

# Scholarly Responses to the Pandemic

## My Archive Fever

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I am a frequent sufferer of what French philosopher Jacques Derrida has diagnosed as “Archive Fever.” For Derrida, *le mal d’archive*, or the sickness that afflicts some archival researchers, represents the “feverish desire” of longing *for* the archive (Steedman 1159). For sufferers of Archive Fever, it is simply not enough to *visit* an archive. The Fever brings about an intense need to *possess* the archive itself. Archive Fever elicits “a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive” when the archive is out of reach and an insatiable desire to search through the archive, even when collections are far too large to sift through in an afternoon, or even an extended research trip (Derrida 57). My particular strain of Archive Fever prompts me to take several hundred images of archival documents during research trips, photographs which I promptly copy into dated folders on my computer and rarely ever examine again. Truly the epitome of a malady, I know.

My first outbreak of archive fever occurred in January 2014, as I worked as an undergraduate intern for archivist extraordinaire, Heather South, at Western Regional Archives (WRA) in Asheville, North Carolina. As a WRA intern, I helped South develop finding aids, fulfill patron research requests, and coordinate volunteer efforts. But, above all, my early days in the archive made visible the too often invisible work of archivists, taking in documents, creating some form of order in the chaos, and most importantly, making collections available for researchers. Developing an understanding of and appreciation for archives and archivists only ignited my Archive Fever, causing a dramatic flare-up in the Summer of 2014 as I ventured back to WRA to begin my research on the Upper French Broad Defense Association (UFBDA). The UFBDA—an incredible group of environmental activists from western North Carolina who successfully defeated the Tennessee Valley Authority’s plan to place 14 dams on tributaries of the French Broad River between 1966-1972—has been the central focus and motivation of my research ever since I first opened those heathered-grey archival boxes and began reading all about their “dam fight” (for more on the UFBDA see Murray 2015).

My Archive Fever, particularly as it pertains to my study of the UFBDA, which is also the focus of my dissertation, is not merely a selfish impulse to collect, or hoard documents and materials pertaining to this fantastic story in environmental history. Rather, my Archive Fever comes on in spells when I feel like I am an inadequate scholar, researcher, and writer when it comes to telling the story of the UFBDA. My research with the UFBDA is not merely a means to an end—I am not writing about these

incredible people to earn a PhD or land a particular job. My UFBDA research and its associated Archive Fever manifest because this research is what acclaimed Appalachian photographer Roger May once referred to as my “heart work”—the activity that is closest to home and the most meaningful, because, well, it is about my home, identity, and family history. My family has lived in Buncombe County and along the French Broad River for seven generations on one side and three on the other. Had the UFBDA not stood up to the TVA, the landscape of my home, and my memories, would be utterly devastated—fertile farmlands transformed to mudflats and sacrificed for measly drawdown reservoirs. My attachment to western North Carolina, the people of these mountains, and to the French Broad River itself are not only a powerful motivator for conducting ethical, effective research, but also a trigger for my own Archive Fever. In fact, even writing about it now, I can feel a feverish spell coming on.

I have had consistent Archive Fever flare-ups throughout the 2019-2020 academic year. In November 2019 I passed my comprehensive exams for the PhD in Rhetoric & Writing Studies in the English Department at Virginia Tech. As part of this process, I completed a dissertation proposal outlining how I would approach UFBDA archival collections as a rhetorician. By January 2020, I was excited and ready to get to work in the archives, but due to teaching, writing, and other research responsibilities, I decided that the best option would be to go home to Asheville over spring break in Mid-March 2020, to see family, old friends, and of course, visit the archives. Well, I suppose by now, we all know how that plan worked out—not so well.

The irony is not lost on me that my desire to satiate my own Archive Fever has been impeded by the outbreak of a global pandemic from a virus that among other symptoms, causes a virulent fever. As coronavirus swept across the globe, and as the U.S. emerged as a hotspot of COVID-19 cases, archives across the nation, and across Asheville, closed their doors. Like many of us, I was initially disappointed by these closures, but as I learned more about the virus, and went into quarantine myself, I quickly embraced an altered day-to-day, one where the goal was to neither contract the virus, nor pass it to others. In the necessarily slower pace of life instituted by the novel coronavirus, concerns about research productivity, much less Archive Fever, quickly eroded. To be completely honest, my immediate reaction to limited access to archives, was most akin to burying my head in the proverbial sand. But, nonetheless, as the semester wound down in May 2020, like most chronic conditions, my Archive Fever came back once again, as I realized this summer could provide some much needed writing time towards the dissertation, as well as the flexibility to explore the river, if not the archives.

Just as my own Archive Fever was beginning to return, Heather South provided me with a tremendous gift—scans of crucial documents from the collection that serves as the foci of my dissertation project: “Upper French Broad Defense Association [UFBDA]: Organizational Records, 1961-1975” located at WRA. With the organized, high-resolution scans South provided me, I can now begin to resume my research, even

without the access to the archives. I wrote to South immediately after receiving these gifts, expressing my gratitude, a measly effort for all the help and kindness she has shown me over the years.

One thing I know for sure: whether a researcher is overwhelmed with Archive Fever or not, success in the archives is absolutely not a solitary endeavor. Archival research is not about a monastic researcher pouring over old documents in a reading room for hours. For me, archival research would not even be possible were it not for the hard work of archivists who diligently make materials available to researchers. In my experience, archival research involves a collaboration between researchers and archivists. For those of us who study an historically marginalized place like Appalachia, it seems important to not only collaborate with archivists, but to approach the research process itself as a communal endeavor, working not to displace the documents in the archives with our own theories and ideologies, but to work with the writers, rhetors, and citizens represented by archival collections. While Archive Fever drives my need for time in the archives, archival research is absolutely not conducted in isolation, whether, before, after, or during the global coronavirus pandemic.

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