Archival labyrinth: words, things and bodies in epistemic formation

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ABSTRACT
Examining research conducted by the author in 2006, 2007 and 2017 at Yale University’s Manuscripts and Archives, and focused particularly on letters as interlocutors and informants, this article demonstrates the ways in which archival research is ethnographic and labyrinthine. Situated in science and technology studies, and drawing on the work of Karen Barad and Tim Ingold, archival research is posited less as discoverable clues and lost traces than as threads of inquiry bursting with possibility, uncertainty and potential for sense making. In the process of working in the archival labyrinth, the researcher, the works and the archive are transformed.

KEYWORDS
Peru; archives; letters; ethnography; affect

The archivization produces as much as it records the event. (Jacques Derrida, Archive Fever)

Archives. Before I stepped foot in one, I thought of them as repositories. They stored and kept safe papers, postcards, photographs and other miscellany related to a noteworthy person or institution’s life. Questions might be answered by archived documents. Hidden stories might be brought to life. Facts might even be unearthed. The scholar whose work relied on archives might even conceive of the pursuit as an expedition to discover, hunting for that diamond that might transform and reveal our understanding of the past. The scholar who thought that, however, would be wrong.

In this paper, I draw on research I conducted on Hiram Bingham’s three scientific expeditions to Peru (1911, 1912 and 1914–1915) at Yale University’s Manuscripts and Archives in 2006, 2007 and 2017. I do so to conceptualize archival research less as fact-finding and more as ethnography. I examine the way in which my theoretical foundation in science and technology studies (STS) and ethnographic sensibility, gained from previous fieldwork to Peru, informed my initial reading of Hiram Bingham’s papers and then ultimately intervened in the project’s direction. In particular, I focus on the making of one chapter from my book Framing a Lost City: Science, Photography and the Making of Machu Picchu called “Epistolary Science.” I do so to examine how the direction and conclusions evolved, both materially and imaginatively, in situ and virtually, through what I
consider the archival labyrinth. In analyzing my experience in the archive and the initial argument of the book’s chapter, I revisit some threads, often leaving them loose, concluding that the chapter’s “findings” were produced out of, and through, my engagement with the archival labyrinth. Drawing on the work of Tim Ingold and Karen Barad, I argue that letters are unique materials allowing for flow and interpenetration of both the reader and the document and, because of their purpose as a device for communication, serve as a dialogic agent, acting on its reader from afar.

In considering archival research as a labyrinth, I articulate the way in which historical knowledge is constituted and produced. Previous research has demonstrated the ways in which archives are the result of a historic process of selection that reflects what was considered important for memorializing at the time of their creation (Geary 1994; Stoler 2002; Gosden, Larson, and Petch 2007). Consequently, archives are fractured, and full of gaps and crevices, the fault lines allowing for a multiplicity of readings, interventions and “anarchical play” (Ring 2014, 391). Opening up a file containing a dozen letters performs a multitude of possibilities and directions, none of which leads to any immediate closure.

When I entered the archive, I had some specific research questions, but there were nesting eggs ad infinitum of possibilities not only because of the material but also because of my ideas, of the literature I had read, of the way I thought of the archive as an anthropologist conducting a potential ethnographic project, and how all this came to converse with the archival matter itself. In this sense, historical anthropology is not only about improvisation (Cerwonka and Malkki 2007) or quests for clues (Ginzburg 1986; Benjamin 2006). Instead, it is a labyrinthine struggle and negotiation of the material and immaterial in a laborious and creative pursuit to make sense of the past through, and in, the present. As Lorraine Daston points out in her edited volume Things That Talk, it is “neither arbitrary nor entirely entailed which objects will become eloquent when, and in what cause” (2004, 15).

Archival fieldwork

The first time I visited the Manuscripts and Archives at Yale University, I had never really worked in an archive before. I had previously researched in a library’s special collections and had interned at the National Museums Scotland. But the National Museums Scotland was less an archive than a storehouse. In contrast, Yale’s Manuscripts and Archives consisted of vast holdings that were meticulously organized. I was interested in the Yale Peruvian Expedition Papers (YPEP), which was comprised of 42 boxes containing 16.25 linear feet of material gifted by Hiram Bingham III in 1936 with subsequent material donated in the 1970s by his sons. I also became interested in the Bingham Family Papers that was created in 1977 and was larger than the YPEP consisting of 53.5 linear feet and included information, not related to the expeditions, about Hiram Bingham, his wife and children, and other family members.

My first pass through the labyrinth was overwhelming. I had originally thought that I would only tackle the special correspondence with Kodak and National Geographic.1

1The YPEP material, which includes administrative records, journals, reports, articles, field notes and correspondence are organized by either topic or date, and then filed in folders which are then filed in boxes. The correspondence is further organized with general correspondence including boxes 5 through 12 and special correspondence with
I had written a thorough proposal, which was funded, and I thought I knew what I was after. I wanted to examine the role of photography on the expeditions. Then, I began work in Bingham’s archives and I started to think about the expedition and all of its technologies, not only through the lens of a camera.

