Of Historicity, Rhetoric: The Archive as Scene of Invention

Biesecker, Barbara A.

Rhetoric & Public Affairs, Volume 9, Number 1, Spring 2006, pp. 124-131
(Article)

Published by Michigan State University Press
DOI: 10.1353/rap.2006.0018

For additional information about this article
http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/rap/summary/v009/9.1biesecker.html
First, an assertion: Whatever else the archive may be—say, an historical space, a political space, or a sacred space; a site of preservation, interpretation, or commemoration—it always already is the provisionally settled scene of our collective invention, of our collective invention of us and of it. To assert this much is, of course, to refuse absolutely the substantial constitution of any “us” or “we” as well as the evidentiary status of any archive, its inherent (by virtue of its “realness”) capacity to guarantee in advance or serve as ultimate arbiter of identity, history, practice, criticism, and theory. To assert this much is also to open the way toward writing a different kind of rhetorical history that will not be governed by the notion of referential plentitude and the motif of truth.

I am quite aware that in claiming that the archive may best be understood as the scene of a doubled invention rather than as the site of a singular discovery, I am challenging a whole set of presumptions that underwrite the lion’s share of critical and theoretical work in the field at the present time. I am also quite aware that it is a good deal more likely that historians of rhetoric will take strong exception to my insisting on the historicity of the archive (its merely appearing to be present in an ontic sense, as material proof of the past) than my insisting upon the historicity of “us” (subjectivity as process rather than subjectivity as presence). Of course the reasons why this is so are multiple, and although a nuanced accounting of them no doubt would deepen our appreciation of the stakes and entailments of our recent return—nearly en masse—to archives of all kinds, for the purposes of this short essay suffice it to note only two. The first reason is the transformation into common sense of the deconstruction of the subject and, more specifically, of all the familiar concepts on which any sense of stable subjects depends: amongst others, origins, autogenesis, presence or consciousness as the self’s being present to itself, and the immediacy of sensation and experience. The second reason, which is actually closely related to the first, is the widespread sense among academics that History—a certain idea of history, the Idea of history or history as the unfolding of the Idea—has come to an end.1 History as a metaphysically animated and unilinear narrative of progress and overcoming is, well, history, and “this

---

Barbara A. Biesecker is Associate Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Iowa in Iowa City.
also consequently means,” as Jean-Luc Nancy passionately put it, “that history can no longer be presented as—to use Lyotard’s term—a ‘grand narrative,’ the narrative of some grand, collective destiny of mankind (of Humanity, of Liberty, etc.), a narrative that was grand because it was great, and that was great, because its ultimate destination was considered good.” Indeed, with the awareness of the resolutely discursive character of ourselves and the radically precarious character of history came the frenzied production of micrological analyses of the past that, at their best, ostensibly delivered a minimally mediated account of a “moment” whose value was understood to be predicated on the presumed stability, materiality, or “givenness” of the archival object and on the researcher’s ability to allow it to speak on its own behalf.

To be sure, I am not alone in worrying our investment in, unbridled enthusiasm for, indeed under-interrogated relationship to the archive. Back in 1985 historiographer Dominick LaCapra admonished against the new archivism’s tendency toward the misrecognition of words as things:

The archive as fetish is a literal substitute for the “reality” of the past which is “always already” lost for the historian. When it is fetishized, the archive is more than the repository of traces of the past which may be used in its inferential reconstruction. It is a stand-in for the past that brings the mystified experience of the thing itself—an experience that is always open to question when one deals with writing or other inscriptions. Nearly 20 years later, in a special 2003 issue of Poetics Today in which theorists and critics who routinely work in archives meditate on the conceptual as well as physical transformations of the archive from antiquity to postmodernity, Renaissance scholar James A. Knapp looks again with suspicion on the revival of archival, material, or ocular proof in cultural history. More specifically, he questions its practitioners’ tendency to bracket suddenly and altogether the problem of mediation, to “retreat into the safety of what Merleau-Ponty termed ‘the perceptual faith,’ a belief in the existence of the material world,” and to grant archival discoveries the evidentiary status of fact. As Knapp astutely observes,

