


ADVENTURES IN THE ANALOGUE ARCHIVE

By [Roanne Kantor](#) On 9 September 2013 In [Main](#)



At the end of her last [post](#), Hannah wrote that the increasing availability of digitalized copies is leading us gradually to give up firsthand contact with the “beauty of the object” in exchange for “access to books we could never, otherwise, read.”

I take this tradeoff personally. When writing grants to go to Chile this July*, I initially struggled to identify archival materials that were *not* accessible remotely on my own computer, materials that would justify the cost of a five thousand mile flight and two month’s rent. Even once the money was awarded and I found myself in the archive itself, a similar conundrum awaited: look at a particular manuscript on microfiche right away, or purposely postpone my investigations a whole day just to look at the real thing. Sensing my hesitation, the archive’s director intervened: “It is such a *luxury* to work with the original material.” And indeed in-person archival research is fast becoming a luxury. Not so much an indulgent pleasure, as the director meant it, but an unsustainable extravagance. Unless and until we can quantify the difference to scholarship of accessing original materials as opposed to well-made digital copies, I fear it may soon become difficult to find support to do archival research on site.


Like a lot of humanities scholars, I got my foot in the door by identifying institutions with which to affiliate myself abroad—archives chief among them—but made the biggest breakthroughs working with people I met through those institutions. Many of these people have almost no internet presence: unlike their colleagues in the United States, they experience little pressure to “publish or perish.” Instead of loudly proclaiming itself in articles and monographs, their knowledge is often buried within the compilation of critical editions, colloquiums, or the expertise through which archival institutions are organized and run. Their own bibliographic traces are so faint that it can be nearly impossible to learn of their existence in a purely digital world. As the rationale dries up for sending scholars abroad to access archives, our contact with these embedded scholars will necessarily diminish.

Let me give a single example of what we have the potential to lose here. In my own case, my connection at the Biblioteca Nacional put me in touch with a former colleague, the archivist, whom I visited a week later at home. The apartment itself was arranged like an antique library’s secret vault. Bookshelves covered nearly all the available wall space and spilled over two layers deep into the coat closet. This abundance showed its necessity as the archivist shuttled from wall to wall, pulling down different editions of the same book I had come to Chile to study—*La sombra del humo en el espejo* by Augusto d’Halmar —so he could point out and explaining the significance of minute deviations between them. Like many of the archivists I met in Chile, he had an almost encyclopedic knowledge of his collection and could quote from it at length. Finally, from a manila envelope tucked into the back of a desk drawer, he withdrew a volume with a title I didn’t recognize. Underneath were written the words *La cadena de los días*, and onto of each of the yellow, crumbling pages of the original book, d’Halmar had pasted in and annotated clippings of his own early newspaper articles. Here was the author’s private archive *within* the archivist’s private archive. Although this collection is housed so far outside the auspices of the National Library, I was nevertheless brought into contact with this incredible man and his exceptional palimpsestic object precisely through our relationship to that institution.


Hannah is doing her utmost to bring our attention to the importance of materiality in the study of the humanities. If that’s something that matters to you, as it matters to me, I strongly encourage you to attend the [conference](#) she’s organizing this October, with keynote speaker Katherine Hayles. In such company, I find myself vastly under-qualified to defend the scholarly value of direct contact with archival materials themselves. But I can say definitively that the people I met in pursuit of those materials have become essential to my research. As the means of those connections, in-person archival research is *not* a luxury we can afford to do without.

* If you are considering research abroad and will not have gone into candidacy before next summer, I strongly encourage you to apply for a [Tinker Field Research Grant](#).


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