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Understanding the archival fonds as autobiographical text through three discourses[*]

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ABSTRACT

Over the last few decades, textual criticism has shifted its focus away from the reconstruction of final authorial intentions in favour of exposing the multiplicity of intentions concurring in the formation of literary texts. A similar shift in focus can be tracked in the theoretical literature on lifewriting exploring the nature of autobiographical texts. There, the notion that such texts function as sites for the revelation of a unified authentic self has been displaced by an understanding of them as sites for the construction of multiple selves. Both these shifts resonate, in turn, with a growing body of archival literature investigating the multiple layers of agency implicated in the construction of archival fonds. Drawing on the insights of textual criticism, lifewriting scholarship and the archival theory of arrangement, this article considers the ways in which personal fonds in general and writers' fonds in particular may be understood as autobiographical texts.

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In "Many Paths to Partial Truths," Elisabeth Kaplan maintains that there are "meaningful and useful analogies" to be drawn between archival studies and other humanities and social sciences disciplines grappling with similar issues and concerns. She offers three compelling reasons for exploring such analogies:

> Cross-disciplinary comparisons can help us to view our field in a larger context, shedding new light on familiar thought and practice, reorienting us toward the broader intellectual climate in which we work. Comparative analysis can help us better to understand our field's past. Ultimately, though, it should help us to improve our practice […]; a conscious understanding of what we do will better enable us to make and to justify the decisions that archivists must make every day (Kaplan 2002, 211).

It is possible to find meaningful and useful analogies between archival studies, textual criticism and lifewriting. All three disciplinary fields are concerned with the history, transmission, and representation of cultural texts and share an emergent understanding of texts as forms of representation which do not simply reflect reality but actively construct it.

Textual scholarship is "the general term for all the activities associated with the discovery, description, transcription, editing, glossing, annotating, and commenting upon [literary and other] texts" (Greetham 1994, 1). Within this broad field, textual criticism traditionally has been concerned specifically with "the reconstruction of an author's intended text and the production of a critical edition displaying that intention" (Greetham 1994, 8). Over the last few decades, textual criticism has shifted its focus away from the reconstruction of final authorial intentions in favour of exposing the multiplicity of intentions concurring in the formation of literary texts. A similar shift in focus can be tracked in the theoretical literature on lifewriting exploring the nature of autobiographical texts. There, the notion that such texts function as sites for the revelation of a unified authentic self has been displaced by an understanding of them as sites for the construction of multiple selves. Both these shifts from revealed to constructed text resonate, in turn, with a growing body of archival literature investigating the multiple layers of agency implicated in the construction of archival fonds in general and personal fonds in particular.

These focal shifts across the three disciplinary fields – which are influenced, either directly or indirectly, by poststructuralist thinking – invite us to consider the archival fonds as a kind of cultural text, one that shares some affinities with literary and autobiographical texts. D.F. McKenzie's explication of the term *text* helps to make the case for such affinity. As McKenzie observes, the Latin derivation of text is *texĕre*, meaning "to weave"; in this sense the term "refers, not to any specific materials as such, but to their woven state, the web or texture of the materials" (McKenzie 1999, 13). What constitutes a text, therefore, "is not the presence of linguistic elements but the act of construction" (43). McKenzie's explication aligns with the post-structuralist re-positioning of text as a "pan-disciplinary concept" encompassing "any cultural object of investigation" as well as its re-thinking of the "contextuality of texts" (Threadgold 2005, 345–346). According to that rethinking, "any text is quite literally a weaving together of other, similarly interconnected texts. Thus, rather than having a single or stable meaning somehow embodied in its structure […] the text is engaged in a continuous play of meaning across the field of intertextuality" (2005, 345). In this article, I draw on the insights of textual criticism, lifewriting scholarship and the archival theory of arrangement respectively, to explore personal fonds in general and writers' fonds in particular as autobiographical texts. Taking a leaf from Kaplan's book, my aim is to deepen and broaden understanding of the

broader intellectual climate in which archivists work, reorient archival understanding of the foundations of archival theory, and encourage the cultivation of more reflective and defensible descriptive practices, specifically in the area of personal archives.