[i]ike Sinfield’s tangible stuff (“it doesn’t get any more material than that”), in the present cultural context it seems that “seeing is believing. . . .” If a return to the things contained in the archive promises relief from the interminable difficulties of interpretive debate, it does so by suggesting that the material artifacts still visible to the historical observer can somehow offer a less-mediated interaction with the past. . . . Plenty has been said about the dangers of overlooking the role of the observer (the subject) in the formation of the historical account at
both the moment of its writing and that of its reception. Similarly, poststruc-
turalist theory has highlighted the radical instability of all objects of study by
pointing out the necessity of mediation at every level of understanding. But
while the historical contingency of subjection and objecthood may be widely
acknowledged, the notion that historical study might yield—or at least approx-
imate—a glimpse of the past as it was remains oddly compelling.  

Oddly compelling, indeed, as what Knapp alludes to here but does not elabo-
rate explicitly on is the suggestion that historical work today follows the for-
mula of fetishistic disavowal: “I know very well that the archive is not the
space of referential plentitude, but still . . .”

It is precisely what we, following Slavoj Žižek, would identify as the sublime
appeal of the archive that Helen Freshwater addresses in an essay that expresses
her considerable unease with the new archivists’ “myth of the fixed historical
record” and the “beguiling fantasy of self-effacement, which seems to promise
the recovery of lost time, the possibility of being reunited with the lost past, and
the fulfillment of our deepest desires for wholeness and completion.” Drawing
upon archaeological theorist Michael Shanks’s book-length inquiry into the
“antiquarian” absorption in the archival object that has superceded an archae-
ological investigation of the past, Freshwater reads “the academic fascination
with the seemingly recoverable past contained within the archive” as “sympto-
matic of a more recent societal obsession” with archives of all sorts (from the
once forgotten and now fading multigenerational family photo album in the
attic to the meticulously managed collections housed in state sponsored and
privately funded institutions). Freshwater urges us to resist the dangerous
“allure of the archive” by persistently reminding ourselves that the archival
object is, as Jacques Derrida explained some time ago, given to us as a trace:

Here the archive’s inherently textual nature must interrupt our blissful
encounter with its contents. During our investigation, we cannot avoid experi-
cencing the familiar problem of all [textual] analysis: the indeterminacy of inter-
pretation that haunts every text. . . . When digging up the details of the past
hidden in the archive, we must remember that we are dealing with the dead. As
Derrida notes, “the structure of the archive is spectral. It is spectral a priori: nei-
ther present nor absent ‘in the flesh,’ neither visible nor invisible, a trace always
referring to another whose eyes can never be met.” Any figures we encounter in
the archive are ghosts, mere shadows of the past. Their actions are complete, and
their original significance will remain undetermined, open to interpretation.

Neither simply absent nor present, but both. For an elaborate explanation of
Freshwater’s judicious invocation of the rather recent Derrida of Archive Fever
who writes of ghosts, I have time only to point the reader in the direction of
the much earlier Derrida of *Margins of Philosophy* whose sustained mediation
on *différance* would serve as a rigorous explication of why the archive as insti-
tuted trace anchors nothing absolutely, and to summarily state that it is in this
sense that history is what is not in the archive, not in any archive, not even in
all the archives added together.10 But if history is what can neither be found in
nor authenticated absolutely by the archive, where does that leave us? On the
way toward (im)posing one answer to this question, I want briefly to revisit
the *Enola Gay* controversy, reading in that now infamous “history war” an
object lesson in the radical indeterminacy of the archive as the opening onto
the vicissitudes of rhetoric, here taken not only or even primarily as the irre-
ducibly tropological nature of all historical work but, rather, in its strict sense
as the art of persuasion.

On January 30, 1995, and at the behest of 81 members of Congress, the Air
Force Association, and the American Legion, Smithsonian secretary I. Michael
Heyman canceled the National Air and Space Museum’s planned 50th-
anniversary exhibit of the historic flight of the *Enola Gay*. Coupled with the
cancellation of “The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War
II,” conceptualized under Martin Harwit’s directorship, was the promise that
another exhibit would take its place. In less than six months Heyman’s display,
titled simply “The *Enola Gay*,” opened to the public.

