“Everything is a burned book.”
- Roberto Bolaño, 2666

From the point of view of the Social Sciences, the archive has an empirical function: it is the repository of historical data that, when synthesized in narrative, can illuminate the past. Recent developments in the Literary Humanities, however, have problematized the archival function and its role in the writing of history. Contemporary theory suggests that although the archive is the necessary field of historiography, there is something in the archive that resists narrativization. This ‘something’ is not a matter of gaps or silences in the historical record: rather, it is connected to the enormous difficulty of bearing witness. Derrida argues that if the Freudian unconscious is ‘like’ an archive, then the archive is ‘like’ a national or an institutional unconscious, subject to repression. As such, the archive contains an impulse that is anti-archival.

We live in a political culture that is intent upon uncovering the crimes of the past, upon truth and reconciliation. The archive, broadly defined, is crucial to this work. Yet, recent trauma theory approaches trauma as an event that is, in some ways, beyond representation, beyond narrative itself: a trauma, accordingly, demands our witness, but also defies our witness. As Giorgio Agamben writes, “there is no voice for the disappearance of voice.”

This course approaches the archive as a highly vexed figure of representation, a figure that continually interrogates its own status and truth-claims. We begin with a series of classic American novels, each of which arises from an archive that, in diverse ways, it cannot read. We shall then take up the theories of Derrida, Freud, and Agamben – in particular, their models of the unconscious, the return of the repressed, and the problematic status of the witness. The goal of this course is to sustain multiple and conflicting models of the archive, its representation, and its relevance. Our aim is not to resolve these conflicts. Rather, this course is illuminated by a larger question: how does the archive, and indeed narrative itself, bring us up against the limits of our understanding about the past?

Texts:

**Theory:**
Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*. Penguin.
A course pack of brief readings, chiefly in the social sciences, available at the university bookstore.

**Narrative:**
Course Work and Grading:

Contributions to seminar discussion 10%
Formal Seminar Presentation 20%
Short Essay based on the Seminar Presentation (5-7 pages) 20%
Essay (15 pages) due December 14 50%

Note:

1. The short essay is due one week after your formal seminar presentation.
2. Because much of the class time will be spent on close reading and analysis of the text, students are requested to bring the assigned texts to class.
ANGLAIS 6092 - Readings in Contemporary Theory
Fall 2009

SCHEDULE

Sept. 3  Introduction: what is an archive?
         *The Scarlet Letter* and the lessons of deconstruction

Sept. 10 *The Scarlet Letter*: The Custom House as archive

Sept. 17 *Go Down, Moses*: slavery and its ledgers

Sept. 24 *Go Down, Moses*, continued

Oct. 1   “The Aspern Papers” and “The Turn of the Screw”: The archive is on fire

Oct. 8   Derrida, *Archive Fever*

Oct. 15  Derrida, continued; Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”

Oct. 22  Reading week

Oct. 29  how do social scientists approach archives? (course pack)

Nov. 5   the Klemperer Diaries: witnessing and testimony

Nov. 12  the Klemperer Diaries: time and temporality

Nov. 19  Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*: what is a witness?

Nov. 26  Agamben, continued: what is an archive?

Dec. 3   summary and synthesis

Dec. 14  Essay due

Supplementary Readings

from *Lost in the Archives*, ed. Rebecca Comay (Toronto: Alphabet City, 2002)
  Rebecca Comay, Introduction
  Gustave Flaubert, “Bibliomania”
  Rebecca Comay and Ian Balfour, “The Ethics of Witness: An Interview with Geoffrey Hartman”

  Charles Merewether, Introduction: “Art and the Archive”
Sigmund Freud, “A Note Upon the Mystic Writing Pad”
Michel Foucault, “The Historial a priori and the Archive”
Ilya Kabakov, “The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away”
Giorgio Agamben, “The Archive and Testimony”
Susan Hiller, “Working Through Objects”
Renée Green, “Survival: Ruminations on Archival Lacunae”
Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse”

from *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, by Carolyn Steedman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002)

Preface
“In the Archon’s House”
“Michelet Derrida, and dust”
“The Story of the Dust”


Introduction: “Archive Fever, Archive Stories”

from *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, by Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996)

Introduction: “The Wound and the Voice”