I quickly realized, however, that to get a better understanding of the operation and its use of photography, I needed to start from the beginning and read the material in its entirety. Reading the Kodak correspondence made me curious about all that had happened before. Consequently, I regrouped and began with the general correspondence and worked my way through the notebooks, reports, articles, scrapbooks and administrative records. As I opened the first box, I realized the enormity of it all. Within each carton were various folders – 10 sometimes 20 – each numbered, their uniformity belying the diversity within. Inside each folder were various quantities of letters, postcards, and calling cards sub-organized by date. Some were typed in carbon but most were handwritten in cursive, each person’s hand materialized in ink. After opening up my first folder, I realized that reading this entire archive set was going to take a painstaking amount of time. A few days on I also came to the conclusion that there was absolutely no way I could remember all of what I was reading. So, I began to develop my own personal system for finding my way out of the labyrinth, leaving breadcrumb trails in the form of photocopies, photographs and transcriptions. In the end, these helped me find a way out but not because they were tracks. Revisiting my footsteps was impossible. Things were always new and I was always different. Instead, they acted more like threads and lines leading me elsewhere. I may have first conceptualized the archive as a puzzle but I was wrong. There was no endpoint; no way out; no determinate resolution. The only thing to do was to give attention, embarking on a journey with an unknown end and form.

Lines of thinking

In Lines, Tim Ingold refers to inquisitors as wayfarers or “terrestrial travelers” (2007, 56). Wayfarers are always on the move, inhabiting and making place as they go. “For all of us,” he says, “knowledge is not built up as we go across, but rather grows as we go along” (2007, 102). Only those, he says, who have made it back from the underground can explain the form. In Life of Lines Ingold deepens his argument, writing that thinking is about attending. “To think”, he writes, “is rather to take a deep breath, to gather, to marshal” (2015, 139). Things appear and the researcher is opened up to possibility (2015, 140). Consequently, one has to “keep an eye out for the subtle signs – footprints, piles of stones, nicks cut in the trunks of trees – that indicate the way ahead” (Ingold 2015, 132). One follows the signs, paying attention to obtain mastery (2010, 118).

With every letter read, I became a wayfarer anew; following the path, attending to what was before me. In the archival labyrinth, the researcher can never see the whole, only threads of possibilities. Eventually, the path taken forms a pattern, and, if you are lucky, an argument that peer reviewers find worthwhile. There is sorting and skimming, building and tearing down, active dialogue, ongoing conversation, heading somewhere, going nowhere. Through this, the wayfarer inhabits the archive, slowly integrating a vast

Kodak, National Geographic and the Treasurer’s Office in boxes 14 through 17. The scrapbooks Bingham made of newspaper clippings are held in the boxes but their contents are not further detailed.
entanglement of possibilities, conversations, ideas to find a way through, to weave a pattern, an argument, an order, a spinning pinwheel whose colors blur to give the impression of singularity. Other than reading the files in order, there was no navigation as there was no direction. Archival research was more akin to an inkblot dripping and bleeding its way to form, surprising its viewer in the process.

Ingold refers to this as a meshwork of becoming; the human and its mind an ever-growing extension akin to “earthy roots or aerial foliage” (2015, 48). The experience of imbibing Bingham’s letters was a profoundly social one, a tangle that connected me to beings and ideas and emotions long past. For sure, the letters were not alive. They did not breathe. But, through their words, they spoke to me, the paper and I in partnership, dialoguing, an interstitial making that brought us both to life (Ingold 2015, 16).

Initially, I tried to contain the archival labyrinth with various techniques of my own. I made a Word document titled “Cast of Characters” to help me organize the people involved in the story. I made a list of the resources I wanted to look at and then proceeded to cross them out as I went through them. I made a list of questions for myself. Who is SA Dolan? Something I still do not know mostly because I did not find it out right away and now I do not know if SA was shorthand for South America, one of the quirks of my transcribing, if it were somebody’s initials, or if it was business shorthand for Société Anonyme.

Ideas came to me and then fell away; a line followed but then abandoned. The partiality and incompleteness amongst such quantity were striking. There were so many potential threads to follow but none offered a total picture. At one point, I decided I needed to detail all of the books Bingham read in preparation for his expeditions to understand his influences. I began:

- Ordered Books: “La independencia de América – Catálogo de documentos del Archivo General de Indias” Published by La Sociedad de Publicaciones Históricas, Madrid, Spain
- The Americans in Panama, WR Scout
- The Indians of the Terraced Houses, CF Saunders
- On the Great American Plateau, Prudden
- Through South America, HW Van Dyke
- Across South America, James Bryce
- Subscriptions to Daily Newspapers: El Mercurio
- Commercial and Industrial Outlook of South Central Peru, Osgood Hardy (illustrations)

I thought to myself: “Wouldn’t it be a great idea to build a card catalog of his books? An archive of his archive!” I decided using notecards might be helpful so I went to the Yale bookstore and bought a packet of lined colored indexed cards where I detailed the books he was purchasing and how he read them. At the time, I imagined creating an alphabetized file of the index cards where I could then cross-reference each book or article with appearances in future references. Since he was simultaneously purchasing collections from individual collectors in South America to help buttress the Yale library, the vastness of it all eventually proved so overwhelming and ancillary to my questions that I ultimately dropped these threads, leaving that spur to follow another path. The index cards sit haphazardly in my filing cabinet awaiting resurrection. I can talk about the books he read or purchased for his library but an examination into what he consulted
and how all of this precisely worked its way into his own practices and texts will have to wait. One day, I think, I will step back onto the path and revisit this question.

