The Infinite Loop

ARCHIVES AND TIME TRAVEL IN THE POPULAR IMAGINATION

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Series Introduction

"WHAT'S PAST IS PROLOGUE": IN *THE TEMPEST*, SHAKESPEARE REMINDS us that our actions up to this very moment provide context for our present decisions and actions. The accrual of this activity, in the form of the archival record, enables us to reflect on that past with tangible evidence in hand (or on screen). But recorded evidence doesn't just enable us to interrogate the present. We preserve the records and data of the present to provide evidence and context that will help us shape our collective future.

The Archival Futures series seeks to capture an irony that lies at the heart of the series title: Can what is past have a future, and vice versa? As a point of departure for critical thinking and for conversation, it centers the active role of archivists *and* everyday people in documenting society. Above all, it seeks to bring together all individuals who have a vested interest in cultural heritage and its stewardship, to both acknowledge and imagine the importance of the future archival record. This is a tall order.

When people find themselves without records and archives, memory, accountability, and transparency become precarious. We all share a collective, vested interest in the future of archives and must be partners in the preservation of the evidence of our present. Archivists act on behalf of the public good. Our work is focused outward and reflects the interests of many individuals and institutions. When archivists appraise records for enduring archival value, we imagine how people will use those materials; when archivists arrange and describe those records, we imagine how those descriptions might help people access important records; when archivists select technology and systems to serve as interfaces to our inventories and digital materials, we consider the ease with which people can find critical information; when archivists preserve and provide access to records, we imagine how those records will provide context for complex issues to society in the future; and when archivists consider the constellation of digital content on the Web—social media, hosted systems, local systems—and the fragility and ephemeral nature of that content, we understand our vital roles as stewards for the historical record and our role in ensuring that these materials will exist in the future.

What makes this engagement of the archival record possible is a new approach to looking at the archival endeavor. By considering the work of archivists along with the theory that underpins that work, and by pairing that with ideas from contemporary trends in social theory, this series shows how the preservation and stewardship of the archival record is a collective effort that underpins and supports inclusive and democratic societies and institutions. Our current times stand as a watershed for transparency, authenticity, accountability, and representation. These values are bound to the responsible preservation of our historical materials, and everyone should be concerned with the processes by which we accomplish this.

The decision to preserve a historical record is also undertaken in conjunction with allied professionals, such as librarians, museum curators, and information scientists, and is fundamentally future oriented. As the contributions to this series reveal, the notion of an *archival future* underlies all discussions concerning the responsibility to promote the preservation of records that document the full range of human activity. Archival practice necessarily responds to the past, the present, and the future. Archival professionals imagine a future—whether in the next century or a week from now—and strive to support the use of records in that future, by people not yet known, for reasons not yet imagined.

Through the contributions to this series, we want to open the discussion about the future of the archival record. We enter into this with the understanding that the archival record of the past informs contemporary society and that archival practice is a collaborative endeavor—between archivists, librarians, and people. Our stake in the future is written in the records and archives that represent us and tell our stories to future generations. What is past is not simply prologue; what is present is not simply epilogue; the records of the now are vital to the future of human society.

Bethany Anderson
Amy Cooper Cary

Foreword

Without libraries, what have we? We have no past and no future.

—**RAY BRADBURY**

THE IDEA OF TIME TRAVEL HAS ALWAYS HELD AN EXTRAORDINARY fascination for people. A nostalgic yearning for the past is part of it, and so is the desire to know what the future holds and how things will turn out, and/or to see past current troubles to happier times. Regret for mistakes we've made is also part of the fascination, and the wish that if we could just go back in time, we might be able to fix our own mistakes and those of society and even change the course of history for the better.

