

FINDING CHILDREN'S CREATIONS IN THE ARCHIVES: METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR SCHOLARS

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FOR THE past few years, my research has centred on interpreting the writing of anonymous children from the past. My first project related to this came about from an accidental find. While I was viewing two archival manuscript collections from the estate of two authors of juvenile fiction, I found that each of these authors had kept all of the fan mail they had received from children, along with the envelopes. All of the letters were written by elementary school students from North America in the 1970s and 1980s. Analysing hundreds of these letters, I argued that children used rhetorically savvy techniques to play with the formal genre of letter writing and close the distance—both physically and figuratively—between themselves and the authors to whom they wrote (60).

This project began my preoccupation with studying historical children through their creations, including writing and going beyond that into scribbles, tracings, drawings, and colourings. While most scholarship within the field of juvenilia studies has focused on the creations that famous adults made as children, my work has been dedicated to the nameless, everyday, and often anonymous child. I resonate with the description that queer theorist Elizabeth Freeman offers when she explains her interest in the most un-famous historical actors, whom she calls “the archive’s stray dogs” (xii). As she also notes, Michel Foucault similarly went into the archives looking for the most obscure lives, hoping to find traces of the “lightning-existences” (78) that flash so briefly.

Since that first article, I have conducted many studies on anonymous children’s marginalia, school work, and other creations. In doing so, I have come to see that anyone who hopes to do this work is faced with severe methodological obstacles. When studying children of the past, scholars must locate their primary sources within

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archival collections, wherein an institution has preserved something for the historical record. In the North American context at least, the historical record consists primarily of things created by the government and by important individuals, who are nearly entirely adults. When searching for small traces of children that may have made it into these adult collections, scholars are then faced with bibliographic obstacles, given that *age status* is rarely a major keyword in archival records. This type of inquiry becomes even more difficult for scholars who are seeking more specific sources, such as the work of a child from a particular region or race.

Some have suggested that this type of research is impossible. Laura Tisdall, a historian of childhood, notes how often historians have asserted that they cannot easily write the history of childhood, not due to lack of interest but precisely because of this research problem. Without the evidence available through archival sources, a child's own experience and perspective are unavailable to contemporary researchers, and many in the field have given into the belief that "it was not possible to find children in the archive" (959). Other scholars play with creative methodological solutions to this source problem, such as gathering sources from material culture (959) rather than a traditional archive. For example, Tammy Charelle-Owens had to rethink what her methodology might look like when faced with methodological limitations to her study of Black girlhood during the era of American slavery. Since the kind of child she was searching for has been "relegated to the lonely margins of the absolutely unsearchable" (385), Charelle-Owens is able to do her research only by forgoing the traditional archive in favour of reading things like popular novels more critically, as historical sources.

While these obstacles in the research process are genuine, juvenilia studies has no choice but to work within archives to locate the creations of children of the past. Many in the field have pointed out the importance of this work: Anna Mae Duane, for instance, argues that children's ideas and feelings are necessary to "understanding social, political, national, and ethnic structures" (1) of the world at large. Others, like Christine Alexander, have suggested that juvenilia studies does not even need to serve grand purposes but can "value youthful writing for its own sake" (42). In any case, those in juvenilia studies are dedicated to interpreting the creations of children of the past; before that is possible, each of us is under methodological pressure to locate what is nearly impossible to find (unless we are to rely on the limited number of known archives that collect work by children who are already famous), and we cannot rely exclusively on chance encounters like my fan mail find.

For these reasons, I offer here a methodological discussion that provides both insight into why archives are structured the way they are and ways to work within these structures to locate things created by children. In addition to being a scholar within childhood studies, I am also a professor of archival science and a former archivist and librarian. Archives absolutely *do* have things created by children—often by accident and not purposeful acquisition— and I believe that scholars are aided in locating these things when they have a better understanding of how archives work,

better ways of wading through adult-created detritus to find juvenilia. In the following pages, I offer an introduction to archives, their limitations related to children's materials, and creative search strategies for archival research.