Textual criticism

Within the eclectic or authorial tradition of textual criticism, the textual critic's task in preparing a critical edition is to reconstruct, from among the many "corrupt" variants of a literary text that have existed over time, the authentic or "ideal" text, namely, the one that best embodies the final intentions of the author. The theory underpinning the tradition is that the final intentions of the author are always and inevitably corrupted by transmission: examples of such corruption include copy editors altering the author's punctuation and spelling; friends and relatives revising typescripts and page proofs, sometimes with and sometimes without the author's knowledge or permission; and publishers subtracting and adding material to new editions after the author's death. Textual critics working in the tradition of eclectic editions attempt to restore the text to an imagined historical moment before the onset of these forms of "corruption" by identifying and incorporating the features from various versions of the text that carry the greatest authority with regard to the author's final intentions. As Thomas Tanselle expresses it: "If we grant that authors have intentions and therefore that the intentions of past authors are historical facts, we require no further justification for the attempt to recover those intentions and to reconstruct texts reflecting them, whatever our chances of success might be" (Tanselle 1989, 76). The result of these efforts is an eclectic edition, which David Greetham has described as "the 'text that never was' […] (but, by implication, *ought* to have been, since it construct[s] authorial intention [in spite of] the testimony of individual documents)" (Greetham 1994, 334).[1]

For much of the twentieth century, the authorial theory of critical editions dominated the Anglo-American tradition of textual criticism. Since the 1980s, however, it has come under fire from textual scholars who maintain that it "hypothesizes two related phenomena that do not exist: i.e., an autonomous author, and an ideal text" (McGann 1992, 56). The ideology underlying the theory of final intentions, Leah Marcus contends, is a Platonic one, inasmuch as it "locate[s] the ultimate reality of the literary text outside its material embodiment, usually in the mind of the author" (Marcus 1996, 29–30). For Jerome McGann, the ideology is, at the same time, a Romantic one that imagines a solitary author "creating a work in an 'originary moment' of composition" (McGann 1992, xiii). He points to numerous examples of authors whose work is inextricably linked with a variety of collaborators – editors, publishers, friends and relations – making it impossible to determine the authors' final intentions or to separate their intentions from those of their collaborators. "Texts are produced and reproduced under specific social and institutional conditions," McGann maintains, "and hence […] every text, including those that may appear to be purely private, is a social text" (McGann 1991, 21). By focusing all their attention on revealing the mind of the author who created the literary work, the procedures of eclectic editing isolate the authorial text from its subsequent social distribution, that is, from the institutions that transmitted that text to the public. Moreover, such procedures can obscure the less than passive role played by editors themselves in the preparation of an eclectic edition. Marcus

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[1] The theory and methods of eclectic editions are discussed in more detail in MacNeil (2008; 2016).

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illustrates how, for example, the shaping hand of the editor has acted in the past to mask, "a given text's engagement with issues of colonialism and race":

> […] nearly all modern editions of Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* emend the first octavo's description of him as "snowy" in complexion to the preferred reading of "sinewy" on grounds that "snowy" is hardly likely as a description of warrior-conquerer, even though it is the reading of all the early texts; one of the later octavos even amplifies the descriptive term to "snowy-white". In this case, editors have tacitly discounted the overwhelming likelihood that Tamburlaine, whom we have tended to think of as the paradigmatic Islamic other for the English in the sixteenth century, might instead be defined by Marlowe as light-skinned, like the English themselves (Marcus 1996, 151).

To counteract the tendency of eclectic editions to deprive literary texts of significant dimensions of their meaning, textual scholars have argued for an alternative "social" theory of textual criticism in which the entire history of a literary work – from composition to reception and beyond – falls within the scope of textual scholarship (McGann 1991; Marcus 1996, 8–9). They take the view that the primary task of the textual critic is not to re-constitute authorial intentions through the establishment of a single definitive text but, rather, to expose the complex and open-ended histories of textual change and variance through the presentation of multiple texts. Marcus has proposed the term "new philology" to describe this shift in editorial attention from idealized to historicized literary texts. The "dominant textual paradigm" of this new philology is a "web" or "network," within which "the text loses its privileged separateness and is conceptualized as part of a much wider vectoring of forces and objects"– including the shaping hand of editors themselves (Marcus 1996, 22–23).

Lifewriting

The insights of textual criticism resonate with those of life-writing scholars whose specific concern is with teasing out the nature of self-representational texts. Life writing is now commonly understood as "a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject" (Smith and Watson 2010, 4); and it includes a broad range of writing about the 'self,' including published autobiographies and memoirs; as well as unpublished forms of writing such as diaries, journals and letters.

