

Down the Drain with Archive Fever

Introduction

In the day-to-day lives of many women, hair may serve as both a distinctive feature of one's image and a subconscious material at once. Much attention may be given to it simultaneously to the fact that is forgotten for most of the day. The mass of growth may sit on one's head benignly, and yet it takes up space and lives its own reality. This discussion of hair will not just be done in a singular, self-reflective method. A collective and oftentimes international outlook is necessary to understand the female hair's positioning and meaning within space. My hair simply is one of the narratives within a larger and shared feminine one. The concept of my own gendered hair will be placed against the structuring topic of the archive. A strand of hair or a curl is a tangible piece produced by the body. The documentation of memory operates in similar ways. Both hair and memory are centralized inside of and on specific areas of the body, and exist, interact, and grow within the vast space of the world. In this analysis, various questions will be discussed in search of a better understanding of the positioning of female hair in the light of rituals and methods of existence, and how hair interacts with the memoryscape's archive.

Most important to this discussion will be Jacques Derrida's *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. In this critical theory, Derrida dissects the function and power of the archive over humans and allows for an understanding of how we implement and interact with the archive within our lives and our subconsciousnesses. Freud's theory on the obsession with mortality is just one of the lenses Derrida uses to analyze the archive. This seminal text will be used to guide and accompany other world literature that is more focused on the experiences of female hair and existence in modern contexts.

Hair ~ Archive?

Before delving deeper into the words of Derrida, it is worthwhile to simply ponder upon the similarities between human hair and the being of the archive.

An archive seems to the average thinker as a vast room filled with documentation and records. Archives usually belong to any grand institution in order to subject the information it owns to a process of record keeping. Many people can be involved in supporting such record-keeping at any given time. The materials are handled with great care and yet, objects may often fall through the cracks. The archive can be seen as a representation of a history that is subjected to the confines of a space.

The archive may be tied to its location. The head of hair is also eternally linked to an area. While bodily hair on large surfaces is important to mention in the scope of feminist theory, in this essay hair on one's head will be the focus. According to an etymological analysis, the ancient Latin word for hair, *capillus*, stands for 'little head' (Levine, 1995). The head-hair's location is important to note, as hair grows half-attached out of the skull that holds our internal processors. It grows at the top, at the highest point, and lives between the influence of both internal and external forces. The archive may contain memories, and the head space does so similarly: growing, maintaining, and forgetting them at times.

The archive may also have a structure and be controlled and organized by type. Categorization serves the purpose of meaning-giving to objects within a space. One can also apply a similar systematization to hair. Structure is important to note to uphold the meaning or necessity of an object, as Pierre Bourdieu claimed with the cultural field of production's habitus (a "structuring and structured system") (Bourdieu, 1984). Systems may be upheld for the sake of the preservation of an existing order. Molly Levine understood the categorization of hair as a "gendered grammar" in her discussion on Ancient Mediterranean [female] hair. The rules of a significance-providing system, one that functions in a cultural application, are absorbed unconsciously. And, such applied systems exist within the structure of a "standardized" gender order (Levine, 1995). The hair on my head may culturally represent my gender assigned at birth - female. It is untamed, long, dark-colored, and curly. It gains an ethnic meaning to many, including myself: Russian-Jewish. My hair can be ordered and arranged into categories, thus acting as a representative of my own self and experience.

Is my head of hair the archive of my experiences?

“The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law... They have the power to interpret the archives” (Derrida, 1995, p. 9 - 10).

Power and law may be one of the cruxes of the archive’s existence, as Derrida notes, and this factor may be rooted in the specific questions of who is in control and what power structures exist to reign over the object in the archive. The space and working order of the archive functions may work in a Foucauldian sense. In Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*, the philosopher outlines the concept of the panopticon. This specific detention system is unique in structure, with a tall tower standing in the middle of the prison. Each prisoner falls under the surveillance of guards around the clock. The prisoners eventually internalize the gaze and the punishment of the watchtower guards, giving space to the guards in their own consciousnesses. Thus, Foucault assumed the internalization of the panopticon as a modern method of punishment (1995).

In a modern and feminized context, Sandra Lee Bartky continues with the notion of the panopticon and applies it to female existence. The disciplinarian for women and femininity in the modern world is no longer a person or concrete structure that controls by way of physical manipulation and adherence to a domestic space. “[The] disciplinary power that is increasingly charged with the production of a properly embodied femininity is dispersed and anonymous” (Bartky, 1997). This may mean that the punishment, rituals, and categorizations women apply to themselves and have applied to their female-ness are deeply internalized in the same, punishing ways.



Figure 1 Antoni, J. (1993). *Loving Care* [Photograph of performance art].
<https://elephant.art/iotd/janine-antoni-loving-care-1993-05052020/>

My gendered hair grows from my head. I think I own it. I do everything and nothing to it. I let it grow. I subject it to my own gaze in the mirror, in reflections of storefronts or the glossy eyes of others. I ask myself, should I pay a large sum of money to straighten it to feel like everyone else? I ponder to my partner out loud if I have any sex appeal. I take a picture of my hair every time I see an abnormality, like a grey hair. I think I want to own my hair. Owning means remembering it. Remembering it means owning it. There is a power (Maybe it's not one that I get. Rather, the disciplinarian does.) in archiving my hair's essence within a space. Hair ownership may simply be a tool or symbol for the internalization of self-punishment to function.

