

# Epilogue: Archive Matters

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“the archive [...] will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of said memory.”<sup>1</sup>

What the philosopher Jacques Derrida diagnoses about the archive, taking place at the lieu of a structural breakdown of memory, is pertinent as well for the complicit yet complicated relationship between history and photography. It is this collapse that all articles of this Special Issue allude to when they examine photography as history. Let me take this idea a little further and consider how archives matter when it comes to discussing the images’ “tension between facts and meanings” mediated on the level of memory and remembrance.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that the relationship between history and photography is defined by the archive as a place of consignment negotiated by the images that may nevertheless become powerful enough to articulate counter-semantics and alternative narratives of civil imaginations. As a sort of epilogue I wish to reveal this implicit political ontological dimension of photography that is irreducibly tied to the archive.

To do so, let me thus turn to one special case of photographic archive through which I wish to address the image’s authority as an historical document, a main trait that is also discussed one way or the other by all articles. For instance, in one of the photographic albums of the large United Fruit Company photograph collection, we find a picture bearing the caption “Natives and huts – Escondido River – Nicaragua, 1891” [fig. 1].<sup>3</sup> It seems to be one of the oldest pictures included in the albums (if we believe the added date that is written in pencil).<sup>4</sup> Yet, it is not known why or under which circumstances this photograph was taken and included in the album. Opaqueness regarding the image’s conditions of genesis may be a main feature of the many United Fruit Company photographs and, more generally, poses a true challenge when it comes to discussing the photograph

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Fig. 1: Album Caption: “Natives and huts – Escondido River – Nicaragua 1891.” Gelatin silver process on paper, photographer unknown, Photograph albums, box 29 (United Fruit Company Photograph Collection, Baker Library, Harvard Business School)

as source material.<sup>5</sup> However, rather than looking at what the image presents, I underscore another aspect here in order to examine the picture’s tension between facts and meanings and to address the ontological dimension of the relationship between history and photography. It is noteworthy that the picture was collected and stored in the United Fruit Company photographic albums, a most laborious work that was carried out consistently throughout almost the entire life of the corporation. These epistemic practices of collecting, storing, and ordering items

may be called *archival practices*, into which most of the images we retrieve as historians are embodied.

In what follows, I shall emphasize the material aspects of the archive and how that determines the image's tension between fact and meaning, in particular with regard to its trait as a document. Moreover, it goes without saying that archival practices correspond to documentation. Being conscious of the problematic nature of documents, in the particular case of the United Fruit Company, I argue that the picture is *deployed* as a document in the way it is defined by the material practices of collecting, storing, and ordering. Yet, one should be aware of not denying the documents' mediating role, "because it's easy to see them as simply standing between the things that really matter, giving immediate access to what they document."<sup>6</sup> Following this, I argue for conceiving the United Fruit Company photographic collection as nothing less than, in its conceptual extent, an *archive* that is constituted by a "set of practices, institutions, and relationships,"<sup>7</sup> whose function does not primarily lie in storing information but in having a share in internally organizing the corporation and its future spatial relationships.

What Derrida once observed elsewhere becomes pivotal here for further defining the relationship between history and photography: "*There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technique of repetition, and without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside.*"<sup>8</sup> What he conceives is a fundamental relationship between the archive and its place of "consignation" or "registration" as a constitutive one that describes the archive's epistemic correlation with its outside, that of a *hors-texte*, when he punctuates: "What I call 'text' implies all the so-called 'real,' 'economic,' 'historical,' social-institutional structures, shortly, all possible referents."<sup>9</sup> What becomes now pertinent for this Special Issue's discussion of history and photography is that 'text' is understood in a broader sense that comprises the photographs as source materials that are in one way or another related to an archive. So it is that Ezer Vierba searches the newspapers of the time in order to discuss the depiction of the political trials in both Panama and Cuba to tackle the question of the image's authority. That this authority is necessarily bound to the archive in its material and conceptual extents as a lieu of reclamation is implicit in his rationale.

