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Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*. Trans. Thomas Scott Railton. Foreword by Natalie Zemon Davis. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. ix + 130 pp. \$25.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-300-17673-5.

Review by Stéphane Gerson, New York University.

Upon its release in 1989, Arlette Farge's slim *Goût de l'archive* seemed outmatched by the weighty publications that marked the bicentennial of the French Revolution. Twenty-five years later, some of these tomes have gone out of print while Farge's book continues to engage new readers. And now, thanks to a fine translation by Thomas Scott-Railton, it is poised to reach a new audience. While one may regret that a quarter-century elapsed before this book found a translator, it is possible that publishers struggled to determine what exactly had fallen into their lap. Farge's essay is many things at once, none of them straightforward: a research guide that resists authoritative lessons, a personal account that eschews the "I," a reflection on historical craft that says a great deal about pleasure, and an ethnography of the archival world that delves both inward and out. Kudos go to the folks at Yale University Press for figuring it out.

For some readers, the publication of *The Allure of the Archive* (its English title) will lead to a discovery. For others, it affords an opportunity to revisit an old friend—the book, not the author—and see how she is holding up. I fall among the latter. While I have long assigned selections to my doctoral students, I had not read the entire book in more than a decade. Twenty-five years is a long time of course, more than enough for the book itself to enter history. Farge's precise and evocative account of her days in the archives places her in a long line of French historians who have reflected upon a universe in which present and past, life and death, paper and human destinies all come together. Jules Michelet and Augustin Thierry naturally come to mind. So does the famous passage in the *Origines de la France contemporaine* (a book dedicated to archivists and librarians) in which Hippolyte Taine explained that, valuable as literature and science, correspondence and memoirs might be, these sources occluded what historical actors dismissed as "banal and familiar," "technical, tedious, and petty." [1] For a comprehensive view of what he called the human condition, Taine insisted that one delve into archives. Farge would not disagree on this point. While *The Allure of the Archive* focuses on eighteenth-century Parisian judicial archives, the book has much to say about the archive in general.

Farge's book also has entered history in a second way, as a document of the major historiographical changes and debates of the late 1980s and 1990s. Despite its brevity, *The Allure of the Archive* captures the move toward a history of individuals who drew pragmatically from multiple resources to situate themselves within and act upon their world. It traces the shift from a history of women as stand-alone actors to one of relationships between the sexes and gendered sociabilities and modes of expression. It takes us back to the recovery of non-elite or "popular" cultures, with their specific forms of intelligibility and relationships to space, power, and other social groups. Finally, it marks a move to new scales of analysis, converging upon what Farge calls the event, a fragment of social life that opens onto broader collective identities, solidarities, conflict, and horizons of possibility. Because Farge contributed to all of these evolutions, her discussions are invariably interesting. What they have lost, however, is urgency. Whether taking on structuralist and Marxist paradigms or denouncing ideologically-driven historians

of the Vendée, Farge is fighting battles that have cooled over time. She has ended up on the winning side, to be sure, but parts of the book have almost acquired the status of archives themselves.

This is why its third and final historical presence is ultimately its most vibrant and relevant today. Here, Farge draws us to the early years of what has been called the archival turn, a reconsideration of the archive, not as a pure repository of objective facts or what Ann Stoler called an “inert site of storage and conservation,” but as an historically-specific place and process of knowledge production.[2] Infused with epistemological skepticism, this scholarship has investigated modes of preservation, selection, inclusion, exclusion, organization, and classification to flesh out the archive’s long-neglected contribution to representations of the past. The history of the archive thus contributes to and draws from a broader history of the modern European nation-state, notably France, often depicted as the birthplace of modern archival administration and (in theory) public access.[3] It is in the ostensibly neutral archive that the state sought historical legitimacy, mobilized some memories and occluded others, invented new forms of surveillance and police work, delineated normative categories, defined zones of deviance and respectability, and created subjects.[4] It is likewise in the archive that imperial powers consolidated their rule over colonized peoples. They decreed what could be written and memorialized, effaced traditions, defined and imposed social spaces and temporalities, generated precedents for legal arguments and administrative fiats, and legitimated violence.[5] Indebted to Michel Foucault’s vision of the archive as system of statements that shape what can be said and to Jacques Derrida’s conviction that “there is no political power without control of the archive,” the archival turn has moved relentlessly toward a history of institutional mediation, governmentality, and power.[6]

Farge writes about the archive as mode of civil and penal administration, the “hand that collects and classifies,” and the Parisian police’s obsessive thirst for detail and “dream” of governing emotions and immobilizing a popular world in constant movement (pp. 3 and 25).[7] But she is primarily interested in the ways in which men and women circulated within the interstices of the “systems [*dispositifs*] of power” (p. 97). While Foucault leaves an imprint on this book, it is less the author of *Discipline and Punish* than the essayist who, in “La vie des hommes infâmes,” sought to retrieve “ces milliards d’existences qui sont destinées à passer sans trace” at the moment of their encounter with power structures that sought to destroy or erase them.[8] The archive bears witness to human efforts to create meaning and create oneself.

