



## Keynote

# Parting the Waters: CLIR's Pathways into the Archive

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Jacqueline Goldsby, Professor of English & African American Studies, Yale University

### Standing at the Water's Edge

The title of my talk deserves an explanation—or, rather, a confession. I wish I could credit my inspiration to Taylor Branch's magisterial study of the Civil Rights Movement, because that allusion would suggest I believe that CLIR's Hidden Collections Cataloging Program succeeded because it advances information access as a *civic right*.<sup>1</sup> Now, I do think that case can be made. Moreover, that view informs my remarks today. However, that intellectual genealogy didn't inspire my talk's title.

Instead, my title stems from a guilty pleasure. Every March, I watch Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956). I might rationalize this ritual by claiming to study Cold War allegories of anti-communist statecraft. But that's not true. My mother started me on this habit when I was in elementary school. She was a huge film buff, admired Charlton Heston, and relished well-choreographed visual spectacles. So, I have to admit, the image of Heston—arms thrust wide open against the roiling black sky; intoning his commands in fine, prophetic mode; Yul Brynner, Edward G. Robinson, and the other faux Egyptians shocked and awed as the waters of the Red Sea part: that image immediately sprang to mind as the icon I needed to focalize this talk.


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1 I refer to the first volume in Branch's extraordinary trilogy chronicling the Civil Rights Movement, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1989).

I concede that the religious allusion or the film's kitsch excess (maybe both) might offend secularists and modernists in the audience. But the scene's staging of the proverbial "making a way out of no way" strikes me as a visceral but useful emblem that acknowledges the special effects that CLIR's funding played in the success of the cataloging initiative.

When, in 2005, I first began my own archival project in Chicago, *Mapping the Stacks*, I read Barbara Jones' ARL white paper, *Hidden Collections, Scholarly Barriers* (2003), and Mark Greene and Dennis Meissner's manifesto "More Product, Less Process" (2005). These field-defining arguments placed my goals for *Mapping the Stacks* in a sobering context. As Jones and Greene and Meissner made clear, hidden collections imposed a staggering burden upon archives and cultural heritage repositories because uninventoried boxes of materials, overcrowded shelving space, understaffed processing units, patrons clamoring for materials—often unaware that ones more suitable for their projects were just several linear feet away—defied archivists' efforts to devise efficient strategies to recover uncataloged manuscript collections. Not to mention moving image, photography, and born digital collections, which pose their own daunting challenges.

The financial, human, and technological capital required to relieve and reverse those pressures needed to be shrewdly mobilized, on the one hand, and commanding in its own right, on



the other hand. CLIR's multi-year, multi-million dollar funding capacity bordered on something we might call miraculous, partly because it summoned money from the Mellon Foundation to seed grants that weren't then presently available. More importantly, because CLIR targeted hidden collections explicitly, its funding operated with both fine precision and wide-ranging scale that fostered breakthrough strategies that repositories can now use not only to unhide collections, but to keep those holdings visible and accessible throughout a collection's life cycle.

Judging from their titles and abstracts, the posters and papers presented at yesterday's unconference and today's symposium examine more precisely how these new protocols function *in situ*, on the ground. I begin my remarks with this broader appreciation: the inroads that now lead into hidden collections were made possible because of CLIR's large-scale, longer tail funding capacity.<sup>2</sup> The \$27.5 million distributed to the 129 projects across the U.S. and Canada has created not just one but multiple pathways for knowledge production to reach new shores.

Indeed, it's not an exaggeration to proclaim that the collections unhidden through CLIR's Cataloging initiative can—and will—transform the landscapes of research, teaching, and public engagement in humanist studies here in the U.S. and around the world. Truly: the range of materials recovered is logistically staggering and intellectually thrilling. I, for one, can't wait to steer my students and colleagues to the riches that await us in CLIR's [Hidden Collections Registry](#).

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2 A political scientist might liken CLIR's funding model to federal government block grants. Applying for yearly support from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, CLIR functioned as a state that redistributed Mellon monies to local entities, to advance Mellon's policy interests in hidden collections vis-à-vis its Scholarly Communications program. For a recent and useful account of this funding approach, see Dilger and Boyd 2014.