The 'first wave' of life writing criticism in the first half of the twentieth century was informed by the Enlightenment notion of a unified and universal selfhood. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain:

> [First–wave lifewriting scholars] assumed the autobiographer to be an autonomous and enlightened "individual" who exercised free will and understood his relationship to others and the world as one of separateness. Focusing on the teleological pattern of development in narratives usually written late in life as retrospections on public and/or writing careers, they assumed a concluding point at which some kind of self-understanding through reflection on past achievement takes place (Smith and Watson 2010, 199).

First wave critics and theorists emphasized the transparency and representativeness of individual autobiographical texts – which were viewed as historical texts rather than literary texts – and established a canon of life writing that was built around key life narratives of so-called "great men".

They situated the man and his actions within specific historical and cultural contexts and assessed how his deeds were "representative" of the times (Smith and Watson 2010, 195–96). Pre-occupied with evaluating the lessons to be learned from the autobiographical narrative, first wave critics treated the narrator as a transparent and objective observer of their own life and did not question whether issues of "identify, self-definition, self-existence, or self-deception" might influence the narrator's version of that life (Smith and Watson 2010, 200).

With the second wave of lifewriting, which began around the 1960s, critics, "shifted from the concept of a universal 'self' – achieving self-discovery, self-creation, and self-knowledge – to a new concept of the 'subject' riven by self-estrangement and self-fragmentation" (Smith and Watson 2010, 201). Second-wave critics were more conscious that self-representational texts were constructions, rather than transcriptions of the past and so reconceived life narratives "not as sites of the truth of a life but as creative self-engagements" (Smith and Watson 2010, 203). As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson observe, second-wave criticism was also influenced by the poststructuralist "dismantling of metaphysical conceptions of self-presence, authority, authenticity and truth" from the 1970s on", which led to a further reconceptualization of subjectivity and thus, of autobiographical acts" (Smith and Watson 2010, 206, 204). As autobiographical writing shifted from the realm of history to literature, its generic boundaries expanded as life-writing critics began to take into account the kinds of life narratives ignored by the first wave, such as letters, diaries, and journals.

Much of the second-wave lifewriting literature rejects the idea that there is an unified and coherent self waiting to be revealed through "autobiographical telling"; rather, that literature argues, an autobiographical narrative is best understood as a "performative" rather than a "self-expressive" act in which the narrator "performs" rather than "expresses" interiority. In other words, Sidonie Smith explains, "narrative performativity constitutes interiority. […] the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an *effect* of autobiographical storytelling" (Smith 1995, 17–18). Literary scholar Robert Fothergill offers some examples of the ways in which the performance of interiority is enacted in the specific context of diary writing:

> Just as the diary text reflects a selection of materials, so does the diary tone reflect, inevitably, the adoption of a particular stance, posture, self-dramatization: the diary persona. This need not, of course, be a conscious self-dramatization, but even artless sincerity is still a stance. Neutral note-taker, tortured self-analyst, wry observer, unappreciated hero, sensitive plant "tremblingly alive all o'er"-the possibilities are endless and not to be reduced to these schematic formulae. But all the same, what the diarist talks about and the tone the diarist habitually adopts combine to construct a diary persona, which may represent the actual living person quite fully and fairly but which is, nonetheless, a version of the self that the diary text serves to project and reinforce (Fothergill 1995, 90).

Fothergill's examples draw attention, not only to the performative nature of the diary but, also to the multiplicity of personae or selves concurring in the construction of any life narrative.

That multiplicity of selves has been explored in some depth by Smith and Watson. They distinguish between the "flesh-and-blood person located in a particular time and place" (i.e., "the historical 'I',"); the "persona of the historical person" (i.e., "the narrating 'I'") who tells the story about the self; and "the protagonist of the narrative" (i.e., "the narrated 'I'") who is the version of the self that the narrating 'I' chooses to construct" in the story (Smith and Watson 2010, 72–73). These discussions

of the performative nature of broadly autobiographical narratives "reflect the shift in theories of life writing and autobiography away from a view of identity as unchanging and essential, as 'something that either guides, or must be discovered' by the life writer, to a view of identity as multiple" (Douglas 2013, 52) and encompassing what Janna Malamud Smith terms, "a vast archive of selves, each one an internalized two-persona relationship expressive of a slightly different nuance of psyche and experience" (Malamud Smith 1996, 153).