The finding aid written by Yale’s archivist further expands the paths one might take. Cross-listing the names of prominent members of the expeditions, scientists, and government officials, including the President of the US and of Peru, with other collections held in the archives, I could continue to forge new paths with boxes and files held elsewhere in Yale’s manuscripts collection. The cross-referencing details an impressive analog of the archival record and attempts to provide an overview of the many directions a researcher might go. Interested in diplomatic relations? Consult the De Forest Family Papers, Henry Hill Papers, Beer Family Papers or Henry Stimson Papers, who happened to be the secretary of state under President Hoover 1928–1932. Interested in the US and Latin American relations? Take a look at the James Watson Webb papers, the US minister to Brazil from 1861 to 1869. This cross-referencing was for one holding. Manuscripts and Archives houses over 85,000 linear feet of material, more than 16 miles for those counting.² Oh, the directions you could go.

Even though I had written an extensive proposal, and even though I had previously researched expeditions and photography, the amount of material seemed insurmountable. What should I capture? What should I type up? What was insignificant? How could I pay attention to it all? I tried to organize my thoughts. I typed up a list of themes to settle my racing mind.

(1) Making of national patrimony
(2) Presidency and national patrimony
(3) Pro-indígena association
(4) “el problema indígena”
(5) Historical memory of MP [Machu Picchu]
(6) MP as metonym of Peru
(7) Photography and the creation of patrimony, race and place, etc. etc.

The lists only made a partial dent in my quest to cull and narrow. The lines jammed; the threading too much. One day I glanced to my left where I saw another researcher methodically using the Excel program so I decided to try it out for myself. I quickly realized that this would be inadequate, not to mention unnecessarily cumbersome because what was written was so important. I abandoned the Excel file and subsequently dragged it to the trash bin. Ultimately, I opted for a Word file, organizing my transcriptions by box number, typing up much of what I thought would be useful. I asked for photocopies of letters that I guessed would be of particular importance – a semi-educated divination that proved correct only about half of the time.

I typed an outline of future archives I was going to visit, with material or persons that would be important including travel chronicles or South American explorers such as Squier or Métraux.³ I then listed published materials from Peru that spoke to those at Yale. I made doodles, with dialogue boxes and lines to connect other doodles and dialogue boxes. I

²From their library news archives, dated 1 August 2016. https://web.library.yale.edu/librarynews/201608.
³Alfred Métraux was a Swiss anthropologist who grew up in Argentina and is best known for his texts about the Incas and Haitian voodoo. Ephraim George Squier was a nineteenth-century US archaeologist who wrote Peru: Incidents of Travel and Exploration in the Land of the Incas.
printed out my notes and then scribbled atop their neatly organized bulleted paragraph. On one sheet, I penned in red ink with some urgency, “Golinski – examine knowledge-making practices of actors/actants and broader relationships in which they are embedded.” Then I wrote, “examine how these practices persist/morphed in contemporary circumstances.” I began other Word documents where I attempted to organize the many newspaper clippings highlighting Bingham’s pursuits and detailing the expeditions. In the labyrinth “every path [was] now a thread rather than a trace” (Ingold 2007, 56). As in ethnography, the archival labyrinth was bursting with paths and lines of inquiry. The potentialities from the neatly trimmed periodical clippings overwhelmed. I turned to the camera to try and contain the spinning.

Today many researchers employ the camera to re-image archives, taking pictures of the documents, hoarding in mass the archived matter materially located in one setting so that they might be examined at a later date in a more comfortable and personal setting. At the time, however, researchers had to get permission and were required to photograph everything with a laminated label that said: “COPY: Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University.” Also, camera phones were mediocre so I toted my 35-mm digital camera to the archive in an effort to employ it as an aide-de-memoire. I am grateful for these images detailing not simply the words but all of the other interesting aesthetic and material details. But, in the end, I found that the most helpful virtual tool was the searchable Word document where the typing skills learned in high school helped transcribe hundreds of pieces of correspondence. These simulations proved invaluable and simultaneously problematic, mostly because of minor inaccuracies and inconsistencies in spelling which later caused me significant anxiety when wanting to use a direct quote in publications, forcing me again to traverse the labyrinth, picking up new threads threatening my ever-tenuous gossamer webs.

Reflecting back on my archival journey, I realize that much of my anxiety stemmed from the way I initially approached the archive as a maze to master. Yet all of the material that I examined was inflected with my own previous research, newspaper articles and books I had read, people I had heard about, conversations I had once had. It was participant observation with material detritus. My field notes from February 17 listed eleven points that I needed to follow up on as I headed to the archive. This continued. My notes show a constant curation of ideas, of selection, of potential archives to visit, of potential subjects to explore, of potential threads to follow, only to be dropped as I picked up another, shaping the labyrinth anew. They demonstrate a frantic and partial attentiveness that only calmed when I eventually committed to a path, forgetting all of the others that I had once entertained.