Even though this database is still a work-in-progress and might be refined further (Christa Williford advised me), in its current state the registry is an extraordinary resource because of its main differences from resources like Archives USA.<sup>3</sup>

First, the collections federated in CLIR's Registry are, implicitly, the freshest, "rawest" primary sources available, precisely because they've been previously hidden and hardly researched. That's not the case for collections indexed in Archives USA. Second, the collections federated in CLIR's registry are searchable along multiple pathways (seven, compared to Archives USA's two).<sup>4</sup> These search routes hold remarkable potential as user-friendly portals. Which ones and why?

The index of project titles is quite helpful, for instance, because those thematic cues provide a sharper sense of a given collection's likely content. The three subject portals (along with the keyword search box) function in their expected ways but with an important twist: unfamiliar individuals, organizations, practices, or events can be discovered and then linked to broader, more commonly recognized topics.<sup>5</sup>

For instance: I might not know that Margaret Bush Wilson was a Civil Rights Movement activist, but because her papers are indexed under "Civil Rights," CLIR's Registry places Wilson's career in that historical field.<sup>6</sup> With that data point in view, others crop up, ready to plot:


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3 In its cataloging grant proposal, CLIR stresses the registry's "complementary" functions to Archives USA (p. 4). The point I'm making here is that the differences between the databases make them compatible.

4 Archives USA allows users to search by collection and repository name.

5 To explore these features, see the Hidden Collections Registry's home page at: [http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/registry#c12=all&b\\_start=0](http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/registry#c12=all&b_start=0).

6 For Margaret Bush Wilson's papers, see <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/registry/hc.0953>.



because immigration rights collections are also housed under “Civil Rights,” a student might begin to think comparatively about, say, the shape of the movement along regional lines (U.S. South, Southwest, Far West).<sup>7</sup> Open to that suggestion, a researcher might think about the politics of segregation differently when, from Wilson’s Papers, she’s able to identify within the “Civil Rights” rubric that the California State University system’s “Activism, Culture and Diversity in Southern California” project includes the McFauling Collection, which holds records concerning Japanese Americans’ relocation from the internment camps following World War II. How might African American wartime migration and housing settlement patterns in Los Angeles, Long Beach, and other southern California port cities make sense against the backdrop of Japanese-Americans’ removal from their neighborhoods and property?<sup>8</sup> As an English professor, when I teach a novel like Julie Otsuka’s *When the Emperor was Divine* (2002)—a haunting novel about a family’s forced relocation from Berkeley, California, to Camp Topaz in Utah—addressing questions like these could set very interesting, unexpected cultural frames around that novel. CLIR’s Hidden Collection Registry encourages this kind of expansive pedagogical experimentation.

The Registry’s potential is so rich that I pledge to use this site in my research seminars and thesis advising at Yale, and I’ll encourage my colleagues to do the same. Can you imagine the A.P. high school, college, and graduate-level instructors who could also send their students to this resource to explore possible research projects? Can you envision documentarians who might comb

7 For the broad listing of civil rights-related collections, see [http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/registry#b\\_start=0&c12=civil-rights](http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/registry#b_start=0&c12=civil-rights).

8 See <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/registry/hc.0797>.

the Registry for leads to un-listened-to sound recordings and never-before-seen prints, photographs, and films to inspire multimedia projects?

I’m sure you can imagine these scenarios. They’re probably already happening in your organizations. If so, that’s fantastic. The point I want to make here, though, is a request. I’d respectfully encourage all of you—and CLIR—to channel your inner Charlton Heston-as-Moses and lead the publics you serve to the Hidden Collections Registry more assertively. This shouldn’t be a hard story to sell. The recovery of so many original, fascinating, inspiring, never-or-hardly-used archival collections—and the labors archivists and librarians expended to organize them—is a mediagenic story that should be spread as widely as possible. The work that you’ve accomplished deserves publicity on the scale of a Cecil B. DeMille spectacle!