For all their differences there was one point on which both parties to the
controversy over how to display the *Enola Gay* in the nation’s most frequented
museum could agree: namely, that “The *Enola Gay*”’s near-complete absent-
ing of the devastation at ground zero was a difference between the two
exhibits that mattered. For Harwit and his team, who understood themselves
to be “responsible for portraying [the historic flight of the *Enola Gay*] accu-
rately and truthfully” as well as champions of the exhibit who would enter the
fray several years later and speak publicly on its behalf, photographs of the
already dead or dying were the key archival evidence on which the balance of
the exhibit hinged.11 Without them, there would be nothing to counter the
*Enola Gay*’s sublime effects. However, to the opposition the matter looked
altogether different. According to veterans, military historians, members of
Congress, and journalists who pushed for the cancellation of “The Last Act,”
the supposed “shock and awe” effect of the sheer presence of Superfortress
and, thus, the need to provide “balance” by incorporating photographs of
what took place beneath the mushroom cloud was a ruse. First, as Colonel
Paul Tibbets emphatically argued, because its size and weight prohibited dis-
play of the fully assembled B-29 in the National Air and Space Museum
(NASM), the presentation of the forward fuselage—“without wings, engines
and propellers, landing gear and tail assembly”—would not pay due homage
to the historic aircraft but, instead, enhance “the aura of evil in which [it was] being cast.” Second, in light of the literal and figurative mutilation of the plane that Tibbets and other veterans took as a sacrilege of the sacred icon, the incorporation of photographic images taken of ground zero promised to deliver one thing only: a gross distortion of history that would inevitably provoke a crisis of national conscience and, thus, promote anti-American sentiment. Unlike the director and the curators for whom the photographs would undoubtedly lend “balance” to the exhibit, those opposing it were deeply troubled by their irreducibly obfuscating and ideological effects.

But exactly what made all those involved so certain that the truth of the historical exhibition hinged on the inclusion or exclusion of those photographic images? What guaranteed that those bodies or, more precisely, their material traces were, to turn Judith Butler’s phrase, bodies that would always already matter to patrons of the exhibit? Counter-intuitively, perhaps, I want to suggest that they were not. Indeed, I want to call into question the presumption on both sides of the debate that the incorporation into the exhibit of these bits of the archive would inevitably prompt patrons to question—rightly or wrongly—the official historical narrative sanctioning the dropping of the bombs.

That archival photographs or footage of the human suffering caused by the dropping of the bombs need not necessarily produce a crisis of American collective consciousness and conscience is, in fact, borne out by recent U.S. cultural history itself. On Memorial Day 2002, little more than ten years after the Enola Gay controversy began, NBC aired Price for Peace. Although the cultural cottage industry about World War II that emerged out of its golden anniversary had attended almost exclusively to the European campaigns, what was most striking about this prime-time two-hour special was not its singular focus on the Pacific theater. Even more remarkable was its unabashed inclusion of the kind of images that had caused so much trouble for Harwitt and his team at NASM a decade before and the kind of images that Heyman’s surrogate exhibit avoided altogether. Indeed, Price for Peace did not leave the human cost of the blasts at Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the imagination of its viewers but brought it squarely into the living room of thousands of U.S. households. In a full segment of the program (seventh out of eight) on the atomic bomb and “the end of the war,” audiences not only saw iconic footage of the mushroom clouds rising over both cities from above (not incidentally, with corresponding text at the bottom of the screen indicating the date of the drop and approximate casualty figures, 140,000 for the former and 74,000 for the latter), they also got a graphic look at what had taken place from below. Following sustained panoramic footage of the leveled landscape come five vivid and lingering close-ups of Japanese civilians maimed by the blast. Moreover, in this segment of the film the representation of the five women and
children whose mutilated bodies metonymically stand in for thousands of others is prefaced by the inclusion of yet another civilian, Mr. Sakita, a Japanese eyewitness and survivor of the drop on Nagasaki, who gives voice to human suffering as the mushroom cloud begins to take shape on the screen.