As I worked to master the materials I began to realize the artful improvisational way that I made choices. As I transcribed some of the materials, I would take up one thread in my imagination, following it until I read another letter that dropped that theme and picked up another. My interlocutors were not informants but slips of paper – the material good as important as what it contained. The research consisted of many of these seemingly inconsequential decisions. At first, I thought, well, maybe this is my inexperience. I fretted, blaming myself for not having a precise process or clear accounting system. I thought to myself, joked with friends, and even wrote in my journal: “why hadn’t I taken a

4This refers to Jan Golinski’s work Making Natural Knowledge (1998).
better historical methods course?” At the time, I believed the way I approached the archive was amateurish and I worried that I would miss something or that my process was inefficient and that, with more insight, I might be able to navigate the archive with more ease. But I have since asked historians and anthropologists how they work through and read an archive and every one of them has a personal style developed in tandem with the archive they are working. One uses notecards, painfully transcribing by hand the material, carpal tunnel a result after so many years. Another, who could only use pencil in the archive, re-read each of his penciled selections into Dragon Naturally Speaking. Over time the program had been personalized to his voice and, as he read, he could correct or fill in things that he had missed or added notes to himself while re-threading his gently fading marks. Another, like me, simply used Word. Now that many archives allow digital photography of their holdings, another colleague brings along his camera and images all of the material, annotating each photograph using Evernote. A historian I met this past summer told me about a new phone app called cam scanner that converts multiple images to a singular PDF file, organizing images back into the documents that they initially indexed. All these strategies and new technologies tell me that navigating the labyrinth is idiosyncratic; a personal documentary relational effort at sense making, one that can only be developed with the specific archive in mind and at hand.\(^5\)

Ten years on I now realize that this figuring forms the basis of a significant project of selection and threading. It is not so much that I was searching for clues or traces like Sherlock Holmes, but that those things presented themselves and were either taken up and used, or deployed to spur new inquiries. Other archives and other knowledges interrupted and informed readings, enticing my attention elsewhere.\(^6\) To be sure some inquisitors might pluck out particulars to craft their argument or version of history but the archive taken anthropologically, expands exponentially, the labyrinth endless, the amount of lines limitless. The formation of the researcher, the ideas, and the argument is always in process, the structure temporary, albeit with some structures standing for longer than others. It is a series of practices where temporary stabilization allows for the mobilization of sense (Stengers 2010). As actors in the labyrinth, we keep taking up those threads, weaving ourselves into the labyrinth, writing our way through the meshwork that we ourselves have spun.

**Epistemic formation: sense making through the labyrinth**

The labyrinth is my chosen metaphor to describe my experience of STS research in an archive as the disorder in apparent order. The multiplicity of small decisions, letters, writings, conversations, photographs, personnel issues, payments, bureaucracy, politics: life. The vastness and extensiveness of an archive is always in progress, a process that seems to not end (Stoler 2009). But I do not think this is Borges’ *Library of Babel*. “Official searchers, inquisitors” do expect to discover something (Borges [1941] 1998, 54). Mouse-like we sniff and touch and make decisions to understand a question’s complexity, its construction, its aesthetic, and its feel. Ultimately, we do not so much find a way out, as we inhabit the labyrinth.

\(^5\)Daston writes that new hypotheses create new archives (2017, 6). So too, then, do its wayfarers.

\(^6\)Ginzburg notes that: “Texts are intrinsically dialogic” (1986, 159).
The Oxford English Dictionary defines a labyrinth as a complicated irregular network of passages or paths in which it is difficult to find one’s way; a maze; a complex structure; an intricate and confusing arrangement. My initial pass at the archive was labyrinthine – the many directions I might take, the papers I might write, the things I might think. It was scary, confusing, exhilarating, destabilizing at times, and stabilizing at others. When I returned to the archive seven months after my initial visit, I had a better sense of what the archive was comprised. This second pilgrimage helped me understand the magnitude of the material and, in my mind, I had more of a grasp and ability to manage the quantity. The labyrinth beckoned me and I corrected errors and reviewed items of importance. The labyrinth was becoming more comfortable as I began to inscribe sense onto it, crafting a clear line out of the becoming familiar. Ordering, forming, removing, clearing, highlighting, in relief. I could imagine the material for some chapters, thinking about an argument. I began to cultivate certain themes, to order the material into evidentiary hierarchies in my mind and on paper. I began to think of the archive as evidence of an argument I someday might make, twisting knots to tie up loose ends. An epistemic formation was taking place. The labyrinth was morphing into something decipherable, a pinwheel or spiral or embroidered meshwork, a temporary flow that might at any moment erupt and turn in a different direction. Tugging one thread might unravel everything.