What Makes It into the Archives

PROFESSIONAL archivists and humanists who do archival research do not always use the term *archive* in the same way. Archivists use the term to refer to a place where records are held, typically a special collections library. Many archives and special collections libraries are housed at universities, but some are government-run, such as the Library and Archives of Canada in Ottawa. Some are privately run, such as The Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, DC. Unlike professional archivists, many humanists use the term *archive* in more abstract ways. Writing about how the archival turn impacted scholarship, art historian Sara Callahan explains that this turn “involved a simultaneous *inflation* and *conflation* of the archive: the term was used with much more frequency and its meaning dramatically expanded as it became a stand-in for a range of different collections, theoretical notions, and ideas” (75). The term’s proliferation deteriorates the precision of its meaning; some have said that the Earth is an archive, the body is an archive, and, perhaps most misleading, that “the archive” is an amorphous structure floating out in the world for us to grab historical sources from. One thing archivists and humanists will likely agree on, however, is that we can blame Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida for making the term so popular.

Recontextualising the term *archive* away from its most literal meaning has resulted in a lack of understanding, among humanities scholars, of what actual archives hold, why they hold it, how they describe it, and how to search within them. Archival science scholars Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah Torres named this skillset archival intelligence. For example, scholars should be aware that within archives there exist smaller designations of specific collections of documents, which are called *archival collections*. Within archival collections there exist individual items that might be called documents, records, materials, works, or creations. At this point in time, any of these terms could refer to traditional paper-based materials as well as born-digital materials. In the context of juvenilia studies, archives are most likely to hold paper-based records that children created, likely in the forms of drawings, poems, school assignments, letters, diaries, and similar artifacts. These individual items are the hard-to-locate sources many of us are after.

Archives are most likely to hold the kinds of things that users expect from the historical record, such as government records, the personal estate material of acclaimed writers, and documentation from former institutions such as businesses and churches. However, archival priorities vary and continue to change; across North America, the field of archival science is a rather new profession that has evolved along with changing societal priorities. The National Archives of Canada were only officially

formed in 1912 (Wilson 16), while the national archives of the United States were made official in the 1930s (Jimerson 236). Before official repositories were formed, many archives were largely made up of what historians and other individuals had collected themselves, often for their own research area, or as part of their interest in collecting important documents of the ruling elite (236). There are many places across the world where archives still do not exist or are not maintained.

This historical context helps explain why most archives largely contain the traditionally collected documents of government and business materials, documents of famous people and events, and specialised collections created by researchers themselves and also why this trend has been shifting for decades. As archival theorist Terry Cook explains, archives originally set out to safeguard the “documentary ‘Truth’ of the modern world” (100), meaning that archivists were meant to act as objective liaisons between materials and researchers. Today, however, while securing evidence is still an archival priority, the field also sees its role as preserving and creating memory (101). Contemporary archivists largely understand their job duties as subjective tasks, noting that it is impossible to merely collect and protect “truth.” Naturally, this subjectivity has impacted collecting decisions, with many archival institutions now collecting materials created by marginal people and communities, such as Indigenous populations, tribal nations, and others whose viewpoints are underrepresented in traditional historical narratives.

Given that the field of archival science has the immense responsibility of collecting everything needed for the historical record—even as that record expands in all directions—the field is rich with debates about how to represent various epistemologies within collections and how to preserve various formats, from analogue to digital. Some archival theorists, for example, have taken issue with the fact that most archives are text-heavy, when we live in a world in which images are just as important (Schwartz 142–71). Other debates include how best to create processes for collecting that are more democratic than the processes of the past; developing such processes means considering the desires of communities and citizens when deciding what to collect, rather than letting archivists curate collections alone (Cook 116).