Taine wrote that through archival sources, “on devient presque le contemporain des hommes dont on fait l’histoire.” He then confided that he sometimes wanted to speak out loud to the dead. Farge is likewise drawn toward the archive’s unknown, vibrant human universe, the “rough traces” that are embedded in parchment or rag paper and seem so real, the glimpses of ordinary lives caught haphazardly and now coexisting with only the appearance of coherence (p. 6). But she also depicts the archive as a flood, “excessive and overwhelming (. . .), unsettling and colossal (. . .), infinite, perhaps even indecipherable” (pp. 4–5). The archive escapes control and mastery, which means that historians must free themselves from the illusion of a “full-fledged resurrection of the past” (p. 14). I cannot help but think that, for Farge, the key word in Taine’s statement above is *presque*: the thrust toward the archive and “the essence of being and things” coupled with the knowledge that its full recovery will always remain illusory (p. 8). “We cannot bring back to life those whom we find cast ashore in the archives” (p. 121).

But we must still move in their direction. Farge outlines an embodied and self-reflexive practice that seeks new forms of knowledge while both acknowledging and pushing against its own limitations. Archival practice rests on availability (*disponibilité*) and imbibing (*impregnation*), a process that begins with bodily experiences. Just as bodies underlay the minds in eighteenth-century lives, so historians should turn their own senses and emotions (curiosity, surprise, pleasure, befuddlement, doubt, disgust) into founding blocks of a hermeneutical relationship with historical actors whose texts they can

inhabit.[9] Touch the paper, slowly transcribe documents, allow your hands to partake in the creative process. Read misspelled words out loud in order to make out their meaning and hear accents, intonations, and affective registers. Even if one cannot bring the dead back to life, even if one must acknowledge that they do not continue to lead autonomous afterlives “sous nos yeux” (in Taine’s words), one can tap different modes of knowing and hence open up spaces filled with complicity as well as strangeness.

Senses and emotions thus reveal unknown parts of the historian’s inner life. This self-discovery can in turn nourish historical understanding, propel the mind into action, and generate new questions, but only if it includes a reflection on one’s archival experiences and their impact on what one sees and hears, what one deems significant and what one dismisses. Farge was not the first to make such a call. In fact, one wishes that she had said more about other social determinants, including class and gender, that shape the scholar’s relationship to the archive. But historians have long proven more reticent than anthropologists to reflect upon their encounter with their own documents or *terrain* and then incorporate this reflection into their analysis. Despite some advances, the discipline still pays little attention to the scholar’s body, with its racial origins, state of health, and past traumas, all of which have an impact on historical sensibility.[10] Farge’s voice thus remains rich with promises for a historical practice that is as attuned to the historian’s internal life as it is to the collective setting in which she operates. *The Allure of the Archive* also contains beautiful fragments for an ethnography of the archive as institution and social world, with its tensions, its conflicts, and its impromptu solidarities between individuals who, as in Farge’s eighteenth century, operate within constraints that they withstand and reshape at the same time.

According to Farge, openness to one’s self facilitates openness to the past with all of its surprises and singularities, its oppositions and contradictions, its conflicts and disorder. Venturing beyond reductive notions of shared culture or “average person[s],” Farge asks her reader to embrace a multitudinous world that takes form between certainty and uncertainty, proximity and distance, singular trajectories and full or partial adherence to collective frameworks.[11] “By continually revealing more of the same, of the other and of the different,” the archive generates increasingly complex problems (p. 41). Her recommendations, all presented as personal practices rather than normative injunctions, have lost none of their pertinence. Collect all of the voices in the archives. Take your time before deciding which ones matter and determining how they relate to one another. Read against the grain of police systems to determine how individuals narrated their lives in specific situations. Remain wary of seemingly transparent documents that reveal their meaning too quickly (the archive as reflection). Eschew the temptation to provide your readers with all the fruits of your archival labor, as if long excerpts could take the place of argumentation (the archive as conclusive proof).

Finally, write a history that makes room for multiple perspectives, for exceptions alongside apparent trends or rules, for what is plausible (rather than definitively true), for what may have to remain partially known or barely known at all, for the research process and its provisional end-product. Farge’s call for a new historical language remains as pressing today as it was in 1989 since, here again, advances toward what Christophe Granger recently called an “autre mode d’intellection possible du monde” through another mode of writing have proven timid.[12]

The stakes are not only conceptual and stylistic, but also ethical. Indeed, it is this dimension, the ethics of archival practice and historical worth, that more than anything struck me upon this reading. In the graduate courses I have taken and those I have taught, the assumption has often been that, beyond plagiarism, ethics is an individual matter. Good scholars by and large grasp the discipline’s norms on their own. This may be true, but Farge offers an ethics of the archive that younger scholars should read with care and more advanced ones revisit with regularity (I certainly will). Remaining open to the archive’s multiple voices, embracing evidence that contradicts one’s working hypothesis, representing with care historical actors who never asked to answer the policeman’s or the judge’s questions: all of this

falls under the purview of ethics. So do disclosures about one's research process, with its choices and uncertainty, and aversion for novelistic tropes that turn complex persons into two-dimensional types. Resorting to such tropes "would be a kind of betrayal," Farge writes (p. 77). These strong words betray her own emotions, her seriousness of purpose, and also her humility, for this book is nothing if not a *vade mecum* for the author as well as her readers. "It would be prideful to imagine that by virtue of having spotted the traps we have eluded their grasp," she writes with characteristic honesty (p. 78).