When I was almost done with what I consider my first foray into the archival labyrinth, I called a friend about the quantity of letters and how seeing them together had made such an impression. I talked about the volume of writing and the materialization of a building network. Still impressed, I later typed in an outline on 9 May 2007:

Ch 2 – The Science of Letters and the Global Public: network of ideas, exchange, how connections made, how notion of MP shaped through specific channels: exchange, work, meaning making
(a) The role of letter writing in establishing social network of knowledge
(b) How MP became known and shaped – with active intention [emphasis original]

After writing this I packed my bags and boarded a flight to Peru. Returning a year later, I wrote another outline. Dated August 2008 the outline reads: “CH 3 – The Science of Letters and the Global Public: network of ideas, exchange, how connections made, how notion of MP shaped through specific channels: exchange, work, meaning making, speech making, media.” The description is nearly identical to the previous year’s outline save for the addition of speech making and media to the evidence I might include. Then, for reasons I am unsure of and cannot recall, a month later, the importance of letter writing was dropped and replaced by a chapter that I tentatively titled: “Chapter 2 – Scientific Acquaintances and Corporate Sponsorship.” The role of letters disappeared, a new thread taken and stitched. A different path occupied my attention.

I eventually wrote my dissertation about the role of photography and science. Titled, Framing Machu Picchu: Science, Photography and the Making of Heritage, I drew on STS to analyze the way the expedition conjured Machu Picchu into a lost city discovered by Bingham and Yale and how those expeditionary narratives continued to hold sway in the then current relationships with the site. I included a chapter on collecting, on the conflicts over artifacts between Yale and Peru, on the making of the National Geographic issue “In the Wonderland of Peru,” on my work with tour guides and tourism to the Machu
Picchu, and a final chapter on the way multiple actors, including the state, prospected heritage for commercial and identity-making in the twenty-first century. Letters remained cursory.

The role of letters did not figure in the dissertation. Instead, “Scientific Acquaintances and Corporate Sponsorship” became “Discovering Machu Picchu for Science and its Sponsors.” In it, I examined the social network that formed the basis of the expedition and how Bingham had relied on expanding global capital for North American reach into South America. The dissertation, I suspect like many, was uneven, the application of STS substantial when it came to thinking about photography and the conflict over collected remains, but thin in the sections on twenty-first century heritage prospecting and tour guides. It was not until I began to consider what shape the book would take that I removed much of the contemporary ethnography and deepened the analysis into the expeditions themselves. For this, I wanted to rely on STS methodology and theoretical insights. Bingham’s was a scientific expedition even though many never considered it such as it was continually overshadowed by the popularization of a heroic discovery narrative that positioned the sighting of Machu Picchu as a lucky find, a happenstance with no relation to its historical material–social relations.

As I began to rework the book, the chapter that discussed the fundraising and social network began to feel antiquated. There was nothing noteworthy about the argument. The path was so worn as to feel tired and boring, my feet knowing what lay underneath and ahead. We knew that wealthy industrialists went to Latin America to expand trade and influence, and to strengthen a nation’s reach. That Bingham was a part of this seemed obvious to me at that point. The chapter seemed a rehash of core–periphery and world-history development narratives. It all seemed clear enough but I had a nagging feeling. I needed to keep moving.

I ruminated. I reviewed the themes. I asked myself about the technology and the materials of the expedition. I revisited the archive from a distance, reviewing the materials, embarking on new paths, my thinking evolved over the years, new interlocutors, and informants accompanying me this time. I opened my filing cabinet and pulled out the manila folders that contained the copies of the letters I had requested years before. Organized thematically I reread them all, wayfaring from a distance. I opened up the digital files that held all of my typed transcriptions and reread their contents once again. I reviewed the photographs I had taken of the materials having the distinct sensation that I was seeing much of it for the first time. The letters were objects in their own right and had figured prominently in the expedition. They had been my most important informant and insightful interlocutor in the archive. They are what I had conversed with, and handled, and were what had enraptured me in the process. The letters were corporeal and affecting and I took my time savoring conversations with old friends, surprised at ones I had forgotten, stunned at my remembering.

Ingold writes in Textility of Making, that materials never change. They do not possess agency but rather are possessed by action (2010, 95). Letters might be the exception to his rule. Yes, the letter remains a piece of paper with words inscribed onto its surface, but what it says, what it means, how we perceive it, and how it moves and pulls us along, does change. Whispers of their writers, archived letters are dialogic, subjects communicating in abstentia. New information, new questions and new ideas edge their way into the communicative slip. The archival labyrinth is not a form that was fashioned by
archivists alone, but a dynamic shape shifter that morphs and moves along with its way-farers. There is interpenetration; a melody making that fuses the researcher with the archive (Ingold 2015).

In her study of Neils Bohr, Karen Barad demonstrates that science is a material-discursive apparatus wherein the making of scientific facts and observations are constituted through the types of instrumentation and materials employed. “Matter and meaning” she writes, “are not separate elements” (2007, 3). Rather, scientific phenomenon is a matter of entangled agencies and not independent realities (Barad 2007, 33). Such realities, she argues, are not a priori ontologies but rather effects of the “intra-active engagements of our participation with/in and as part of the world’s differential becoming” (2007, 361). Devices, materials and technology intra-acts with us and in phenomenon. What is written, what becomes materialized, is dependent on the relationship between scholar and material. “It matters” she notes, “which cuts are enacted: different cuts enact different materialized becomings” (2007, 361). My observations and conversations were schooled in the archive, a learned and disciplined form of experience that trained my body and mind so that I might fashion evidence for a collectivity to witness (Daston and Lunbeck 2011, 2 and 3). This schooling was performative and active. I engaged with the letters and they engaged with me. Bingham and I both made cuts.

