Article Critique: “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives”

Tom Nesmith’s article, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives", *The American Archivist* 65, 2002, pp. 24-41 was examined for this assignment. Tom Nesmith is currently an Associate Professor of History at the University of Manitoba in Canada and is also a member of the Association of Canadian Archivists. His research interests include, “the history of communication, documentary analysis, archival work, theory, and institutions, particularly as they relate to contemporary archival management issues and the role of communication and archiving in the formation of knowledge, memory, and societies ([www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/history/faculty/nesmith.html](http://www.umanitoba.ca/faculties/arts/history/faculty/nesmith.html), August 2, 2005).

**Summary**

This article examines the major assumptions underlying archival methodology through the lens of postmodernism in an attempt to help redefine the profession and its direction in these fast changing times. Nesmith does this by identifying the assumptions of archiving, defining the terminology appropriate to this analysis, and also offers a direction for archivists to follow which incorporates an understanding and acknowledgement of archivists’ methodological assumptions. Nesmith’s analysis incorporates an understanding of the history of archives and also puts forth how understanding this history can help archivists’ move into the future. In his analysis of the historical roots of the archival profession Nesmith identifies, “the central archival professional myth: enormous power and discretion over societal memory, deeply masked behind a public image of denial and self-effacement” (32).
This article focuses on a theoretical critique of archival methodology. It has prominent epistemological and ontological underpinnings. This article critiques archivists’ role in knowledge production and identifies them as having more than just a passive role and he highlights archivists’ acceptance of this behind the scenes (or vault doors) approach.

Aside from acknowledging archivists as active participants in knowledge production, Nesmith argues that archivists also shape what society “needs” to know (32). He goes on to state that, “archivists may actually make a greater contribution to the creation of the record than the inscriber (35). This is admittedly a strong statement but I think it brings to balance the century of denial put forth by archivists evidenced by the lack of unity in both theory and practice. Nesmith ends with a reflective statement, “Seeing archives, then, means seeing archivists anew—as visible, active, agents in the construction of this history and the societal knowledge it shapes” (41).

Use of Appropriate Archival Terminology

Records

Nesmith, “aims to contribute more fully to our understanding of the how the postmodern view of communication throws light on the role of archivists as key mediators or constructors of the knowledge available in archives” (26). As such this article could be viewed as a critique of records. Archives have differentiated themselves from libraries on the basis of records, but more specifically on the types of records that each deals with, primary source belonging to the archives and “secondary” source to the libraries.

Provenance
The most interesting of Nesmith’s critiques dealt with provenance. Provenance is considered to be the foundational characteristic of archives. It is what separates archives from libraries. Nesmith examined the way in which Archivists have relied on the idea of provenance as a “natural accumulation” of records. “Natural accumulation” has been used by archivists to suggest, mostly through implication, that the way organizations arrange their documentation and how this documentation was created was part of an unbiased process. It is suggested to be so obviously unbiased that it is a “natural” ordering of things, thus emphasizing the special significance of primary source records even more.

Archivists have coupled this “natural” ordering with their idea of “no further harm” to promote an almost virgin-like innocence of the discipline. Nesmith suggests archivists break away from this facade and acknowledge that bias, if not personal than institutional, does exist in this aspect of their discipline. This bias is not a result of archivist’s methodology but rather of the entire knowledge creation process itself. This idea is not specific to archivists. Many other disciplines are transitioning from the Positivists’ promotion of “unbiased science” and are starting to acknowledge the various biases in the knowledge creation process.

**Indefinite Retention**

While many archivists have framed “indefinite retention” as a necessity during this era of “downsizing” and budgetary constraints, Nesmith showed how this practice introduces bias into a discipline which has traditionally argued against its existence. Nesmith suggests that “indefinite retention” helps to frame not only “what” can be known, but also what people “need” to know. Nesmith has taken many of these foundational archival principles and practices and exposed their inherent biases. A lack of biases in their methodology, is what archivists have
been claiming, through “natural ordering”, provenance, and “no further harm”. Nesmith has exposed this façade and suggests that the entire knowledge creation process is biased.

**Critical Analysis**

This was a well argued article. The author stated his purpose/argument, provided evidence to support his arguments, clearly defined the terms that he was using to articulate his argument, used definitions that were appropriate to his field, and most importantly offered ideas for the future direction of archives. In many theoretical critiques, the authors often attack and dispute certain claims but leave the argument open ended by not providing an “answer” to the questions which they have refuted.

Personally I agree with many of the points that Nesmith brought forward. In a discipline with so much diversity, where fellow constituents often use differing definitions, and where the theory of the discipline is so detached from the actual practice of the discipline I feel that such diversity can be traced to foundational arguments of the discipline which often arise from a failure to acknowledge the assumptions of the discipline.

As with all theoretical arguments, not everyone is going to agree on everything. This trend of questioning the nature of knowledge, questioning what and how do facts become facts, and questioning the “unbiased nature” of certain types of information is no longer going unchallenged in archives. Many, if not all, disciplines are beginning to challenge the “sanctity” with which certain types of knowledge creations have been attributed.

For the case of archives in Hawai‘i, many issues such as ownership/chain of title/provenance to certain archival materials and the user access versus preservation issue are relevant. Considering the context of Hawaiian history, and archives’ role in articulating Hawaiian history, many scholars would argue and make the same points that Nesmith did, but
would have framed it in terms of Colonial theory. I think Nesmith’s approach is more effective because it critiques the assumptions of archives’ foundational principles and because Nesmith is an archivist too, he has “merit” to speak on this issue.