More might be said about Mr. Sakita’s return in the final segment of the documentary wherein he speaks passionately about his suffering from radiation poisoning, multiple surgeries, and a compulsion toward suicide that is checked only by a commitment “to abolish nuclear weapons,” a “cause” that “gives [him] a reason to live.” And more might also be said about the inclusion of competing views—albeit strictly bifurcated along American and Japanese lines—on whether a Japanese surrender would have come sooner or later had the bombs never been dropped or dropped in an unpopulated area so as to issue a warning without killing tens of thousands of Japanese civilians. And even more might be said about how this film, in striking contrast to Harwit’s canceled exhibit, not only does not address Japanese aggression and brutality between 1930 and 1945 at length but also only mentions the Bataan death march once, never raised the ire of veterans. Indeed, despite candid admissions by World War II vets who testify over the course of the film that “the only thing that we wanted to see the Japanese was dead,” that “It was very easy to shoot a Jap, believe me,” that “I don’t care if it had been a woman, child, baby, I could shoot,” that “we didn’t mind shooting them in the back either,” *Price for Peace* is never charged with having sought, wittingly or otherwise, to produce anti-American sentiment. By Memorial Day 2002 it appears to be the case that those images of ground zero no longer signify in the same way as they did a decade before. That the visual and verbal representation of the carnage created by the dropping of the bombs will not necessarily cast a dark shadow on the national self-image finds additional support in the recent use to which *Price for Peace* has been put. On the 56th anniversary of the Normandy invasion (June 6, 2000), the 70,500-square-foot D-Day Museum opened its doors to the public. Founded by Stephen Ambrose in 1991 and located in New Orleans in honor of Andrew Higgins, the museum’s exhibit space is organized into two main installations. Not coincidentally, *Price for Peace* is shown at regular intervals each day and serves as the preface to patrons’ self-guided tour through the exhibit on the war in the Pacific.

Now the point of tracking this intertextual chain is not only to document the extent to which things changed between July 23, 1992, when World War II veteran W. Burr Bennett Jr. began his letter-writing campaign on behalf of “the proud display of the *Enola Gay*,”¹⁴ and May 27, 2002, when Tom Brokaw hosted the Memorial Day prime-time network presentation of *Price for Peace*. More important than noticing that the archival “evidence” of Japanese civilian casualties that had aroused partisan passions in the early nineties did not do
so a decade later is to understand why. That is to say, the detection of this significant shift need not be taken as the terminal point of an historical inquiry but may instead be read as pointing the way toward the critical analysis of the processes by which that difference has been produced: What happened over the course of a single decade such that the photographs whose “referential plentitude” had provoked a public controversy of near epic proportion (resulting in the unprecedented cancelation of an exhibit, the resignation of the director of the most frequented museum in the country, and U.S. Senate hearings on future management guidelines for the Smithsonian Institution) appear since then to have lost their power of counter-hegemonic address? To what are we to attribute the dramatic alteration of their effects?

Given the limited space allotted to me, answers to these specific questions will have to wait for another day. In the place of a demonstration, then, an assertion, not unlike the one with which I began. As I see it from here, which is to say, from within an intimate relation to one archive, scholars of persuasive speech have not yet begun robustly to engage the entailments of the archive’s irreducible undecidability even though we are uniquely positioned to do so, given that the deconstruction of “fact” or of referential plentitude does not reduce the contents of the archive to “mere” literature or fiction (this is the most common and silliest of mistakes) but delivers that content over to us as the elements of rhetoric. Indeed, from the historicity of the archive, rhetorics; out of the deconstruction of the material presence of the past and, thus, in relation to what the archive cannot authenticate absolutely but can (be made to) authorize nonetheless, issues an invitation to write rhetorical histories of archives, which is to say, critical histories of the situated and strategic uses to which archives have been put.

Notes


13. See, for example, air force historian and Director of the Center for Air Force History Richard Hallion’s letter to Harwit in which he writes, “Unit (400) of the exhibit, [dealing with the aftermath of the bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki], strikes me as possibly tasteless. I am not opposed to selective photographs that show graphic injury or damage—but the power of a broken person is overwhelming, and may leave visitors with the mistaken impression that nearly all victims of the Pacific were Japanese.” Quoted in Harwit, An Exhibit Denied, 203.