The archive is ubiquitous and elusive these days. The term has come to encapsulate all kinds of things, from collections to museums to bodies of knowledge. The "archival impulse" resonates in art and literature. Authenticity and a tactile relationship to time seem to grow ever more compelling. And yet historians are faced with a new technology that, as Natalie Zemon Davis remarks in her foreword, makes it increasingly difficult to touch and smell and listen to archives.[13] Expanded access and embodied history do not, it turns out, necessarily go hand-in-hand. Within a few years, *The Allure of the Archive* may thus feel elegiac, a relic from a vanished era in the history of history. But Yale University Press made a good call with this translation, belated though it may be. Much as things will change for archives and historians, this thin yet weighty book will continue to chart our methodological and ethical horizons. Twenty-five years from now, it will still command our attention.

## NOTES

[1] Hyppolyte Taine, preface to *Les origines de la France contemporaine 1: L'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Hachette, 1875), repr. on the website *Les classiques des sciences sociales*, [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/taine\\_hippolyte/origine\\_France\\_t1/origine\\_France\\_t1\\_preface.html](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/taine_hippolyte/origine_France_t1/origine_France_t1_preface.html). My translation.

[2] Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form," in Francis X. Blouin, Jr. and William G. Rosenberg, eds., *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006), p. 270.

[3] The Archives Nationales were established in September 1790, the archives départementales in October 1796. See Ernst Posner, "Some Aspects of Archival Development since the French Revolution," *American Archivist* 3, no. 3 (July 1940): 159-72.

[4] Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* 39 (Winter 1986): 3-64, quoted in Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive* (London and Cambridge, Mass: Whitechapel Gallery and MIT Press, 2006), pp. 72-3; Jennifer S. Milligan, "What is an Archive?" in the History of Modern France," in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 159-83; and Pierre Karila-Cohen, "Le Christ s'est arrêté à Origny. Le temps, l'enquête et l'administrateur," in Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini and Dominique Kalifa, eds., *Imaginaires et sensibilités au XIXe siècle: Études pour Alain Corbin* (Paris: Créaphis, 2005), pp. 101-14.

[5] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); and Nicholas B. Dirks, "Annals of the Archive: Ethnographic Notes on the Sources of History," in Brian Keith Axel, ed., *From the Margins: Historical Anthropology and its Futures* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2002), pp. 49-65.

[6] Michel-Ralph Trouillot coined the expression "archival power" in his *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1995). Jacques Derrida's quotation comes from his *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 4 n. On Foucault and the archive, see Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M.

Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972) as well as Antoinette Burton's introduction to *Archive Stories*, pp. 1-24.

[7] In a recent publication, Farge likewise investigated the syntax, codes, and form of the reports written by the Champs-Élysées' police chief in the late eighteenth century. See her introduction to Farge, ed., *Flagrants délits sur les Champs-Élysées. Les dossiers de police du gardien Federici (1777-1791)* (Paris: Mercure de France, 2008), pp. 9-11.

[8] Michel Foucault, "La vie des hommes infâmes," *Les cahiers du chemin* 29 (January 15, 1977), repr. in Foucault, *Dits et écrits 1954-1978*, eds. Daniel Defert and François Ewald, 4 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), 3: pp. 240 and 243.

[9] Farge, *Effusion et tourment, le récit des corps. Histoire du peuple au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007), p. 11.

[10] Philippe Artières recently made this point. See Ivan Jablonka, "Quand l'histoire nous traverse. Entretien avec Philippe Artières," *La Vie des idées* (June 6, 2014), <http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Quand-l-histoire-nous-traverse.htm>.

[11] On the *individu moyen* in a certain history of mentalities, see Farge, *La vie fragile: violence, pouvoirs et solidarités à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1986), p. 8.

[12] Christophe Granger, "L'imagination narrative, ou l'art de raconter des histoires," in Granger, ed., *À quoi pensent les historiens? Faire de l'histoire au XXIe siècle* (Paris: Autrement, 2013), p. 164. In the same collection, see also Delphine Gardey, "L'histoire, les *feminist & others' studies*," pp. 223-24. For an important conceptual and stylistic experiment, see Ivan Jablonka, *Histoire des grands-parents que je n'ai pas eus. Une enquête* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2012).

[13] Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 3-22, quoted in Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive* (cited above, note 4), p. 143. On the valence of the archive, see also Okwui Enwezor, ed., *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* (New York: ICP, 2008); and Tod Lippy's innovative *Esopus Magazine*, whose twentieth issue, *Special Collections*, was filled with replicas of archival material in 2013. For reflections on new technologies and the archive, see Marianne Hirsch and Diana Taylor, eds., "On the Subject of Archives," special issue of *E-Misférica* 9, nos. 1-2 (Summer 2012), <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hermi/e-misferica-91>.

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