuality as such, his work speaks to the condition of the historian quite precisely.

In explaining historians' general disinterest in deconstruction, Steedman (2007, p. 15) suggested that it is the closeness of the enterprise to deconstruction that accounts for it:

It is in fact the historian who makes the stuff of the past into a structure, an event, a happening, or a thing, through the activities of thought and writing: that they were never actually *there*, once, in the first place [. . .]. There is a double nothingness in the writing of history and in the analysis of history: they are about something that never did happen in the way it is represented (the happening exists in the telling or the text); and they are made out of materials that aren't there, in an archive or anywhere else. We should be entirely unsurprised that deconstruction made no difference to this kind of text, in which the historian's nostalgia for origins and original referents cannot be seen, or exposed, because there is actually *nothing there*: only absence, what once was: dust [emphasis in original].

The concept of time that subtends most historiography is a relatively simple Western, linear time. As humans, we live in a present that comes after the past and before the future. The past is lost to us; it is absent and we cannot simply retrieve it in its fullness or presence. We have traces of that past, which point back toward it. However, it would be wrong to see traces as simple signifiers that point back to a living past, a "signified." Traces do not provide unmediated access to the past in any simple way. The traces have logics of their own, and indeed they make possible historical sense in general. For Derrida, the trace is "anterior" to "the meaning of absolute presence":

"The trace is in fact the absolute origin of sense in general. Which amounts to saying once again that there is no absolute origin of sense in general. The trace is the difference which opens appearance and signification" (Derrida, 1976, p. 65, emphasis in original). Regardless of whether one accepts Derrida's argument in general, it clearly maps onto the condition of the historical document. A text, a trace, makes possible the writing of the past (after all, no history can be written where there are no traces), but that past is only an imagined past. The conceit of the historian—and this is what Scott and Steedman challenged—is the conceit Derrida called "the metaphysics of presence," the idea that the [historical] signifier, whether a text, artifact, or some other trace of the past, ultimately refers back to a signified which is fully present in itself. The metaphysics of presence posits the possibility of a "transcendental signified, which would place a reassuring end to the reference from sign to sign. [. . .] From the moment that there is meaning there are nothing but signs. We *think only in signs*" (Derrida, 1976, pp. 49–50, emphasis in original).

The error that guides so much instruction for young historians is thus a theological error. By instilling the metaphysics of presence in its practitioners, the field forces its students to confront the absence which makes their work possible and then to put all their methodological energy into erasing that absence, as if documents are evidence of things that happened. John Durham Peters (2008, p. 29) criticized the dream of "matching the past in its fullness" as a positivist dream, but this fantasy also partakes of idealism. The unlikely positivist/idealist coupling that animates so much historical work is revealed in one of the origin myths of modern historiography. Leopold von Ranke, who is usually cited as the father of modern historiography, was a committed Hegelian idealist even though he is read today as a positivist. His most famous phrase was that historians should aim to render history *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, which is usually translated as "as it really was." But the term *eigentlich* had an ambiguity in von Ranke's time that it no longer has, so that the phrase could also be translated, instead, as "as it essentially was." That ambiguity haunts historiography down to the present day, as Ranke's own work followed from the romantic tradition of the desire to "as it were extinguish myself" into the transcendental flow of the history he reconstructed. For von Ranke, historians and the documents they beheld aspired to become conduits for the flow of history (Novick, 1988, p. 28; von Ranke, 1973, pp. xix–xx, 1981, p. 21).² The logical endpoint and motivator for this undertaking, the past as it really or essentially was, is precisely the transcendental signified of history, the comforting end to endless historical traces and chains of signification in which we are enmeshed. It is not that the world is made up of only texts, only that texts themselves can only point out to the world. They never get you there. In assessing this limit, Josh Lauer (2008, p. 15) cited Jorge Luis Borges's story about ancient cartographers who produced a map so accurate that it was coextensive with the empire

itself: “The absurdity of this undertaking exposes the limits of human comprehension. The whole truth—lived reality in its material, temporal, and experiential entirety—corresponds to the full dimensions of reality itself. Mere mortals must content themselves with something far less, or succumb to the cartographers’ folly.” As a transcendental signified, the past is not a text, whereas both historical writing and its raw materials are of necessity texts.