These desires explain why time travel is one of science fiction's most popular tropes and has been from the beginning of the genre. Even in the days before science fiction proper was being written, there were time travel stories, from Washington Irving's "Rip Van Winkle" to Edgar Allan Poe's "A Tale of the Ragged Mountains." One of the very first formal science fiction novels was H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*. (In it, the hero traveled not to the past, but to the future, and early science fiction stories set in the future were all presented as time travel stories, with a careful explanation given as to how the narrator had reached the future described in the story.)

Through the years, many, many science fiction writers, including early authors like Jack Williamson and the team of C. L. Moore and Henry Kuttner, and more recent ones like Harry Turtledove, Diana Gabaldon, and Ken Liu, have written about time travel, exploring every possible facet of it, from the grandfather paradox (Robert A. Heinlein's *By His Bootstraps*) to extrapolations of what the world would look like if a historical event had turned out differently (Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee*).

They've examined the unintended consequences of altering a single, tiny, inconsequential event (Ray Bradbury's "A Sound of Distant Thunder"), the tragic consequences of traveling through time (Jack Finney's *Time and Again*) and the comic ones (William Tenn's *Me, Myself and I*), and they've played games with time loops (Fredric Brown's "The Yehudi Principle") and temporal paradoxes (Philip K. Dick's "A Little Something for Us Tempunauts").

The fascination with time travel is also deeply rooted in science fiction writers' passion for history and, by extension, for libraries and other kinds of archives.

We see this in many stories: from the repository of all galactic knowledge on Thantos in Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* trilogy and the abandoned museum in *The Time Machine* to Christopher Morley's *The Mysterious Bookshop* and the basement full of books that no longer exist in my own novelette, *I Met A Stranger in an Antique Land*, as well as countless traditional libraries: the dusty, dangerous stacks of Ray Bradbury's *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, the maze-like Secretum in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, and China Miéville's floating collection of books stolen by pirates, to name only a few.

These three things—time travel, archives, and history—are deeply connected in all sorts of ways, and *The Infinite Loop: Archives and Time Travel in the Popular Imagination*, a part of the Archival Futures series, explores those connections in detail. It considers how science fiction authors view archives and archivists, how their portrayals in time travel narratives affect the readers' views of them, and how information from studying those portrayals can be used to improve the relationships between archivists and the authors who write about them and make their portrayal in fiction more accurate.

The authors of *The Infinite Loop*, Lynne M. Thomas and Katy Rawdon, are both accomplished professionally trained archivists and devotees of time travel science fiction. They have employed a wide array of science fiction novels, short stories, movies, and TV series in *The Infinite Loop* to illustrate the different approaches to time travel that science fiction authors use, the concepts of time and of the rules and mechanisms of time travel authors employ, and the way archives and archivists are represented in different time travel stories.

They explore how different cultures and societies view time differently, using works like Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Toshikazo Kawaguchi's *Before the Coffee Gets Cold*, and Rivers Solomon's *An Unkindness of Ghosts* to show how those differences in temporal perception affect the presentation of time travel in their works.

They also look at imperfections both in the way time travel writers view archives, including stereotypes, outdated views, and biases, and at imperfections in the archives—and in the historical records themselves. They examine the misperceptions of authors regarding archives and archivists and discuss ways in which the information gleaned from studying time travel fiction can be used to improve the relationship between archivists and the authors who write about them and make their portrayal in fiction more accurate.

To do so, Thomas and Rawdon employ an impressive array of examples from time travel fiction, from H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine*, written in 1895, to Matt Haig's *The Midnight Library*, written in 2020, and everything in between. They

explore Deborah Harkness's *All Souls* trilogy, Audrey Niffenegger's *The Time Traveler's Wife*, and Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladwell's *This Is How You Lose the Time War*, as well as movies and TV series like *Doctor Who*, *Back to the Future*, and the Marvel movie *Loki*.

Their careful analyses of these works, their well-thought-out conclusions, and their many thought-provoking—and useful—insights, both as readers and archivists, make this a valuable contribution to both fields, as well as an engrossing read.

Connie Willis
March 2025

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