The lifewriting literature also recognizes the roles played by "selves" external to the narrator, including so-called "coaxers and coercers;" Smith and Watson define the coaxer or coercer as "any person or institution or set of cultural imperatives that solicits or provokes people to tell their stories" (Smith and Watson 2010, 64). Coaxers and coercers are analagous to the "collaborators" previously mentioned in relation to the social theory of textual criticism. In the lifewriting context they comprise a wide range of agents – such as family members, publishers, employers, religious, ethnic, or other community organizations, public welfare institutions – who suggest, either explicitly or implicitly, a particular way of constructing the life narrative and who may exert influence over what parts of that narrative are included and excluded. Drawing attention to these external selves acts as a corrective on any "notion that [autobiographical] texts produce a kind of unmediated authenticity" (Smith and Watson 2010, 69).

Life writing scholars use all these ideas about the different 'selves' involved in the construction of broadly autobiographical narratives to remind readers that the parts of a life that are revealed in any autobiographical text represents only a fragment of the life experienced outside of it. Barry Olshen reinforces this cautionary point when he draws an analogy between autobiography and the literary trope of synecdoche. In that analogy, autobiography becomes "the ultimate existential synecdoche in which there is continual danger that the part will be perceived as the whole and the whole reduced to its part" (Olshen 1995, 15). Like the new textual scholarship, second-wave lifewriting also draws our attention to the imposition of intentions and interests of agents other than the author in the construction of a life narrative.

Archival theory of arrangement

The new textual scholarship and second-wave lifewriting offer distinct yet complementary perspectives on the various agents concurring in the formation of literary and autobiographical texts. In this final section I will suggest how these discourses tie in with shifting currents of thinking in the archival literature exploring the theory of archival arrangement in personal fonds in general and writers' fonds in particular.

 The traditional European theory of archival arrangement is underpinned by a nineteenth century historiographical ideal; in Rankean terms, a belief in the possibility of "penetrating to the inner being of the past" (MacNeil 2016, 177). That belief is embedded in a number of interlocking assumptions: that the surviving remains of the past can stand in for those that have disappeared; that those remains are, in some sense, a personification of the records creator; and that it is possible to enter into the consciousness of that creator and the past itself through its documentary remains. It is enacted through the conceptualization of a fonds as the totality of a creator's records, which communicates a sense of wholeness and autonomy to something that physically exists only in fragments; and through

the principle of original order, which treats the final arrangement given to a fonds by its creator as a metaphor of sorts for the creator's final intentions.[2]

Although personal archives are conspicuously absent in the writings of early archival theorists, over the last thirty years or so, a substantial body of literature focusing on personal archives in general and writers' archives in particular has emerged and in that literature we can find traces of the Romantic ideology Jerome McGann references in relation to the authorial theory of textual criticism. Central to that ideology was the notion that the Romantic poets' art "was so inextricably bound up with their biographies that to judge one was to judge both' (Reiman 1995, 311). The Romantic ideology informed the nineteenth century's popular fascination with collecting literary autographs which, Stephen Ennis observes, "seemed to offer evidence of an author's inner character and traces of his or her genius" (Enniss 2001, 108). It has also informed the collecting practices of manuscript repositories in the area of literary papers. Collectors attach particular value to the manuscripts found within such papers because they are thought to "bear some trace of the writer's solitary struggle with his own difficult muse" (Enniss 2001, 119). Catherine Hobbs observes that, in market terms, the "rarity and value" of a manuscript found in a writer's fonds stem from "its proximity to the act of creation, its closeness to the spark or intention of the creative author" (Hobbs 2006, 113). It is not surprising then that in contemporary archival writings on personal archives, their value is often attributed to their capacity to express a record creator's interior self.[3] In some of the literature on writers' archives specifically, an implicit connection is drawn between the archivist's attempt to capture a writer's "thinking space" by identifying and preserving the original order of an author's fonds (Hobbs 2006, 114) and the eclectic editor's effort to re-create the final intentions of an author "creating a work in an 'originary moment' of composition".