Relevant to juvenilia studies, some scholars have pointed out that though archives have expanded their collecting, there is a lack of attention to children's documentation within the historical record. What is a history of civilization that does not contain a universal aspect of human experience itself? The arguments remain foundational, targeting things that might seem obvious for juvenilia scholars. For example, Anna Sparrman, Victoria Hoyle, and Johanna Sjöberg argue that one important first step is to convince archives that children are “producers of material cultural heritage” (207). Others emphasise that children need to be seen as historical actors in their membership within “families, institutions, and societies” (Freeman and Kuecker 755). Karen Sánchez-Eppler has argued that having materials from children is only part of the issue; in her view, the more relevant problem is that what does exist

in archives is accidentally obscured from view due to the way archives and special collections libraries classify materials (“Archives” 221). These arguments are indeed foundational, as the place of children within archives continues to be an area of debate.

Children’s Creations in the Archival Context

THE PROCESS of creating and preserving the cultural works of creators is an intergenerational one, given that children cannot reasonably archive their own materials and that, perhaps more interestingly, it is our children who inherit our archival decisions. Juvenilia scholar Juliet McMaster argues something similar, though she is addressing a child’s ability to produce works when she notes that children are always at the mercy of adults to the extent that they “can’t always go out and purchase their own writing materials—paper, pens, ink, and especially a blank book to write in” (72). Writing is a material practice that begins with materials themselves. In other words, there are certain conditions that must be met—largely controlled by adults—in order for children to create. Children are equally at the mercy of adults when it comes to the preservation of their cultural production. Adults control what goes into archives and what will be represented there. For this reason, ironically, archiving is always already an act of passing down something to our children. Archival theorist Brien Brothman argues that “archivists are engaged in the practice of deciding how and what is to be saved for, bequeathed to, our children,” and he asks, “What will our children, the post-present generation, read of/receive from us?” (205). In other words, we, as adults, have the responsibility of deciding what to pass on. Do we choose to leave our children only the cultural production of adults or also representations from their own age group?

In many cases, there is little distinction between collections of adult and child creations within archives, either in their ordering or in their cataloguing. Children’s cultural productions are often found as traces of the child among the accumulations of adults. The adults were the ones who decided that something of the child’s was worth keeping among their own papers, making the decision to delay the decay or destruction of those items. If these materials are transferred to an archive, the child’s creations make their way there among the adult’s things. Archivists tend to not disturb the ordering of collections and will keep most of the materials intact, thus allowing the child to slip her way into the archive by accident. Archival collections are most often distinguished by whoever did the collecting, not necessarily whoever created each item within the collection. This detail helps explain how traces of children often wind up in archival collections of notable people without being specifically sought out by the archive itself.

In the case of my research study of fan mail, both of the two authors of juvenile fiction whose archives I studied kept the letters children wrote to them, but these

were kept among manuscripts and drafts of their books, receipts and letters from their publishers, and promotional materials from their book releases. In some cases, the letters were sent after a child read their books and wanted to reach out to the authors. In other cases, the children wrote letters after the authors visited their schools. In other words, the archive did not necessarily want the fan mail letters written by children, specifically. They wanted the accumulation of documents belonging to the two adult people who assembled these two archival collections. The fact that children's letters are held in the archives in both these cases is purely because some adults wanted to hold onto the children's items among their own things. It is the adults who are historically important, as authors, and therefore they were able to dictate what was worthy of keeping. The letters are written by anonymous children and only earned their place within an archive as plus-one guests earn their places at weddings.

This example demonstrates why, most of the time, children's creations are going to be veiled from view because they are incidental to a larger collection that emphasises the creator of that collection, the adult. As Sánchez-Eppler points out, this is precisely why juvenilia studies and childhood studies scholars face obstacles in conducting archival research: "child-focused research is hindered by bibliographic and classificatory conventions that have rarely considered age a salient category" ("Geographies" 42). This is not necessarily because of some problem with archives but is indeed related to larger scholarly problems with interpreting, categorising, and describing children's production. As she explains, "we hardly even have names for the genres of childhood production, nor any sense of the prevalence of different sorts of child-made things, nor even clear guidelines for how to identify whether or not something was actually made by a child" ("Geographies" 43). Usefully, her way of seeing this problem suggests a multidisciplinary issue that is of concern to both archivists and child-focused scholars.