Even if we ignore Derrida’s critique, even if historians could actually succeed in reconstructing the past as it really or essentially was, even if we could actually talk to our subjects, we would not be any closer to reality in its fullness. After all, if one can talk to one’s subjects, one is confronted by many of the same problems as anthropologists and sociologists. Historiography is certainly about recovery, but it is a recovery of fragments and gaps. This is why—much as I love other people—I prefer the dead to the living as my historical subjects. With the dead, the absence of the history I aim to construct is tangible; with the living, it appears more present than it really is. Historiography needs its absences in order to work. And yet the temptation to reach through the document and into the flow of life is incredibly strong. It feels like a compulsion and is sometimes stated as a political or methodological responsibility, depending on the context.³ History derives its rhetorical power and its lure for both writers and readers through its drive to reference, even if that reference is always receding.

Nowhere is this clearer than in historical work that actually deals with the very near past, which seems more alive than the distant past because we hold it in our living memories. And here, I turn to another anecdote, a story about what happens when it is possible to speak with one’s sources. I am currently writing a 90-year history of the mp3 format. MP3s are ubiquitous sound files, and they are so popular because of their small size. On average, an mp3 file is about 12% the size of the same song one would find on a commercially released CD. MP3s are thus easier to store and transmit than full-sized recordings. Although some mp3s have audible artifacts, many are indistinguishable from the CD recording to the majority of listeners. This feat is accomplished by a technology called perceptual coding, which makes use of a psychoacoustic, mathematical model of human hearing, one developed over the course of the 20th century.

I became interested in the psychoacoustic model—where it comes from, how it works, why it is the way it is, and what it might tell us about the history of the interaction between ears and media. I began reading the technical literature on perceptual coding and histories of MPEG, and quickly ran up against two problems: first, there was a great deal of tacit knowledge assumed in the writing, and second, in much of the published work, there was a decided lack of interest in some of the questions that were most pressing for me, such as who was in the test group and what recordings were used in the tests leading to the creation of the MP3. I had one distinct advantage, though. Most of the people involved in the development of

perceptual coding technology as it is now used are still alive. Given that answers to my questions were likely available in the world, with some sense of duty I began seeking interviews.

Some of the major figures in the field were more than happy to speak with me at great length and even invited me into their homes.⁴ I have learned a great deal from these interviews: by finding out what engineers were reading (and how they negotiated the limits of existing psychoacoustic discourse, which was my original question), I can place their work back into a longer historical conversation regarding what it means to listen to, through, and with technology. In some cases, interviewees patiently explained to me knowledge that is tacit or considered unimportant in the publications they have written. In others, I gained insight into the chronology of the technology and which aspects people involved in its development themselves deemed important. At other times, interviewees were unable to answer some of my more philosophical questions about their fields, or to account for their own *doxas* (which is unsurprising because humanists would do no better if the roles were reversed).

But as I began to accumulate interviews, it became clear that I was becoming a minor player in some of the controversies and debates that are alive in the field of perceptual coding. Who should get credit for which parts of the mp3 phenomenon and how much? Which innovations were central and which were marginal for the development of the technology? What is the relation of perceptually coded audio to other forms of digital and analog audio that came before it?⁵ These are not merely academic questions; they are relevant to the apportionment of prestige within organizations such as the Audio Engineering Society, and they are the subject of lawsuits for the right to charge licensing fees on patents, as in *Lucent vs. Microsoft*. One way to describe my predicament is what Pierre Bourdieu called the *force of the preconstructed*, the idea that social problems and issues come to scholars prepackaged by other discourses: “social science is always prone to receive from the social world it studies the *issues* that it poses about the world. [. . .] To leave one’s thought in a state of unthought (*impensé*) is to condemn oneself to be nothing more than the *instrument* of that which one claims to think” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, pp. 236, 238, emphasis in the original) It is not simply that the problems are preconstructed but that the preconstructions come with a certain degree of force. Even though I have constructed the mp3 as a different kind of historical object—as a collective meditation on the meaning of hearing and subjectivity in an age of ubiquitous media—I am constantly confronted with its central status in debates around sound quality, file sharing, and intellectual property; and the pedigree of innovations.

