[85] Many of these authors were not famous and their names and pseudonyms have not been recorded, even in Masanov's excellent *Slovar' psevdonimov russkikh pisatelei*. Unfortunately, many attributions thus come down to a judgment call. I have chosen to count articles signed by "N. Levitskii," "Arnold'ov," "Zhosef Chuprina," "A. Gorev," "K. O. Min," and "Ia. Murzin" as articles signed with real names despite the fact that these, too, may have been pseudonyms and the authors' full identities could not be verified. If any of these indeed were pseudonyms, it would only enhance Anzimirov's proportion of the newspaper's signed articles.

Felix Cowan is a PhD student in the Department of History at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. His research focuses on the Russian penny press from 1908–1918 as well as larger issues of urban poverty and inequality in the late Russian Empire. Felix's research has been supported by the University of Illinois Graduate College, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, and the Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies at the University of Toronto.





*Critical Commentary*

# Looking Beyond the Archive: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Dealing with Difficult Archives

Kelsey Kilgore
*University of Toronto*

As historians, our work can be seriously compromised when access to archives is complicated by factors beyond our control. Perhaps they are permanently classified, or caught in the middle of political conflicts that threaten not only their contents but also the lives of those pursuing them. Some collections defy easy cataloguing, and others have been collected without organization in an attempt to simply preserve an increasingly obscured history. And, sometimes, archives just disappear. In the course of my own research I have fortunately not encountered the more dangerous of these problems. However, my work on the history of a recently-closed United States military base introduced me to the difficulties of archiving places in transition, and revealed the possibilities of working across disciplines to research beyond the archive. Based on my own recent archival difficulties on a dissertation research trip, I suggest that employing the theoretical tools and research methods of multiple disciplines—a methodological synthesis—can help us find new ways of working around formal archives.

In formulating my dissertation research project, like any historian, I relied heavily on institutional archives and records. This process left me frightfully underprepared when I arrived at my research destination to find that one of my key archives did not exist. Although some of the material had been digitized, the physical collection was inexplicably gone. Having travelled 4,000 miles on grants, it was troubling (to say the least) that no one knew what had happened to the materials. Moreover, only one of a dozen contacts even responded to my requests for information. Despite my advance preparation, I was at a loss for how my research could effectively proceed in the absence of a formal archive. It was by sheer chance that my one reliable contact connected me to a community

organization that proved invaluable to my work. When the base closed in 1994, this group formed to direct plans for the land's reuse, and upon meeting its members, I was given the opportunity to visit the ruins of the base. Moreover, their use of the past to direct the course of the present reminded me of scholarship outside of my discipline that presented ways of understanding my subject in the absence of a formal archive. Together, these influences helped me recognize the physical ruins of the base as an alternative to my missing collection, presenting me with an abundance of resources beyond the archive.

The physical debris and ruins of a historical place, as well as processes of "ruination" left in the present, offer up valuable alternatives to formal archives. Here I refer to the work of Ann Stoler, a historian and anthropologist, whose work on the histories of empire validates the inclusion of physical debris and ruins as archival sources. Stoler's work also highlights active processes—language, political systems, and environmental contamination, which often accompany physical ruins—that reveal history through their continued impact on the present.[1] For my research, some of the most poignant physical ruins are the military vehicles left on the base grounds. While a vehicle is a passive reminder of the history of a place, processes of ruination actively involve the past in the present. For me, this reading of the past through the present served as a crucial methodology that became apparent as I toured the former base. The purpose of the tour was to demonstrate the transitional nature of the site and the difficulties in repurposing lands contaminated by the debris of military activity, like water pollution, abandoned military vehicles, and unexploded artillery buried in the ground. This debris revealed not only present concerns, but also the past activities in which they were rooted. As Stoler and her colleagues argue, this problem of contamination not only defines the present, but simultaneously confirms and demonstrates the history of military training that I initially thought inaccessible without formal archival sources.

The tour also posed questions about debris and authenticity, prompting me to think further about my research beyond the archive. When examining historical sites in decay, the present-day use of this debris prompts questions about the authenticity of its use. Have the ruins remained because the place is untouched, or have they been intentionally preserved? If preserved, for what reason, and how does that impact our ability as historians to use them as sources? This consideration complicates our reliance on historical ephemera—both formal and informal sources—as proving historical fact. The tour ended with an opportunity to look at and take photographs with ruined military vehicles. Having shifted my methodology to consider the authenticity of the present-day base, I could not help but wonder if the vehicles had been moved there for the purpose of a "photo-op," as if to prove that this place had indeed been a military base. Since most of the ruins were buried unexploded artillery, leaving the vehicles as remnants—visual pieces of debris—seemingly authenticated the history of the place. However, unlike the abandoned buildings I walked through independently, the vehicles suggested a constructed historical narrative.