Practical Ideas for Finding Children's Materials in Archives

UNDERSTANDING how archives function and, more specifically, how children's creations make it into archives is helpful in searching for such materials. Within archives, the person who has created the collection is called the "creator," even if they did not create every single item within the collection itself. The creator of an archival collection is the one who amassed the documents that made it into the collection. One way to think of this is through an example of archival correspondence: Nathaniel Hawthorne's archival collection is going to have the letters that Herman Melville sent to him, but it will be called Nathaniel Hawthorne's papers, with Nathaniel Hawthorne being given credit as "creator" of the entire collection. Still, Herman Melville's letters will be within it, given that Hawthorne is the one who kept them, not Melville. Because of this practice of naming archives after their collectors, children are at the

mercy of adults, who usually serve these roles as “creators” of collections. The more notable the creator, the more likely their work will be saved. The more they keep of children’s work, the more likely that their status as an important adult will aid in the preservation of that which they kept.

Making matters more complicated, archival materials are not catalogued in the same way that library books are. While every book may have its own record that we can access via the catalogue, most archival materials are described in relatively narrative formats within a type of document called a finding aid. Finding aids are documents that an archivist writes with the goal of compiling information about an entire collection, rather than individual items. They must contain certain kinds of information, such as the creator(s) (the person or persons who did the collecting), biographical information about the creator(s), the date range of the items within the collection, a description of the general types of materials in the collection, and often some more details about the content of the collection at a box or folder level. A finding aid represents the archivists’ best attempts at representing a collection in written form; however, some finding aids go into minute detail, whereas others are quite minimal.

Searching archives, then, typically involves searching within finding aids, but in many cases, the keywords of *children* or *child* will not be present in the finding aid for a collection that contains the work of children. Even when these keywords are present, the ages of people whose work is contained within the collection is rarely noted. Therefore it is important to come up with search strategies that rely on more than just those obvious keywords. This requires thinking broadly about the context of children’s lives and how they may show up in the historical record. Below, I list several types of archival collections that often contain children’s creations. I also provide examples of successful research in which children’s creations were found in these types of collections, and ways to go about searching for them.

Family Papers

Family papers are records created by a group of people who are connected through ancestry or through personal affairs (Society of American Archivists). Many scholars likely come across family papers by searching specifically for a family name or for an individual who is named within a family paper collection. Even if a scholar is not searching for a famous person or family, they still might find things within a collection useful for juvenilia studies. Family papers often contain references to children, but they may not show up when someone searched the collections using terms like *child* or *youth*. To search such collections well, use family relational terms, such as *son* and *daughter*.

It is also worth noting that many family papers contain information or documents related to people outside of the family. For example, plantation-owning families in the United States often contain references to enslaved

people who are documented within the collection, sometimes even referred to as “property.” Some of these individuals who were enslaved may be children, making for complex research.

For example, in one of my studies of marginalia created by children, my graduate student and collaborator, Zoe Thomas, visited a regional historical collection in Durham, North Carolina to browse family papers collections. She found success in several instances, including a family papers collection that held photographs, postcards, and family books belonging to the Mangum and Latta families between late 1900 and 1915. While the finding aid for this collection does not mention marginalia or children's creations, it does mention that children and siblings have presence in the records: “Some are formal portraits, particularly of Hugh Latta, Phillips Latta, and Garland Latta as children, and some are snapshots of the Latta children, their mother Pattie Mangum Latta, and her siblings, Lula and Hugh Mangum” (Mangum and Latta Family Papers). This signaled to Zoe that the collection may have other traces of those children. She located drawings of flowers within the pages of their school books, scribbles, writings, annotations, underlines, and other marginalia made by the girls during childhood (Kuecker, Grotewiel, Thomas 136). These traces of the children provided insight into what the girls studied, how they interacted with their textbooks and family books, and the ways they used books as scrap paper, among other things. Yet the finding aid said nothing of these juvenile marginalia.