It is not just my sources who do this: audiences who live with the mp3 phenomenon and therefore believe that they understand it by virtue of their own experience, do so as well. The weight of the present presses down

most heavily on the near past. We think we know it better and have more direct access to it as intellectuals. However, it is possible that this is not so. The first challenge I face in presenting this material to new audiences is to introduce doubt where there is none, absence where there is imagined presence. These problems are particularly acute with the recent past, but they also point to the predicament of the field in general. As human beings, we live among our media, so we assume we know what they can and do mean because we tend to generalize from our own limited sense of our experience. But it is the historian's responsibility to explore other possible meanings and connections. We presuppose a loss of direct experience when we confront 100-year-old documents in an archive, but with more recent history, many writers are less critical of experience as a category. Absent experience is not lost data for the historian, it is the fundamental condition of historicity. We may turn to the past for answers to questions that trouble us, but that does not mean that we should be so predisposed to start those inquiries with that which is closest or most known to us, as is often done in media histories.

Although my mp3 project is not ethnographic in nature, I stumbled into exactly the problems of *studying up* identified by Janice Radway in her "Ethnography Among Elites" essay (1989, p. 9): the historian and the subject of history will possess "commensurate" means for representing the history. "The fact that elites in our society produce their own written discourses in reports, internal memos, and other official communications is not unimportant here," wrote Radway, which means that humanistic historiography competes with other types of historical narration. My mp3 history enters a world where others attempt to define its terms and its meaning. A simple Web search of "mp3 history" yields hits from Wikipedia.org, about.com, the Fraunhofer Institute (who owns many of the relevant patents), and the BBC on the first page of results. Living actors with a personal stake or interest in the framing and dissemination of those histories condition each one.

Radway called her elite subjects' tools of representation *commensurate* with her own. The engineers and writers who are interested in mp3 history may have even more access to representation than I do. But even so, my own intervention becomes part of a living discourse, an element in the field I hope to describe. As Radway warned, "The ethnographer will encounter his or her academic self as a character in the other's discourse" (9). In the writing of a still-emergent history, one encounters the strong desire of some sources to self-memorialize. Some people I have interviewed—predictably, the more minor or absent players in the currently available narratives—have followed up with me about the progress of my work, and its possible date of publication. One source has been actively involved in a debate regarding his own contributions to the technology (and their historical precedence) on Wikipedia, where editors argue in the attached discussion pages about the relevance of printed sources from countries outside the first world. Others

continue sending me information, some of which is helpful, but is clearly meant to expand their role in my history.

When I recounted this state of affairs to Fred Turner, a communication historian with a background in journalism, he replied imperatively, “Remember, your duty is to your readers, not to your sources.” A good part of that duty to readers is to read, to interpret, and then to frame, classify and redescribe. This is where Derrida meets C. Wright Mills. In his essay on intellectual craftsmanship, Mills advised writers to stimulate their “sociological imaginations” through such simple tasks as rearranging one’s files, developing an attitude of playfulness toward the words and phrases used to describe a given problem, developing modes of comparison and cross-classification, the consideration of extremes, and the reordering of “topics” and “themes” in one’s longer writing projects (Mills, 1959, pp. 212–217). These are all incredibly derisory ways of getting beyond the pregiven, the assumed questions and range of answers available to us, those “reassuring ends to signification” to use Derrida’s terminology.⁶ The problem with treating documents as mere evidence in historical work is that doing so renders the same ends of signification that the historian projects onto the intending author behind the documents—we become the conduits of the historical soul that von Ranke dreamed up, except that there is no soul there. A category violation has already happened in the first encounter between historian and text, whether in the archive or elsewhere: “If you are a historian, you are always reading something that was not intended for your eyes: you are the reader impossible-to-be-imagined by Philip Ward as he kept his justice’s notebook as aide-mémoire [. . .] The vestryman recording an allowance of 6d. a week in bread to a poor woman, the merchant manufacturer’s wife listing the payments in kind to her serving maid (silk ribbons, a pair of stays, a hat-box!) in Howarth in 1794, had nothing like you in mind at all” (Steedman, 2007, p. 14). Our interpretations have thus already broken in the internal logics and rules contained within our texts. The historical interview appears to solve this dilemma, since your interviewee clearly has you in mind, but in reality it simply confounds it because the interview operates as if the historian’s scheme has after-the-fact relevance to the events and feelings the interviewee describes and, in fact, is merely a collaborative projection. It is collusion in an illusion. For if the metaphysics of presence is particularly strong in the historical text, it is even stronger in the historical interview, and thus it is liable to an even more forceful critique on the same grounds. Our memories of what happened yesterday, much less 2 or 3 decades in the past, are colored by what has happened since. The recollections for which we may fight so hard are no less traces than someone’s faded handwriting on a page from over a century ago. And so as communication historians, we must return to the files, whether they are dusty archival documents, transcriptions of conversations with the living, or the secondary sources that inspire us to ask our questions in the first place. We must go about