It is Derrida again who points out, with regard to the instance of authority over the institution of the archive, that it is always also the place of political contestation and the possibility of agency.<sup>10</sup> Where it is contested in a controversial way, the archive unquestionably discloses a "Material force [...] engraved in phantasmagoric scenarios of potential revolt that called for militias readied with arms," disputing thus any imperial or colonial debris of the present-day.<sup>11</sup> What certainly becomes pertinent for all the Special Issue articles is that the archive is situated "always at the unstable limit between public and private, between

the family, the society, and the State, between the family and an intimacy even more private than the family, between oneself and oneself.”<sup>12</sup> Because of this unstable limit between public and private, the archive and its photographs as potential political forces may transcend their once intended specific purpose. While Derrida speaks of the archive as *arkhe*, the “consignation” referring both to the history and the law, as *commencement* and also as *commandment*, that coordinates two principles in one, he punctuates that “[...] there where authority, social order are exercised, in this place [...] order is given.”<sup>13</sup> The underlying constitutive relationship between the archive and its outside determined by how the “archivization produces as much as it records the event” seems pivotal for grasping the ontological dimension of the relationship between history and photography.<sup>14</sup> Because of the latent archival practices of the photographs discussed in this Special Issue, the images turn into *files* and documentary elements.

For instance, the photograph “Natives and huts” I found in the United Fruit Company archive raises a series of questions about the relationship between photography and history. In the context of business history, it is noteworthy that new impulses and new forms of documentation emerged at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to reorganize large corporations. Moreover, the official business discourses seemed to be anchored “to people, places, times, and artifacts through an elaborate use of signatures, dates, and stamps.”<sup>15</sup> So it is that “Natives and huts” became a document because of the Company archival practices of collecting, ordering, storing and preserving it for a possible future. This material procedure expands our understanding of source material, or to be more precise, the often disputed idea of the photograph as a document, not in the sense that it simply depicts something, but rather that it provokes us to relate to the image’s meaning by looking at the material processes and at what makes a photograph a picture. In the case of the United Fruit Company, this type of material procedure can certainly best be captured as an “internal machinery of corporate public relations” that aimed at demonstrating the “progressivism” and “‘humanity’ of large-scale bureaucratic enterprise,” such as the emerging modern corporation as a new form of business organization that required new means of internal communicational and hence a systematic management.<sup>16</sup> However, with regard to the corporate internal communication this photographic archive seems to reveal the intimate relationship between the Company’s divisions in Central America and the Caribbean and the headquarters in Boston, and it surprisingly unveils a hegemony of vision, inasmuch as most of the photographs were sent from the divisions to Boston in order to inform in minute detail about the operations abroad, often accompanying the new modern business communication means, the *memorandum*. In the way the Company archive seemed to assemble and organize photographs, it preserved them materially as documents for a near

future. This is to emphasize that the archive matters as an authority concerning the image's meaning, since this photograph was embedded in the social practices of corporate communication. Yet "the political function of documents is much more ambiguous."<sup>17</sup> Because of this the archive, into which the photographs are embodied as documents, is primarily a political matter of fact that defines the photographs' tension between facts and meanings. We may gain, through the archive, insights into the exercised social order and history's intelligibility. Following on from this, what all articles in this Special Issue share is that we need to look beyond the frame of the representational and at the image's materiality through which we may be able to grasp its meanings. This is why Alan Trachtenberg trenchantly reminds us that:

Ordering facts into meaning, data into history, moreover, is not an idle exercise but a political act, a matter of judgment and choice about the emerging shape of the present and future. It may be less obvious in the making of a photograph than in the writing of a history, but it is equally true: the viewfinder is a political instrument, a tool for making a past suitable for the future. [...] The sacrifice, for better or for worse, is for the sake of testing and exemplifying a way of reading photographs, not as pictures alone or as documents but as cultural texts. The value of photographs as history lies not just in what they show or how they look but in how they construct their meanings.<sup>18</sup>

In this respect, it is obvious that reading photographs as historical and cultural texts is a continuously challenging task for a variety of scholars, not only for historians, anthropologists or cultural critics, but even more so for all citizens becoming thus a true interdisciplinary and collective undertaking, because photographs incessantly "transform, translate, distort, and modify [as material representations] the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry."<sup>19</sup> With the United Fruit Company's photographs explicitly in mind, I argue that the archive matters, in the way it relates to "the problem of words and things, an attempt to make discourse into actions definable through the trustworthy material order open to the witnessing of members of the Company. [...]. It was precisely the materiality of graphic signs," the anthropologist Matthew Hull suggests elsewhere, "that made them useful as a palpable sedimentation of the real."<sup>20</sup> This *reality effect* is produced by the circumstance that "documents [such as the Company photographs] bear the double sign of the [corporation's] distance and its penetration into the life of the artifacts." Accordingly, following how photographs circulate or do not circulate, change, or cease to exist, the archive