And just as textual critics and lifewriting scholars have complicated the notion that critical editions can reveal the final intentions of their authors or that a unified essential self can emerge through autobiographical texts, a number of contemporary archival scholars have thrown into question two tacit assumptions underlying archival arrangement. The first is the assumption that original order can be a window into the "inner being" of the past or the interiority of an individual. As Brien Brothman remarks, "it is as problematical for an archives to maintain that it is remaining faithful to *original order* at least strictly so – to capture this objective part of the past – as it is for historians to claim that their work somehow captures and *re*presents the past, that is, makes it present once more" (Brothman 1991, 83). The second is the assumption that the fonds, as a totality of records, revolves around a single creator. Such assumption has been questioned on the grounds that it has acted to obscure the complex history of a fonds and the multiple agents that have concurred in its formation. Maurizio Savoja and Stefano Vitali, for example, point out that:

> Identifying a 'former custodian' and distinguishing it from the 'creator' of the *fonds* can be straightforward where 'previous archival repositories' existed in which *fonds* created by state or public bodies were concentrated and sometimes rearranged and described, as a result of political or administrative decisions over the centuries. In other contexts, however, particularly with *fonds* of heterogeneous origin (e.g., records of small private bodies or personal papers), it might be difficult to

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[2] For a more detailed discussion of these ideas see MacNeil 2006; 2008; 2016).
[3] For numerous examples of this literature see Douglas (2013, 34–37).

determine the actual role of an agency that held an archival *fonds*. Should it be identified only as 'former custodian,' or should it also be considered as a creator, especially if it carried out *fonds* rearrangements or, as a collector of ancient documents, gave to the *fonds* (more appropriately, the collection) its organisation? Perhaps it should be considered as both (Savoja and Vitali 2008, 142).

Around this questioning, there have emerged intimations of what might be described as a social or collaborative theory of archival arrangement, one that invites us to think of the archival fonds as a cultural text that is different from but analogous nevertheless to a literary or autobiographical text. Describing a fonds as a text "draws attention both to its constructed nature and to the process of that construction, i.e, the ways in which a web of records and their relationships are formed and re-formed over time" (MacNeil 2008, 9). Such description aligns with Marcus's conceptualization of the literary text as a "web" or "network" and prompts us to take into better account, therefore, the "wider vectoring of forces" and agents that have shaped the creation and ongoing history of a fonds and its parts, including the silent shaping hand of the archivist.

In the specific context of personal archives, one archival scholar, Jennifer Douglas, has drawn explicitly on second-wave lifewriting theorists like Smith and Watson to identify and elaborate the multiple agents or "selves" that participate in the construction of a writer's fonds before and after it is transferred to archival custody and that tend to be overlooked in the lifewriting literature. These include the performative acts of what she terms the "archiving I". As she explains it, "this is the 'I' who makes decisions about what will represent the 'real' or historical 'I' as part of [the writer's] archive. This archiving 'I,' like Smith and Watson's 'narrating 'I,'' is involved in the construction of yet another 'I': the archived 'I,' another completely textual 'I' and the result of the archiving 'I's acts of selection, retention, and representation" (Douglas 2015, 67). Douglas illustrates the development of the archiving 'I' in the efforts of Lucy Maud Montgomery, author of the Canadian children's classic, *Anne of Green Gables*, to shape her legacy both through the careful crafting and editing of her journals and through her destruction of letters and the deposit of her papers in the archives at the University of Guelph (Douglas 2015, 57–68).

Douglas also directs attention to various custodians who play the role of coaxers and coercers in the construction of a writer's fonds, drawing on the archive of the American poet Sylvia Plath. As Douglas explains, for decades following her suicide in 1963, Plath's husband Ted Hughes and her mother Aurelia Plath battled for control over her literary remains and posthumous reputation and their fingerprints are all over the Plath Archive: they can be found in, among other things, the interpretive and explanatory notes Ted Hughes attached to each bundle of poetry manuscripts he donated to the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College and in the annotations, underlinings and blacking out of passages in the letters Aurelia Plath donated to the Lilly Library at Indiana University (Douglas 2015, 76–82). Finally, Douglas points to the coaxing and coercive role played by archivists and archival institutions. "By determining what material to keep, how kept materials relate to each other and how to represent materials in finding aids," she argues, "archivists create a particular version of the archival body – viz the archival fonds – and affect how it will be encountered and understood in future" (Douglas 2018, 40).