rearranging our own files, and others' as well because they have always already been arranged and rearranged before our arrival. They are already not the history they described, and so it is up to us to find linkages across documents, registers, genres, and problems to give history meaning and intelligibility for ourselves and our readers. To refuse the act of interpretation is to become an instrument of an inchoate world we project back onto our sources; to refuse interpretation is a double *impensé* because it requires an imaginary positivism, or perhaps (with von Ranke) an equally fantastic transcendental idealism. In the act of interpretation, we think transversally. We cut across categories that appear firm and well insulated in our source materials. We force conversations where there were none. We combine what was supposed to be separate and we separate what was supposed to be combined. We reclassify the classifications we encounter. In the process, we are likely to make connections that did not (or do not) exist in the minds of our sources. We impose rules, regularities, and order according to our interpretive protocols, predilections and styles. However, this does not mean that we do turn history into fiction. All we can do with traces is turn them into history.

NOTES

1. There is a considerable methodological discourse inside the field, and in my sole trip to the American Historical Association, I found it to be a common topic of discussion. However, this talk seems less available or known to outsiders and presupposes a wide range of affinities and tacit knowledges.

2. That said, we should not take this romantic reading of von Ranke too far. As Bonnie Smith (2000) showed, Ranke's practices around the archive and the seminar did install a certain mode of male domination in historiographic thought; a privilege of the disembodied male professional over the embodied female amateur. In addition, either reading of von Ranke is susceptible to the critique of the politics of archives themselves, something well documented in the recent archival turn in historiology. (In addition to Steedman's recent work, see Burton, 2003, 2005; Cvetkovich, 2003).

3. The extreme case is of course the Holocaust because Holocaust denial often rests on historical relativism and the denial of empiricism, two attitudes that mainstream historians often associate with deconstruction, even though deconstruction in no way requires a relativist stance (for an example, see the debate as characterized in Jenkins, 1997). The problem with using the Holocaust to resolve the debate over the evidentiary status of historical materials—and the duty of historians to construct realist histories—is that it takes a by-definition exceptional case as paradigmatic. I do not wish to trivialize the debates or the agony they have caused in the historical profession, but at the same time, I do not believe that the imperative of “never again” has any necessary moral connection with either realism or positivism in historiographic inquiry, even if it may require realism as a rhetorical stance in public debate (although there are other options as well, such as the policies and practices of some institutions and countries of effectively disallowing debate on certain subjects in certain arenas).

4. Other figures, who are clearly important players in the history, have not responded to my queries (or perhaps their secretaries have not forwarded my queries to them).

5. The analog vs. digital debate has already emerged as an object of (sometimes superstition-laden) debate among humanists. For a full discussion of this issue, see Sterne (2006).

6. This coupling is perhaps less strange than it seems, given that Derrida's notion of the signifying chain was derived from Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatist phenomenology (see Derrida, 1976, p. 49; Peirce, 1955), a pragmatism that also influenced Mills.

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