cannot simply be the storage space, in which we locate or revisit facts, but rather it is an active process that provokes a permanent redeployment and continuing transformation of the facts.<sup>21</sup> The archive matters because it shapes the discourses it mediates and because it allows for processes of recontextualization “which are at once material and semiotic.”<sup>22</sup> Processes of institutionalization become meaningful therein, inasmuch as they vest authority in the photographs that determine knowledge and its production, which are materialized and become verifiable in the archive.

Yet, as previously noted, the lettered order of history seems to persist in consonance with the historians’ fear of the photographs’ ambivalence, because “the relation between the images and imputed meaning is fraught with uncertainties, for, like opaque facts, images cannot be trapped readily within a simple explanation or interpretation.”<sup>23</sup> Questioning the intimate relationship between photography and history Trachtenberg reminds us that relating to the images’ meaning implies carving out the “attitude toward history,” that is, the “intelligible view of society implicit in the internal dialogue of images and texts, and their external dialogue with their times.”<sup>24</sup> I have argued that material aspects and with them external spatialization become relevant as constitutive relations of the archive. Moreover, it is one of the significant virtues that the technique of repetition determines the archive’s economy.<sup>25</sup> In other words, if the archive is to preserve at all, it must be materially spatialized. This becomes even more pertinent since with this spatialization the archive is repeatable: In fact, it is this very repetition we conserve, as it is the archive’s main capacity to relate to history in its forms of past and present. Both the spatialization, that is, what defines the archive’s relationship with what is outside of it, and the paradoxical temporality are constitutive of the archive, for they form the archive’s external dialogue with its time. This is because the archive “determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future.”<sup>26</sup> In accordance with Derrida’s notion of the archive, meaning is always spatial and temporal.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, against a logocentrism that punctuates the idea as truth and not its literal materialization, he demonstrates that meaning cannot primarily be related to a mental content, but rather that its significant substance is always an effect of the material context.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, he punctuates the simultaneity of content and form against an Occidental philosophical model that conceives *form* only on a secondary level. What Derrida explicitly had in mind is the interplay between the economy of memory and its medium or media bearer, that is, to think of the material practices of the archive as something that determines the single event to be stored.<sup>29</sup> So it is that he contemplates the determination of meaning through a media structure, though without reducing meaning to its bare medium.<sup>30</sup>

This understanding is pivotal for my reading of the United Fruit Company photographic archive questioning its photographs as documents, but also for the other photographs discussed in this Special Issue, in the way the articles contour in one way or another the relationship between the archive and what seems to be outside of it, or, paraphrasing Derrida, the archive's place of consignment. Ezer Vierba implicitly unfolds this place of consignment as he reconstructs the photographs' meaning within the public perception and what remained as memories of the trials both in Panama and Cuba as contested sites of testimony and evidence. On the contrary, Kevin Coleman explicitly outlines the unstable limit between the public and the private that gives contours to the immaterial archive of the pictures not taken. So it is in particular this negotiation about the private space between the photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White and the poor man, between oneself and oneself, which defines, in this case, the place of registration within a civil contract of photography.<sup>31</sup>

To conclude, it is thus clear that the image archive as a place of consignment allows for an open situation of re-appropriating the public and the private, of re-appropriating imperial or colonial debris, its ruins and the processes of ruination as the residue, the "psychic and material space in which people live."<sup>32</sup> The past eventually remains open to the future, because the future consists of the reordering of the archive. And significantly this reordering does not only comprise a restructuring of the archival content, but it also intervenes in the form and thus economy of the archive itself.<sup>33</sup> So we are rightly reminded by Marianne Hirsch and Diane Taylor that "the archive [...] is in transit and in translation. [...] Archives are thus not stable storage or storage places, but rather engines of circulation, understood as a kind of performative act that mobilizes different media and are mobilized by them."<sup>34</sup> So, the archive matters because we are confronted with the present-day place of consignment and with the archive's exteriority, and our own courage to make the archive matter within our choice of action. As we are reminded, there "is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation."<sup>35</sup> This becomes particularly true in the case of the United Fruit Company photographic archive, but it is also relevant for the other cases discussed in this Special Issue, as from within, an ethics of seeing allows for a future choice of remembrance and for the readers' participation in its history.