I picked up some threads and recollected my previous conversations with my friend about letters and how they had made such an impression on me. The memories, feelings and objects of the archive continued to intervene in my thinking and in the process of writing the chapter. I thought about STS and scholarship that had shaped me like Karen Barad’s work on agential realism. I re-read Michel Callon’s “A Sociology of Translation.” Ultimately, I focused on the materials and practices to conceptualize letter writing as a scientific technology and practice as important as the camera or the meter stick. I reworked the chapter. I reconsidered the fundraising as the outcome of an extensive letter-writing campaign but also how letters were critical to imagining an expedition, to conjuring a lost city, and to ultimately finding it. It was not that the letters were only reflections of history. As I wrote in the book, they were history. The letters were used to communicate ideas but they were also materials that produced specific ends. Letters were used to curry favor, open doors and vouch for and validate expedition members. As I ultimately wrote in the chapter, the letters acted as “shibboleth unlocking protected gates of access, allowing for successful navigation and passage through the Peruvian interior” (Cox Hall 2017, 41). They also were my correspondents in the archival labyrinth.

Not incidentally I sat down to write a letter to my friend through email. I share it here with some trepidation. Letters can be vectors of vulnerability. I cringe at the word “awesome” seeing my middle-class California upbringing evidenced in seven letters.

October 18, 2013
Hi [Name Withheld],
I hope the Bay Area is still awesome.
I am working on my book and have a query for you. I am really dissatisfied with my chapter on social networking/business of science where people are [sic] I list all of the support HB received. I am thinking that a more interesting take might be to do something with letter writing – do you know any work that talks about letter writing as scientific practice?
Take care,
A
My friend responded to me that day and reminded me of some of the works by Shapin and Shaffer along with the book *I, Pierre Riviere* and Foucault’s efforts at document analysis. He wondered if Derrida and Spivak might be potential sources and suggested that the postcolonial literature that dealt with journals and diaries as colonial practices might prove useful. I reviewed some of these works and reconsidered the chapter. He wrote me again on October 26:

looking forward to the chapter! I’ve been thinking a lot about the letters as practice piece, and now i’m seeing hints of it in lots of places. I’m reading Kuhn’s Structure of Scientific Revolutions again, and a part of the formation of his “paradigms” is communications within a community; he focuses on more or less professional communications, like articles, but the role of letters/correspondence is there, lurking. it’s also obviously a critical element in the maintenance of a paradigm and in the overturning of such a paradigm in revolution. clearly there is a need for thinking through, theorizing, and writing about correspondence…. (and here we are, corresponding about correspondence… how meta) …. anyway, doing work on the weekend, unfortunately, so gotta get back to it. can’t wait to read your chapter!

Letters have long played a role in the formation of ideas and the shaping of scientific debates.Robert Westman (2011), for example, shows how letters used in the sixteenth century became the grounds for debating the claims and arguments of Copernicus. The “Republic of Letters” describes the network of people during the seventeenth and eighteenth century whose correspondences shaped scientific thinking and the grounds for experiments at the time. Letters and reports circulated to share ideas, to resolve conflicts and disagreements, and to expand the community concerned (Shapin 1984; Goldgar 1995). In the nineteenth century, letters were no less critical. Charles Darwin relied on letters to communicate, to ponder his theories, and to test hypotheses. His laboratory, you might say, was global as interlocutors from far afield corresponded with him to accompany him in his thinking about evolution. Thus, science has always been a human network and intimate relationship with the natural world. Letters have nurtured the scientist in her becoming for nearly five hundred years.

Letters for Bingham and for myself have been incredibly productive. They have opened doors and established thought collectives lending support and legitimacy to meaning making. Letters influenced my thinking about Bingham and expeditionary science in Latin America but also surreptitiously wriggled their way into my writing, offering new devices for describing and new forms of thinking. Tim Ingold writes that anthropology is a practice of correspondence and that as humans we are not beings so much as becomings (2014, 389). In performing our primary method of participant observation, anthropologists correspond with our interlocutors, learning and changing along with the way, threads intertwining in a forward movement (Ingold 2014, 390). Anthropology is, as Ingold writes, a form of attending that takes others and us places.

How had the archive inhabited me? How had it taken me places? The word query gives me pause. I do not recall ever using the word query in casual conversation and

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7Focused on a material history of knowledge, Rajani Sudan (2016) shows how the making of paper, the writing of letters and their circulation involved a coterie of varying forms of labor that were complicit in empire making.

8The correspondence from the Republic of Letters is being mapped at Stanford. Over the last decade, the University of Cambridge has also begun transcribing and publishing the letters in Darwin’s correspondence circle. David West (2016), in his study of the evolutionary biologist Fritz Müller, demonstrates the way in which letters were critical for cultivating knowledge. Darwin relied on Müller’s letters for valuable field observations, experiments and insights and, as the only Darwinist in Brazil, Müller relied on Darwin for support, direction and ongoing thinking.
less so with a friend in a quick email. Instead, query strikes me as evidence of the archive writing itself into me, inhabiting me as I inhabited it. Query feels like it comes from the language of Bingham’s letters and seems strange as I reread it at some distance years later. I am sure I did not think it was odd when I wrote it, otherwise, I would not have written it. Instead, only after stepping out of the labyrinth do I recognize it as coming from elsewhere. Much like campfire smoke that clings to clothing, the smell of smoldering embers remembers. The formalness of the prose, the etiquette and manners, and social conventions to which writers closely hew, demonstrates for me its extraordinariness.

