

The Politics of the Archive

by Jaime Kirtz

I begin with the question: what are the politics of space (i.e. public and private) and how do they emerge in the university? How is it related to the archive?

The politics of space have long been discussed throughout different academic disciplines from political economy to architecture to visual arts. The history of the politics of space is established in the book, *The Politics of Space and Play*, with the first sentence through which the authors state: "in a world characterized by deep-seated, growing inequalities and highly asymmetrical concentrations of wealth and power, it hardly seems necessary to insist that the spaces through which we move and the places in which we live are thoroughly political, if not always explicitly politicized" (Clewer et al. 2012). However, the authors make a salient point for continuing this discussion: namely, that while space is always politicized, it is also always in flux (Clewer et al. 2012). Thus, as globalization becomes an omnipresent political force in our society and culture, which results in tensions with democracy and nationalistic discourse, the idea of borders and delineated spaces are bound up in these tensions. The role of the border between Canada and the USA is no longer a space that builds connections between countries but rather a space of surveillance, tactics, and reinforcement of certain ideological principles regarding citizenship and national identity. The heart of this shift lies in the slippages, interpenetrations and reconfigurations between the public and private, which ultimately help construct and are constructed by culture. Thus, as the public becomes privatized, seen through the privatization of police, military and border forces through contract companies in the United States, the demarcations of space and ownership are less available to the public.

Accessibility and ownership have become key terms in many socio-cultural-political debates surrounding the privatization of the public, both in government structures and universities. The space of the university itself has changed to models based upon efficiency, progress and notoriety, as Russell Jacoby discusses in *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture In the Age of Academe*. With this shift has come changes to the types of research, the researchers produced by the academy and even the physical spaces in which this research and learning takes place. There are numerous possibilities for discussion regarding the university and accessibility from the open access movement in academic publishing to admission standards and class dynamics; however, what is often overlooked critically are the spaces in which space itself is highly politicized and often at a high premium. Many studies have examined the role of archives in libraries and their efficiency. Archives present an interesting moment in the university, specifically with the digital revolution in libraries that seek to preserve documents by digitizing them in order to save space, among other concerns such as staffing and funding. Library Studies and Digital Humanities have addressed or attempted to address these issues surrounding preservation and accumulation of material in digital format. This multifaceted issue, which has a productive yet tense relationship with the neoliberal interests of the university, is space of creativity, innovation, consumption, exclusivity and power.

But what about the archives that are not official library spaces or are outside the basic digitization model? Archives such as the Residual Media Depot and the Media Archaeology Lab are sites of intersection between public access, collective knowledge, private space and gender constructs that all contribute, are produced by and work against the privatization of the university and its long term effects. Jonathan Sterne provides an ethnographic account of his encounters with the archives and media history in "Rearranging the Files: On

Interpretation in Media History.” This article demystifies and argues for interpretation as an active, self-reflexive method for addressing historical artifacts that are in conversation with one another (2010). Sterne notes that historical artifacts, such as the MP3, “are already not the history they described, and so it is up to us to find linkages across documents, registers, genres, and problems to give history meaning and intelligibility for ourselves and our readers,” thus providing a model of interpretation that draws on interdisciplinary and non-traditional archival objects in order to produce a deeper meaning (2010). Therefore in acknowledging the importance presence of the archiver/researcher, and moving with the problem of agency, an examination of the spaces in which researchers, such as Jonathan Sterne, Lori Emerson and Darren Wershler, work and create illustrate the importance of space and its politics. Spaces must exist to foment thinking that creates Sterne’s “linkages,” and these spaces like the Residual Media Depot are shaped in ways in which political, social, economic and cultural assemblages are both conscious and unconscious with a variety of effects (which I plan to question/find).

What I propose is examining what is the politics of the archive are, specifically regarding the public and private dynamic. Further how are archives connected to play, progress and efficiency and what are the interactions between these concepts through the archive, such as the Residual Media Depot & the Media Archaeology Lab? What role does accessibility, specifically through concepts of gender and class, take in shaping the archive and consequential constructs in academic life? How does design reinforce, perpetuate or subvert the private/public allocations of the archive seen through the Residual Media Depot and the Media Archaeology Lab and how does this influence identity and representation of gender and gender performance?

Works Cited

Clewer, N., Elsey, D., Certoma, C. (2012). *The Politics of Space and Place*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

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