Institutions, Clubs, and Businesses Children Frequent

In the most traditional sense, archives hold the transactions of businesses, institutions, and governments, and they have done so across the world for several centuries (Duranti 247). When placed into an archive, documents gain the status of being authentic and stable, preserved as evidence (251). While most humanities scholars have made use of the papers of authors and artists, they may be less likely to think that institutional collections do not seem as relevant to humanistic inquiry.

In the case of finding traces of children from the past, however, archival collections related to institutions hold good potential for containing child-created materials because they are plentiful and wide-ranging. Given that children are at the mercy of adults when it comes to having their documents saved, one strong search strategy is to not only search directly for children but to also search for collections based on institutions with which children interact.

One example of this can be found in Mona Gleason's exploration of letters written by young people that were collected and preserved in the provincial archives of British Columbia. Between the first and second World Wars, the government of British Columbia created a school that operated via

mail, called the Elementary Correspondence School (Gleason 765). In other words, these letters are an early form of what we now call distance education. Within the collection, Gleason located letters written by children (and their parents), representing rural experiences of Western Canada, all saved because they were part of a government program. Interestingly, these letters not only represent an understudied location and aspect of history, but they also show us the way children of that time and place wrote letters and how they corresponded with their far-off teachers. As Gleason notes, “reading historical documents against the adult grain is to offer alternative interpretations that prioritize the experience of children and youth” (766).

Other institutional archives that scholars may wish to investigate to locate traces of children include searching for collections of churches, temples, religious organizations, residential schools, experimental schools, vocational schools, long-running summer camps, welfare programs, foster care organizations, toy companies, children’s magazine and publishing houses, and non-profit agencies.

It is important to note, however, that a lot of what is kept in archives related to children, especially archives held in government and institutional collections, is related to historical events and atrocities (Kuecker 53) and may therefore centre on traumatic experiences. Such research, as historian Jack Hodgson discovered when conducting archival research with children’s writings from the Whittier State School in California, can be extremely distressing (774). Common record types related to this include documentation of and by Indigenous children forcibly placed in residential schooling, abused children who interact with social services, children held in internment and concentration camps, and children who participated in psychological research and therapies.

Researcher Data Collections

Another common type of archival collection that contains children’s documents is collections accumulated by researchers and scholars in the process of doing their work. Many times, researchers who had a long tenure, and a great deal of scholarly production at university or college, will leave their personal writings and research data to the school. Among their manuscripts, awards, personal correspondence, and other such documents, they often leave things like interview transcripts, recordings from participants, and any other data collected in the conduct of their research.

Among such creators of archival collections are researchers who study children through soliciting their artwork and writings, and these artifacts can then be studied as juvenilia. For example, Christopher Schulte, a professor of art education, has published on a collection of children’s drawings he found within Penn State University Libraries’ Special Collections unit. These

drawings were accumulated by a psychologist, Dale B. Harris, who researched children's intelligence by prompting them through illustration (788).

These drawings were of particular interest because they were obtained during the 1940s and featured children's drawings (and supplementary writing) about the Second World War. The children were Midwestern American elementary school students who drew war scenes, used ethnic slurs, and narrated the war in ways that, as Schulte notes, made sense to them. Significantly, these kinds of drawings—and other similar research data that children created—can be studied on their own even when we are not devoting our research to the person who actually gathered the materials from children. While their research provides a useful context, art such as Schulte analyses also stands on its own as interesting traces of children's documentation of their world.