## Notes

- 1 Derrida, Jacques, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression,” *Diacritics*, 25: 2 (1995), p. 14.
- 2 Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs: Images as History: Mathew Brady to Walker Evans* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), p. xiv. See also Siegfried Kracauer, *History: The Last Things before the Last* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
- 3 For a detailed discussion of the United Fruit Company photographic archive, see my forthcoming book, “A Laboratory of the Modern. The Caribbean in Photographic Archives.” See also my article, “Un caso de archivo fotográfico: economía visual de la circulación de mercancías, cuerpos y memorias,” in Gómez and Gesine Müller (eds.), *Relaciones caribeñas. Entrecruzamientos de dos siglos/Relations caribéennes. Entrecroisements de deux siècles* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter-Lang, 2011), pp. 109-131.
- 4 Note that the United Fruit Company was only formally established as a corporation in 1899, being one of the first global companies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to bring the Caribbean into a Western orbit of knowledge by establishing a global market for tropical fruits.
- 5 In the case of the United Fruit Company, this photograph was collected in the album labeled “Nicaragua” assembled by the later created Company’s Department of Public Relations that was further involved with other public relations projects in the visual production of imagery.
- 6 Matthew Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 12.
- 7 Richard Bolton, *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989), p. xvi.
- 8 Derrida, “Archive Fever,” p. 14.
- 9 Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Wien: Passagen-Verlag, 2001), p. 228 (my translation).
- 10 Jacques Derrida cit. Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel (eds.). *Archivologie. Theorien des Archivs in Wissenschaft, Medien und Künsten* (Berlin: Kunstverlag Kadmos, 2009), p. 29.
- 11 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 2.
- 12 Derrida, “Archive Fever,” p. 57.
- 13 *Ibid.* p. 9.
- 14 Significantly, he further distinguishes: “[...] the technical structure of the archiving archive also determines the structure of the archivable content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future. The archivization produces as much as it records the event. [...] This should above all remind us that the said archival technology no longer determines, will never have deter-

- mined, merely the moment of the conservational recording, but rather the very institution of the archivable event.” *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.
- 15 Hull, *Government of Paper*, p. 10.
  - 16 Guillory, John, “The Memo and Modernity,” *Critical Inquiry*, 31: 1 (2004), p. 114. See also Allan Sekula, “Photography between Labour and Capital,” in Benjamin Buchloh and Robert Wilkie (eds.), *Mining Photographs and Other Pictures, 1948-1968. A Selection from the Negative Archives of Shedden Studio, Glace Bay, Cape Breton* (Halifax: Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983), p. 235.
  - 17 Hull, *Government of Paper*, p. 5.
  - 18 Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, pp. xiv, xvi.
  - 19 Bruno Latour cit. Hull, *Government of Paper*, p. 13.
  - 20 *Ibid.*, p. 8.
  - 21 Ebeling and Günzel (eds.). *Archivologie*, p. 18.
  - 22 Hull, *Government of Paper*, p. 23.
  - 23 Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs*, p. xv.
  - 24 *Ibid.*, p. xv.
  - 25 Bunz, Mercedes, “Die Ökonomie des Archivs – Der Geschichtsbegriff Derridas zwischen Kultur- und Mediengeschichte,” *Archiv für Mediengeschichte*, 6 (2006), p. 36.
  - 26 Derrida, “Archive Fever,” p. 18.
  - 27 Bunz, “Die Ökonomie des Archivs,” p. 30.
  - 28 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
  - 29 *Ibid.*, p. 34.
  - 30 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
  - 31 See here the trenchant discussion by Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).
  - 32 Ann Laura Stoler, “Introduction,” in Stoler (ed.), *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), p. 2.
  - 33 Bunz, “Die Ökonomie des Archivs,” p. 41.
  - 34 Marianne Hirsch and Diane Taylor, “The Archive in Transit. Editorial Remarks,” *E-Misférica*, 9: 1-2 (2012): (<http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-91/hirschtaylor>)
  - 35 Jacques Derrida cit. Marlene Manoff, “Theories of the Archive from Across the Disciplines,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 4: 1 (2004), p. 9.

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