Power and control, rules and laws, do not stop at the archive of my own hair. As part of a more fundamental international female history, the archiving of hair has been done in the past. During the Holocaust, millions of people were transported by cattle cars to concentration camps. All new arrivals would get sorted by SS officers post entry, and all would eventually have their hair shorn. Those who were chosen to "live" had their hair cut as a commencement ritual of dehumanization. Those who were sent to die in the gas chambers had their hair shaved off after their deaths. Yad Vashem especially notes this process as one unique to the Jewish-female experience during the Holocaust (Hair, 2021), as all those who grew out their locks so lovingly had them cut off in quick strokes of evil for the ultimate purpose of commodification. Jewish prisoner hair gained domestic and commercial use in Nazi Germany, as discovered through the meticulous records, with harvested female hair being preferred as it was often considered to be stronger and longer. Various sources later discussed how the strands leftover from the Holocaust's atrocities were discovered by the Soviet army and the battle to understand how to

classify, treat and arrange it ensued by the hands of various Holocaust memorials and museums (Ryback, 1993; Bush, 2015). Hair weaves through the archive in this historical context as a sort of symbol of collective memory. The hair that was once on my head, that is cut off, remains in the archive of my existence for eternity.

Do I really have any agency in what the world has to do with the pieces of me (my hair)?

“But it [the archive] also shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it” (Derrida, 1995, p. 9).

As mentioned earlier, the control of an object within a structured system by a source of specific power is a staple of the archive’s function. In many ways, gendered hair is objectified in a similar way as a symbol of the feminine essence. Throughout the times, acts of covering the female hair, like the confining of archival material inside of a specific space, or the cutting of it (like purposefully removing certain pieces of information from the archive), have been the acts of discipline to control and submit the woman and her agency.

One of the earliest examples of objectified hair is the canonical myth of Medusa, whose beautiful locks were replaced by the goddess Athena with hissing snakes as an act of punishment, after Medusa’s rape by Poseidon in Athena’s temple. The myth continues with Perseus entirely chopping off Medusa’s head to stop her from turning all men who gaze at her into stone (Ovid & Mandelbaum, 1993). The female hair stands as a powerful thing to control, even in the era of Greek mythology, an ownable material of a woman to conquer and punish at man’s will, and the scissors serving as a kind of guillotine. If Medusa’s hair is cut off, then she cannot seek vengeance.

With Medusa as a starting point, there is a seemingly endless list of cutting and covering imposed on subordinating the female through hair. Various religious teachings adopted such principles and designated head coverings as mandatory for women. Such coverings were placed as central to wedding rituals, throughout the Mediterranean region. In Ancient Palestine, head coverings for Jewish wives became a requirement under the law and women had the possibility to be monetarily punished or divorced for dishevelment and accused promiscuity (Mishnah

Ketubot, as cited in Levine, 1995). In Jewish weddings, the *bedeken* ritual is one of the main events in which the bride is covered, uncovered, and then covered with a veil again during the religious proceedings. In the end, the bride is handed over to the groom and her hair must transform, for the rest of her life, by way of shaving, wigs, and hats. Levine further describes the eternal hair covering as an echoing of the Midrash that explains Jewish brides having to cover as punishment for the "original sin" - the woman repays for her perversion, for her dirtiness (menstruation), and for the "spilling of the blood of Adam" (Midrash, 1982, as cited in Levine, 1995, p. 106).



Figure 2 Kass, D. (1992). *Double Double Yentl (My Elvis)* [Silkscreen and acrylic on canvas painting]. <https://deborahkass.com/warhol-project/my-elvis/double-double-yentl.html>

These acts directed at the heads of women are not just acts of control by way of psychical manipulation but also methods of covering female features, as if with a bottle of white-out. When the writer assumes a mistake or an inconvenience on the page, white liquid is spread over it. No matter how much the writer thinks they are getting rid of the stain, the dark indentation remains forever under the cement. The one in charge of covering is also in charge of wanting to forget; the forgetfulness of the disciplinarian, or the archive master, is a hope that with covering all will be forgotten. Sometimes, what slips through the cracks may not be accidental, but deliberate, as a way to ignore the hard to swallow. The agency of a woman and her proprietorship over her head of hair may be manipulated not just through the straightforward acts of cutting and covering, but through the subtext of these rituals. Forgetting can also serve as an act of intentionality in what to forget, what to cut, what to cover [up]. Of course, with all of these

examples of female hair cutting and covering, a feeling of hopelessness may entrench the mind in regard to the collective female experience.