In many of the writers' archives Douglas examined, she found that the records' histories were considerably more complex than the finding aids prepared for them would suggest. For example, she notes that the findings aids prepared for the Plath collections at both the Lilly and Smith libraries

"contain little explicit indication of the processes that led to their establishment. Both sets of finding aids indicate from whom materials were bought or gifted, but this is the extent of description related to the custodial history of the collections or to the recordkeeping practices by which they accumulated" (Douglas 2016, 36). In an informal survey of arrangement and description practices between 2003 and 2007, Geoffrey Yeo also found numerous examples of personal fonds descriptions which failed to mention their provenancial and custodial complexities (Yeo 2009, 55–56). In some cases, material which had been added to the creator's fonds by later custodians represented approximately half of the total aggregation and yet the title given in the fonds level description "mentioned only the creator of the earliest or most 'interesting' material". Yeo also discovered that, "in at least four instances where it would have been possible to identify an individual, usually a family member, who had been responsible for assembling or reassembling the papers after a previous dispersal, a fonds title was chosen which failed to name the individual concerned" (2009, 55–56). For Douglas, the failure of archival finding aids to accurately represent these histories does a disservice not only to the archives themselves and their users but also to the archival discipline and profession and she urges archivists to expose, rather than conceal, the various agents that have participated in the construction of fonds in their descriptive practices. "It is imperative", she insists, "that we start to more openly acknowledge – in both our theoretical statements and the embodiment of these in archival description – that the archives are a construction built by many hands and formed over time. Instead of hiding the 'constructedness' of the fonds, we must begin to actively embrace it. Honest description is the first step toward that aim" (Douglas 2016, 50).

It is possible to find in the contemporary archival literature ideas about how archival description might take into better account the wider vectoring of forces and objects that impinge on archival aggregations (both personal and organizational) over time. These include revising and expanding the elements included in description standards to allow for a fuller elaboration of the records' history[4] and augmenting standardized descriptions with various kinds of supplementary and parallel texts that provide additional layers of contextualization and highlight archival agency in the fonds' construction and representation.[5] In an effort to capture some sense of the nature and effects of provenancial and custodial complexities I have proposed the incorporation of two additional concepts into the archival discourse on arrangement and description: the first is *custodial bond* – a complementary concept to *archival bond*, which refers to the relations that exist between an aggregation of records and the various custodial authorities that interact with those records over time, including archivists and archival institutions; the second is *archivalterity*, which refers to the acts of continuous and discontinuous change that transform the meaning and authenticity of records as they are transmitted across time and through space (MacNeil 2008). In a related vein, Geoffrey Yeo has argued for the repositioning of fonds and collections as co-existent, rather than contradictory categories of archival aggregation. He argues that the traditional distinction archivists have asserted between "organic" fonds and "artificial" collections is not sustainable and that a more meaningful distinction is that between "conceptual" fonds, whose boundaries are diffuse and overlapping, and "physical"

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[4] See for example, Douglas (2018); Light and Hry (2002); MacNeil (2009); Savoja and Vitali (2008).
[5] See, for example, Cook (2001, esp. 34–35); Dean (2011); Nesmith (2005, esp. 271–72); Velios (2011).

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collections, whose boundaries are defined by their custodial history and materiality. Descriptive practices need to accommodate both the physical and conceptual dimensions of archival aggregations (Yeo 2012). Underpinning all these ideas is an emergent understanding of the constructed nature of archival aggregations and the process of that construction, i.e, the ways in which a web of records and their relationships are formed and re-formed over time.

In this article I have traced the contours of some recent thinking about the nature of literary and autobiographical texts with a view to suggesting how that thinking might illuminate and deepen archival understanding of the nature of personal archives. The contemporary discourses of the new textual scholarship and second-wave lifewriting scholarship are connected through a shared concern with the nature of literary and autobiographical texts as social and performative acts, and a shared interest in identifying and explicating the multiplicity of agents and intentions that come into play in the construction of these texts. Both discourses are broadly in alignment with contemporary archival discourses identifying and explicating the multiple layers of agency implicated in the construction of archival fonds and the complex forms of self-representation found in personal fonds in particular. Positioning the three discourses alongside one another enables us to detect the social and performative contours of personal fonds and, in so doing, complicates and enriches our understanding of personal fonds as autobiographical texts. Such understanding, in turn, can deepen archival scholarship in this area by opening up new lines of inquiry into the historical foundations and evolution of archival thinking about archival arrangement and further points of convergence and divergence among the three discourses. Perhaps most importantly, such understanding can lead to more effective and reflective descriptive practice in the area of personal archives.

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