In reviewing an early draft of the book chapter, I cannot tell where my writing has been pricked into new shape by century-old ink. “Proffered” advice? Was this word used in a letter I read in the archive, one that ultimately lodged into me? “It is probable” that the event happened? I picture a pipe and smoking jackets, the masculine verbiage cloaking me. In an early draft of the chapter I wrote: “Farabee who knows the valley.” My friend, whom I had asked to read the draft, deleted it and replaced it with “knew.” Of course, this makes more grammatical sense today but looking at it now, the word “knows” stares at me knowingly. Bingham had used it in one of the letters to try and convince a potential fundraiser to donate to the expedition. My slip was not intentional and the vocabulary and Victorian style around “he knows the valley” puzzled its way into my mind’s elocution. More than just an adoption of style the words shaped me. Thinking about the archive as labyrinth means that correspondence and researchers are not “billiard balls” that crash into each other, but rather interact in a dynamic, improvisational and generative flow. The practitioner of the archive follows the materials, along with her thoughts and imagination, combining and recombining in a dynamic, creative and generative interaction, that holds up ideas to be considered and hewn (Ingold 2010, 2017, 8). Letters are different than kites or wooden boards though. Penned by someone, they dance with us intimately.

In one of my favorite edited volumes, Evocative Objects, Susan Yee writes about her experience visiting Le Corbusier’s archive. “I felt close to Le Corbusier as I walked around and around the drawing, looking at the parts that I wanted to replicate to bring home with me, touching the drawing as I walked. The paper was very thin” (2007, 33). The intimacy she feels from working with the objects demonstrates that this is not a disembodied intellectual pursuit for her. She is in relationship with Le Corbusier through the materials as much as her imaginary. The letters she reads and the drawings she examines affect her deeply. Yee notes that she imagined how Le Corbusier fiddled with his papers and how she fiddles with them too (2007, 33). Poetically she thinks about how the archive was ultimately digitized and how the absence of the materiality produced a loss. Although she does not explicitly say it, I imagine it is the loss of her relationship with Le Corbusier. Filtered through a screen, the touch, connection and intimacy of knowing someone through the things they transformed are somehow not as potent and not as human. The magic, charisma and vulnerability of a document that details the living of life are as relational a pursuit as a conversation. The material talks, imbued with the person who placed pen to paper, helping to instantiate “novel, previously unthinkable combinations” (Daston 2004, 24). The words are important and there is something sensual and sensory.

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9William Roseberry talks about this famous phrasing used by Eric Wolf in Anthropologies and Histories (1989).
that informs archival sense making. Eloquent “magnets for intense interest,” people cling to archived letters in their own imaginative efforts at world making (Daston 2004, 24; Luk 2017).10

The correspondence provided me not only new vocabulary but also other structures in which to reside. The labyrinth offered me a new way to think about correspondence and the way scientific expeditions made their object. Archival words in those letters provoked me to think differently but also to speak differently and to write differently. My own body was written upon in the spelling of certain words, the formality of correspondence, the language and style, in the crafting of an argument, and in my thinking about expeditions. The etiquette in a linguistic habitus embedded in a phrase bled out into my hand leading me to spin new threads, weave new ideas, to break loose onto new spurs. Letters opened new worlds and possibilities.

There is something about the letter. Whether in material or digital form, the language and form of the letter produces desire as it evokes its author in his or her time. Readers look for a connection attempting to forge a relationship through this chimera. After reading the draft of my revised chapter, my friend said he wanted more of the letters. I had included recaps and synopsis of the contents of the letters but he wanted to read the letters themselves. Could I include an appendix of the letters? Elsewhere he wrote “Is this in a letter? I’d love to see it here too.” Two pages down a comment bubble appeared with: “Also information in a letter? Awesome to include it…” At the end of the chapter, he included: “My main comment would be to use correspondence materials to be much more demonstrative; let letters or carefully selected excerpts speak and then explain around them to lead the reader to your conclusions.”

The experience of the archive for me was corporeal and affective. The touch of the letters, the removal of files, the weight of the boxes all inhabited me. My ethnography was the result of this intra-action being written outside of the archive, years after having visited, continuing to be informed by those initial visits and that preliminary way-faring. The importance of the letter; the material; what it communicated. STS helped me validate that feeling, supporting those hunches to intervene in the archive at the moment, and then from a distance years on, to nudge me to consider the archive as a repository of things not incidental to the outcomes of history. Interlocutors, like Barad and Ingold, eased my anxieties, giving me ways to consider uncertainty and spontaneity as legitimate knowledge-making practices.

Letters were in many ways similar to a photograph. Representational texts, their aesthetic forms circulated beyond the intent of the author, their meaning always slippery (Poole 2005). I could track the movements of ideas and people through their exchange of letters. I could see an idea emerge and collapse, a negotiation take place, its materiality extending and exerting the often violent power that accompanied the expedition. I could feel the frailty of the expedition, the anxiety and anger channeled in blue ink. I could be reminded of previous research and stories I held close. I could be asked to pay attention and respond.