I’m highlighting the Registry for this effort instead of the individual social media sites established for individual projects (a sampling of which can be accessed through the [Project Related Resources](#) web page), because the Registry centralizes and focuses attention on the whole, collective lot of unhidden collections that are now known and available for use. A federated publicity strategy aimed at directing a more varied and mass public to converge upon this shared portal will drive a broader range of users to your repositories, I’m certain. Full-to-crowded reading rooms will be a good problem to have on your hands, not simply to build larger constituencies, but also to align new allies and advocates for the ongoing work that collections development requires in the twenty-first century.



## The Relational Archive<sup>9</sup>

CLIR's Cataloging grant program and the Hidden Collections Registry are remarkable for a third—and final—reason I want to discuss.

As anthropologist and cultural theorist Ann Laura Stoler observes in her brilliant study of archive-making in the nineteenth-century Dutch Indies empire, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, “transparency is not what archival collections are known for” (2010, 8), and this problematic has been the focal point of what she calls “the archival turn”—that is, the shift in scholarly emphasis from relying on archives as *resources* for study to critiquing them as *objects* of study (2010, 46-47, 52). I'm sure you're familiar with the body of criticism that defines this turn—I refer here to such works as Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1980), Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever* (1996), Michel Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past* (1995), Carolyn Steedman's *Dust* (2001), and Diana Taylor's *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003) among others. These works offer bracing, important challenges to the institutional formations of libraries and archives that have sustained opacities, exclusions, and suppressions of various kinds.<sup>10</sup> However, I want to suggest that, taken together—CLIR's Cataloging initiative, the innovative work you've done arranging and describing those collections, and the Hidden Collections Registry—proffer a different theory of the archive, what I call the


relational archive. Its conceptual underpinnings, on the one hand, and social-political capacities, on the other hand, are important to name, because those features may help us confront the sobering but necessary fact that this conference itself portends: how to move forward processing still hidden collections now that CLIR Cataloging grant program has ended?

To address that pressing question, let me first define what I mean by “relational archive.” My use of the phrase and concept is inspired by visual studies theorist Nicolas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* (2002). In that study, Bourriaud explains why contemporary art during the 1990s and 2000s moved away from traditional plastic mediums (such as painting, sculpture, and drawing) to embrace performance-based works in which acts of human contact and sociability were not simply the subject of the work but the form of the artwork itself. A recent, well publicized example would be Marina Abramovic's 2010 performance-installation at MOMA, “The Artist is Present.” Abramovic sat in a chair in a large, empty room for three months straight, while visitors lined up for the chance to sit directly across from her, for as long as they chose. The viewers could speak to Abramovic; she would not reply to them.<sup>11</sup> Bourriaud would call artwork like Abramovic's “relational” because it actively solicits the viewer in making the art work function and visible. Indeed, the process of engagement itself—the relationships and transactions that occur between the artist, viewer-participant, and the art object-event constitute the “work” of art as such. In

9 I've addressed this point in an earlier presentation, “Mapping the Stacks: Five Years Later,” Opening Colloquium Lecture, “The Past's Digital Presence: Database, Archive, & Knowledge Work in the Humanities,” Yale University, February 19, 2010.

10 Other exemplary critiques include Gordon 2008, Lepore 2001, and Hartman 2008. Stoler 2010 offers a cogent overview and complex interrogation of the conceptual rigidities of these approaches, particularly within post-colonial studies (see 46-47, 52).

11 For recent accounts of Abramovic's work, see MOMA's summary of its retrospective of her career, “The Artist is Present” at <http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/965>, and the usefully bewildered take by art reviewer Richard Dorment (2014). Bourriaud's book is threaded through with so many lucid, engaging examples it's hard to single any one out. All of them make his point quite astutely.



an era where communications technology and global capital atomize us as much as they link us together, “dialogue,” Bourriaud argues, “grants form a productive status.... As part of a ‘relationist’ theory of art, inter-subjectivity does not only represent the social setting for the reception of art, [...it] also becomes the quintessence of artistic practice” (22).