It is also important to note that when it comes to researcher data and the work of children, some of the materials we might come across will take us to the limits of privacy and ethics. I have personally encountered records that contained upsetting details about children's experiences, such as writings about abuse and neglect by their parents; uncomfortable descriptions and decisions made by medical and psychiatric researchers; and personal details about children from the past that would currently fall within record privacy laws. One reason for this is that research ethics is a contemporary concept that has not been universally practised across time and place. Additionally, some records are so old that they are no longer under the purview of privacy restrictions. Further, it is possible to feel that we are viewing something deeply personal and private, even when that child is officially anonymised, meaning that research data that exists without the name of the participant can satisfy ethical guidelines and still appear like a violation of privacy to those of us who encounter the data in an archive. To be sure, I have also encountered incredibly insightful writing and ideas by children and supportive researchers who collaborated beautifully and ethically with their child participants.

In searching for such materials, the terms *children*, *child*, *minor*, and *juvenile* are often useful. In addition, however, designations related to demographics can also be useful, such as *gifted* and *elementary school*. Searching for specific kinds of genres that may be products created during research with children can also be fruitful, such as *drawing*, *illustration*, and *test*. I have also found that searching for creator types that are commonly related to research with children is a strong strategy, such as *professor of education*, *teacher*, and *psychology*.

Formats, Genres, and Mediums of Childhood

Finally, it can be useful to search for things children created by thinking about genre types that are often associated with children, rather than terms related

to people and institutions. Even simple terms like *drawing*, *finger paint*, *game*, and *song* can lead us to children, as they are avid creators in such mediums.

One of my favourite examples of this is a genre that I realised was the nearly-exclusive purview of children: *letters to Santa Claus*. As a search term this is delightful because I have searched it in many repositories, and while I sometimes come up with nothing, I often come up with something. When I do, it is often in a surprising collection that I may have not found otherwise. For example, the State Archives of North Carolina is largely devoted to collecting government records, as are many state and provincial repositories. Yet I entered “letters to Santa Claus” in the search bar for this archival institution and came across a selection of letters to Santa Claus from 1932.

These letters were a remarkable find, to me, because they are contained within an account book of the Thomas H. Briggs and Sons Inc. Hardware Company, which spans 1865 to 1932. The letters come mostly from Raleigh, NC, with one from Norfolk, VA. They are from the Great Depression, and contain the requests of needy children, along with a fine illustration of Santa himself. Under no circumstances would I have ever thought that a hardware store would be an institution worth searching for children’s materials; and under no circumstance would I have ever gone into an account book to find something a child may have left behind. But because I searched for this child-dominated genre, I located incredible juvenilia of unknown children in the most surprising place. This search term is a boon for anyone who enjoys treasure hunts like this.

I HAVE come to understand that those of us who conduct research on the creations of historical children are used to methodological complexity. The subjects of our research are some of the most ubiquitous—we all are children for a time—but also the most fleeting and maligned. We search for things created by an ephemeral population of people, who are also largely considered “human *becomings*, rather than human beings” (Clark, 11), and thus barely legible as part of the records of humanity’s past. In a world in which cultural heritage institutions still must be convinced that children are producers of cultural heritage, we are often at the whim of happy accidents, in which children snuck into the archive alongside an important adult.

I forecast that the research obstacles facing juvenilia studies and related childhood studies scholars are only going to become more complex. While this article addresses the kinds of child-created materials that current scholars in the field may be looking for when they imagine historical sources, future scholars will also be able to imagine historical sources that were created digitally. Not only will many of these creations be locked within the software in which they were created but they may also be behind a password, locked on a device, or too digitally decayed to save. For those who eventually research the historical child of the twentieth-century, many of these research techniques will be irrelevant.

This article is one way to contribute to a methodological conversation that many of us who focus on children's creations from the past often have in person, in passing, during conferences, and in the classroom. For those of us who work with juvenilia, it is not only what we produce with our inquiry but also how we go about our inquiry—working against what some call impossible archival obstacles—that is at once so frustrating and so satisfying. I hope this helps someone find something they are looking for. I hope it also helps explain some of the ways archives work so that we can speak outside of our discipline, directly to the archivists who make collection decisions, describe the collections, and bear the responsibility of predicting what kinds of materials will be important to future researchers.

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