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10Examing the social role of letters in incarcerated communities, Sharon Luk writes that letters were “constitutive of social life” and opened “real and imaginative possibilities” (2017, 4). She considers letters “poetics” or world making.
Loose ends

Ann Stoler has referred to the colonial archive as a watermark, a grain of wood and a palimpsest to be inscribed upon and then scratched over (2009, 52). While I do not quibble with these metaphors, in my experience this only describes part of the experience. The archive for me has acted as a labyrinth, less clues and pulses of practices, than potential lines to be forged, traversed and abandoned, enjoyed and struggled through. Ethnographically speaking, Bingham’s papers were a place of force and possibility – much like the events it inscribes. A wayfarer might attempt to take a path that others have traveled, seeing the scratches that others have tagged onto it, but any foray into the archive is one’s own. The archivists have ordered the material but still, for the questions one asks it, there is no immediate response. Instead, the archive is a labyrinth of composite inscriptions formed by actors in institutions, to muddle through and to make sense, to feel and to interpret through the readings and experiences of one’s own. Confusion and anxiety is not only something to be read about in the archive but also resides in that of the researcher.11 The archival labyrinth is uncertain and its knowledge unstable and unfolding. The potential is thrilling.

In the labyrinth, I took up the transcriptions of a past to make some sense through variously selected “grids of intelligibility” (Stoler 2009, 37). The archival labyrinth acted like a living entity beckoning me into relationship. It is promiscuous though. Speed dating through correspondence in the hope of making a commitment and lasting connection produces many false starts. A deeply affective knowledge-making practice, the archival labyrinth taken anthropologically is a material-discursive apparatus of potentiality and propulsion through which one embarks upon with hope and faith of making sense, becoming someone anew through the conversations and relationships with interlocutors never known.

As I wrote the chapter, I witnessed the chaos become form, an intoxicating alignment that feels as much as thinks. Ultimately, I wanted to craft the chapter as a creative reflection and representation using letter excerpts to highlight the theoretical argument I was making. This proved difficult and the reviewers found it confusing, so in the end I opted for a more classic approach of prose, evidence, argument. I wrote the chapter and finished the book and I stepped away from the labyrinth temporarily. I had ordered the materials and explained it to others. I had inhabited the archive and threaded a pinwheel, each arc a part of a larger argument helping to form a singular trajectory. Out of loose ends, stitched so precariously together, I had formed a web that others might follow, a fleeting clarity that tamed the labyrinth at least for a time.

In “Spiral Jetty”, the artist Robert Smithson explores entropy. An inert spiral, the land art disappears and re-appears as the water levels of the Great Salt Lake change. Researching transformed into writing exemplifies the Spiral Jetty: confusion to order to entropy. Out of confusion, I have ordered a particular story but it is only one path in the labyrinth. My process continues. The spiral, like all orders, is tenuous and fragile. Arguments deteriorate, new thinking and new lines edge in, lapping its sides, eroding its shores. I made one spiral out of the threads of the labyrinth but there are countless more. My most recent visit to Yale’s Manuscripts and Archives astounded me. I noticed new things and was reminded of what I had forgotten or perhaps never registered in the first place. Entering the archival

11Stoler argues for the importance of fear and uncertainty rather than reason in colonial governance.
labyrinth, I headed out in a direction not knowing where I would end up. I was again on the
way “to somewhere else” (Ingold 2007, 856). The library Bingham built? The albums Kodak
compiled for him? Expeditionary masculinity? The phantom’s finger points me in a direc-
tion, inviting me to come along and step back on the path, my head tilting giving atten-
tion. I need to go back to my informants and talk to them again, to take up those threads
and loose ends and type some knots.

I pull out a letter from the army green folder stored in the carton. I read it again but see it
differently. Letters are like that. They are actants of imagination and feeling. I once received a
letter from a prominent anthropologist. She had kindly read a draft of “Epistolary Science”
and sent me enthusiastic words of encouragement. I was elated that she had responded
to me with such kindness. I printed out the email and tacked it to a corkboard made by
my spouse decades earlier out of wine corks from bottles and restaurant matchboxes we
had taken from bars and cafés in Scotland. The email drifts there, printed, temporarily
ashore. Sometimes the peripheral vision out of my right eye will catch it and I will see her
name in large letters across the top. When I am feeling particularly discouraged, I read
the words and trudge along. Since I hardly know its author, I imagine her tone and her dis-
position when she responded. Letters are good to think with and they are good to feel with
too. They are spaces one inhabits and incorporates, a twinning of humanness (Ingold 2017).

Archival ethnography elicits new sense making. With different questions, I find myself in
new labyrinths. The process repeats. I have questions, a proposal, and I think I know what I am
after. But who knows? The labyrinth is materially and imaginatively generative. It forges ways
in me not yet seen or built or anticipated. The reciprocal capture of words and things and me
and my ideas pulsates. I follow threads, turn left or right, head up or down and wander along.
I feel unsure again but more at ease, knowing that archival labyrinths are like that.

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