I see Bourriaud’s concept of relationality at work when I study the Hidden Collection Registry’s subject tag cloud, for instance.<sup>12</sup> That visualization calls to mind the many applications I reviewed in which repositories promised to design social tagging protocols, to involve nonprofessionals in the intellectual labor of identifying and categorizing the materials of a given collection. Likewise, the range and comparative scales of subject areas visualized by the tags’ font sizes bespeaks a new sensibility as to what counts as research-worthy knowledge objects, as do the formats of those knowledge objects. In turn, this diversity mirrors the variations we see in the kinds of repositories that were eligible to seek CLIR funding in the first place. Ranging from academic special collections to local historical societies to other cultural heritage nonprofit organizations, “the archive” encompasses the multifarious and amorphous forms it’s always been.

Finally, in one of the most remarkable relational patterns, collaborative grants linking institutions together were not uncommon in CLIR’s Cataloging initiative. Over the years, joint proposals composed a small but steady percentage of the total number of Cataloging grant applicants.<sup>13</sup>

12 Scroll to the bottom of the Registry’s home page for the subject tag cloud: [http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/registry#c12=all&b\\_start=0](http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/registry#c12=all&b_start=0).


13 The total collaborative grants submitted (funded or not), run as follows: 2008, 11/118; 2009, 11/169; 2010, 7/145; 2011, 8/72; 2012, 9/100; 2013, 12/75; 2014, 15/92. I’m grateful to Amy Lucko and Christa Williford for preparing and providing these statistics. See e-mail communication with Christa Williford, 25 Feb. 2015.

However, funded collaborations represented an eyebrow-raising proportion: 40% in 2008; 26.6% in 2009; 23.5% in 2010; 15.8% in 2011; 22.7% in 2012; 18.1% in 2013; 31.6% in 2014.<sup>14</sup> And yet, prevailing wisdom insists that digitization singularly realizes the relational archive’s ideal of shared conceptual engagement.

For instance, in a provocative lecture at the ARL’s Fall 2009 Forum on the fate and function of special collections in contemporary times, Mellon Foundation Program Officer Donald Waters argued that digitization will transform “special collections into common ones” because such endeavors can promote collection sharing instead of institutional competition for primary source materials. Moreover, Waters observed, to the extent that digitization destabilizes the idea of institutional ownership, other definitions of value can inform digital-based archival collections.<sup>15</sup> I don’t disagree with Waters’ propositions at all. Interestingly, though, these very same principles were asserted in CLIR’s Cataloging grant proposal—I refer here to its explicit criteria of “interoperability” that required applicants to participate in an iterative exchange process when developing their proposals (2-3) and the “cyberinfrastructure” that was imagined to “facilitate building...virtual organizations

14 The number of awarded collaborative grants runs as follows: 2008, 6 out of 15; 2009, 4 out of 15; 2010, 4 out of 17; 2011, 3 out of 19; 2012, 5 out of 22; 2013, 4 out of 22; 2014, 6 out of 19. I’ve exchanged with Amy Lucko and Christa Williford why these patterns may have evolved. First, they rightly pointed out to me that funded collaborations were steady but not numerically dominant. Furthermore, the grant cycle’s timing often frustrated efforts to build consortiums from scratch, as it were. Third, in the wake of budget cuts, repositories may have been more reluctant to take on ambitious, collaborative projects. E-mail communication with Amy Lucko, 20 Feb. 2015 and Christa Williford, 25 Feb. 2015.

15 Comparable aspirations inform CLIR’s Digitization Initiative. See CLIR’s grant proposal, “Digitizing Hidden Collections and Archives: Enabling New Scholarship through Increasing Access to Unique Materials” (2014), <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/program-proposals/2015-digitizing-hidden-collections-proposal-pdf>.



that transcend geographic and institutional boundaries, an interlocking of technical and social elements” (3-4).<sup>16</sup> Put another way, processing and cataloging hidden collections, differently but no less than digitization, articulate a relational view of the archive, too. This paradigm shift in the social logic and role of the archive rates, for me, as one of the key achievements of CLIR’s Cataloging initiative.