My encounter with the vehicles reminded me of research by geographer Dydia DeLyser on U.S. "ghost towns," which directly confronts the problems of authenticity and debris noted by Stoler. Where the past continues to affect the present through contamination and debris in Stoler's work, DeLyser further defines the ever-present past as a series of moments that were once "the present." Each of these moments adds a narrative and hermeneutic layer to debris and contamination. A key moment in her work is her realization that the "authentic" layout of objects in rooms in a nineteenth-century ghost town was in fact staging done in the 1960s. At the former base, this kind of staging is maintained by the community's indecision regarding the fate of abandoned buildings, and their use in the writing of histories in the service of present opinions about that indecision. Likewise, the ghost town's brothels and saloons were allowed to decay but the more "wholesome" main street was strategically maintained in a state of what she calls "arrested decay," much like the placement of the tank along the tour route. This kind of narrative construction reveals secondary histories that can be used as a peculiar kind of archive. Moreover, both Stoler and DeLyser indicate that this construction involves a process of deliberate selection of artifacts and information, which itself presents a historical narrative and provides another way of thinking about research beyond the formal archive.[2]

ABANDONED MILITARY VEHICLES ON THE FORMER BASE. NOTE THE "CAUTION" TAPE DIVIDING THE SPACE BETWEEN VIEWER AND OBJECT MUCH LIKE A MUSEUM DISPLAY. PHOTO TAKEN BY AUTHOR WITH PERMISSION, SUMMER 2016.

The methodologies presented by these scholars took on new meaning as I met with individual collectors to examine their uncatalogued personal archives. While private collections supplemented my informal archives with materials that could be formally catalogued,

they bore the mark of the politics and experiences of their collectors and thus complicated my understanding of authenticity and fact. The assembly of documents was not chronological or based on subject matter, but arranged in thematic bunches to prove a thesis. As a scholar working on my own research questions, it was challenging to avoid reading the documents as they were presented, especially knowing that a different assembly structure might tell a different story. Although it was critical that I access the documents owned by private collectors, my access to those documents was pre-determined by what they considered important enough to preserve. My reading and application of the methodologies proposed by Stoler and DeLyser facilitated my navigation of these uncatalogued archives, insofar as the private collections were assemblages of debris. As a whole, their physical and ideological arrangement told me why particular kinds of documents survived, due to their importance to the collectors as historical objects and as evidence of their own present-day research projects. By considering the influence of past debris on the present, these collections emerged not simply as uncatalogued primary materials but as layered histories with present-day meaning.

The personal nature of these collections also allowed for informal conversations with the collectors that ultimately revealed the fate of my formal archive, itself a victim of strategic choosing in the construction of a specific historical narrative. The sacrifice of my archive due to budgetary concerns by the host university was indicative of broader social trends, but in its absence other archives were established, both by personal collectors and a group of military-affiliated historians, which highlighted a different set of problems. While private collectors were simply waiting for a space in which to assemble their vast and varied materials, the military had been quietly storing documents, salvaged when the base closed, in a now-defunct library. Happy though I was to have access to a formal archive, I wondered about the processes of selection that led to the collection's present state. Some official records and documents had been sent to the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland by base staff in 1994, but swathes of material were simply discarded in dumpsters. This quiet archive only exists because a handful of hired historians salvaged materials from the trash, making their existence not only accidental but subject to personal and institutional choices and by no means comprehensive in scope.

***These collections emerged not simply as uncatalogued primary materials but as layered histories with present-day meaning***

Which of these layered histories, then, would be most useful to pursue in my work? In attempting to answer this question I drew on a third scholar outside of my discipline. Vivian Sobchack's work in cinema studies on the inconsistencies of time articulated how I might synthesize my varied archives. Visual media, like film, play with time and chronology in a way that reflects and is reflected by what I discovered while researching my project. Sobchack describes telling a three-fold history involving excavated Egyptian ruins, their reproduction in plaster for a film set in the 1920s, and their recent excavation as buried ruins in the dunes outside of Hollywood.[3] She suggests that these histories be told not as linear chronologies, but as interweaving stories that present themselves akin to a screenplay. Rather than attempt to force a linear structure, some histories are better told through non-traditional chronologies that demonstrate the inconsistencies of time and make apparent the processes of choosing primary materials. Even with formal archives eventually at hand, making sense of what I found demanded that I consider this set of methodological tools far beyond my training as a historian. As I continue my research and begin my writing, I have adopted her model to both collect unexpected evidence beyond the archive, and incorporate the story of my research into my examination of a space in transition.

This first trip pushed my abilities as a scholar and revealed the interdisciplinary opportunities afforded beyond the archive. The value of an interdisciplinary approach lies in its use of multiple methodologies that help scholars contend with difficult or missing archives. Stoler's debris and "ruination" reveals alternatives to the formal archive, and DeLyser highlights the problems of authenticity that arise when humans unavoidably interact with historical artifacts. Finally, Sobchack's multiple chronologies reconciles the above methodologies, helping me to most effectively use the alternative archives I found. This synthesis revealed histories and materials that have already enriched my work. Should you encounter a difficult archive in the course of your own work, it is worthwhile to look beyond it, where opportunities for synthesis and alternative sources abound.

## Endnotes

[1] Ann Stoler, ed., *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

[2] Dydia DeLyser, "Authenticity on the Ground: Engaging the Past in a California Ghost Town," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 89, no. 4 (1999): 602–632.

[3] Vivian Sobchack, "What is Film History? Or, the Riddle of the Sphinx," *Spectator* 20, no. 1 (1999–2000): 8–22.

Kelsey is a third-year Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Toronto, supervised by Professor Dan Bender. Her work examines the relationship between Hollywood and the military during the Cold War. She focuses on the influence of the film industry on army training and the negotiation of citizenship through militarized entertainment.