### Theories and Miracles in the Real World

If the statistics I cited earlier don’t offer robust enough proof of concept, we can—and therefore should—assess cataloging’s transformative power in culturalist terms. Here, Ann Stoler’s insight into what counts as an “archival event” is worth recalling:


...[we should] think about archival events with and against Foucault’s compelling injunction to treat them as ‘reversals of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who once used it.’ Such an approach undoes the certainty that archives are stable ‘things’ with ready-made and neatly drawn boundaries. But the search for a dramatic ‘reversal,’ ‘usurpation,’ and successful ‘appropriation’ can hide ‘events’ that are more muted in their consequences, less bellicose in their seizures, less spectacular in what they reframe. Here I treat archival events more as moments that disrupt (if only provisionally) a field of force, that challenge (if only slightly) what can be said and done, that question (if only quietly) ‘epistemic warrant,’ that realign the certainties of the probable more than they mark wholesale reversals of direction. (51)

16 Quotes are cited from CLIR’s original 2007 proposal, “Cataloging Special Collections and Archives: Building a New Research Environment.” This document can be found at <http://www.clir.org/hiddencollections/program-proposals/2008HiddenCollectionsProposal.pdf>.

I quote Stoler at length because her insights allow us to appreciate how needles move—which is to ask: what might come next in our common work?

We can’t be naïve about the contexts in which archival work now occurs. The vexing developments that shape current educational policy also threaten the momentum CLIR’s Cataloging grant program has built. The creative disruptions triggered by constant technological change; the diversification (arguably, fragmentation) of learning publics; and, most devastatingly, the disinvestment in humanist research, teaching, and learning by local, state, and federal government put a sharper point on the imperative I raised at the outset of my talk: how do we keep this work—and the funding that supports it—moving forward?

Self-consciously adapting the conceptual rubric of the relational archive can serve as the impetus and guide we need to extend the gains achieved by CLIR’s Cataloging Hidden Collections Program. The “archival common sense” (to use Stoler’s apt phrase) it introduces as an institutional practice marks a strategic pathway forward, for two reasons. First, the concept of relationality places clarifying pressure on prevailing critical theories that posit “the archive” to be always already subjugating, dominating, or “imperial.” Second, those accounts, whose historical critiques I support but whose trans-historicizing impetus I take issue with, should be distinguished from the relational archive that CLIR’s Hidden Collections initiative has set in motion. Because the kind of archive we need to justify and fund, *in and for our present historical moment*, has found viable, compelling, inspiring forms through the practices that your projects have tested and CLIR’s Cataloging grant program supported.



The strategies you devised to “unhide” hidden collections have transformed “the quintessence of archival practice,” to adapt Bourriaud’s phrase that I cited earlier. Facilitating outreach to and collaboration with nonprofessionals to process collections; redefining what counts as an archival repository and its knowledge-objects; developing technologies and practices that dislodge traditional claims of originality, rarity, accessibility, and use of knowledge-objects; collating that descriptive information within the Registry’s single, shared portal: this model of the archive—which your projects launched—invites library professionals, scholars, students, and the lay public to forge partnerships that can foster and sustain collections management work for the short and long term. Why? Because the relational archive acknowledges we all belong to it. The relational archive functions when we all labor in and on its behalf. The relational archive requires our collective capital—human and financial—to make its form possible. Tackling the problem of hidden collections has been key to this transformation. Precisely because CLIR’s cataloging initiative has come to its end, we can see relationality for what it is: an archival mode and form whose time has come, whose time is now.

### Acknowledgments


I owe deep thanks to Charles Henry and the staff at CLIR—Amy Lucko, Christa Williford, and Nicole Ferraiolo—for inviting me to offer these reflections on the extraordinary achievements of CLIR’s Cataloging Hidden Collections Program.

I also want to acknowledge the work of all the curators, archivists, librarians, and project staff members who serve as the stewards of the cultural heritage materials that made CLIR’s program an outstanding success. This is one time I’ll hazard to speak categorically, on behalf of

researchers, teachers, and students everywhere, as well as the reading-thinking-learning publics at-large to say: thank you for the vital and essential work you do to make knowledge production, teaching, and learning possible.

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