When I was a baby, I wanted everything to be on my head. I would find any hat in my apartment and place it over my then-blond crown. I would try on buckets and pull over my ears warm stockings. My parents still laugh at those moments and remember fondly how I wanted to be a “rebbetzin” (Yiddish for ‘the wife of a rabbi’) at the age of 3. Back then, covering my hair may have seemed like an innocent act. Maybe this was because what I had growing then was nothing like what I have now. Maybe because back then I was still in charge of the covering. There was no reason to forget it, after all, the female baby’s head is new and fresh on earth, with great years ahead of it.

Is my hair even “me” anymore once it leaves my head and evaporates into public space?

“It is thus, in this domiciliation, in this house arrest, that archives take place. The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret” (Derrida, 1995, p. 10).

While I did end up in a usual spiral of feminist theory while considering and outlining this essay, the decision to write it did not exactly come from that direction. Now I see how crucial it is to tie the two - after all, at the end of the day, I am always my category. The feeling that led me to this piece was one of loss. Every week I must be losing at least a few hundred strands. I encounter the dark strings especially while I shower, and I collect as many as possible to prevent them from going down the drain. The feelings of the drain taking my hair away might feel worse than it is getting cut off. I have no control over this ‘losing’. Everywhere I walk I have the feeling that their presence falls off of me. The feeling of what was once me becoming part of the public space frightens me at times.

As soon as my hair leaves me, I have no control over it, and it does not represent me anymore. Each woman might have experienced walking down the street and feeling a heightened self-awareness or consciousnesses while taking up space on the asphalt. To echo moments in *Archive Fever*, one woman’s existence of hair can also fall under the power of a form of house arrest. The domiciliation of my hair can provide it with varying statuses; within my home,

attached to my head, it is still mine and I am able to act as its controller and worshipper, or greatest critic. The space I reside in is one sort of house for my head that places and positions me into existing, but so is the “house” of my head. Albeit, the permanence of this institution lasts only a day or two and then the self, the curl, the secret, sheds from reality.



Figure 3 Godward, J. W. (1902). *When the heart is young* [Painting]. Wikimedia Commons. https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/5/5a/When_the_heart_is_young%2C_by_John_William_Godward.jpg

The next ancient myth to discuss, of Daphne and Apollo, can provide a mythological outlook to the concept of what’s mine and what’s not - what are the borders to existing. With the two mythological “lovers”, there is a classical narrative of “wooing”. The God of Sun pursued the nymph, against her wishes, to be his wife. Peneus, Daphne’s father, turned his daughter into a laurel tree (Ovid & Mandelbaum, 1993) which followed to symbolize immortality in analyses of the mythos. Daphne’s beautiful long locks no longer are wild, rather, they are eternal and tied to the earth. Daphne no longer has the ability to escape to a secret place, rather her personal safety and female self becomes part of the spiritual substance of nature. The gendered hair can no longer be hurt but it also ceases to be private property; instead, it gives strength to the other by being taken away. My hair stops being mine and my secrets are no longer with me, either. I can only hope that those hairs down the drain remember me.

Shedding may mean I am closer to an end, anyway. The *Freudian Impression* part of Derrida’s discussion on the archive interacts with the specific Freudian concept of the death drive. It could be said that Freud established the obsession with loss as rooted within various dimensions of human existence, both on the inside of oneself and in the public spheres and domains (Derrida, 1995, p. 13). The obsession over mortality may be dependent on space, but it also may lay on my gender. Shearing has been a tool employed by men to control the power of women to both

threaten the mortality of the man with female sexuality and the ability to birth. Thus, the fear of women would create a trimming of both space and hair. We all drift between titles of ownership in every space occupied. The feeling of mortality at the end of it all may be what is mine. The death drive, in the case of my hair, could be embodied inside the locks that disappear, never to be seen again. The loss of the object in the archive can cause the archivist a similar and bothersome feeling, as the institution no longer has objectified symbolism to preserve itself with.

If my self does not belong to me anymore, what does it do? Who can find it and where?

"Archive" is only a notion, an impression associated with a word and for which, together with Freud, we do not have a concept. We only have an impression, an insistent impression through the unstable feeling of a shifting figure, of a schema, or of an in-finite or indefinite process" (Derrida, 1995, p. 24).

Freud's conceptualizations in the *Wunderblock* proved to be influential on Derrida's discussions regarding the archive. In this writing, Freud discusses a "mystic-writing pad" which is made up of two layers, one being a cellulose-type sheet that allows for markings to be made and erased infinitely. Under the first layer is the basis on which everything written on top is a trace, leaving marking for eternity (1925a). For Freud, the Wunderblock can serve as a representation of the human memory, on which every remembrance and piece of information is etched into existence for eternity, with never-ending possibilities to add additional information and retain the old indentations. Remembering tends to be a subconscious process - even if something does not need to be retained, it sticks to the foundational layer of the psyche. I try to own my hair as much as possible but various agents and factors find ways to take hold of it. I fear for the loss, at times. But, even if the hair is not mine anymore, it centers itself into existing by being a part of my memory. My curls and every interaction with them leave imprints - etchings are left in dots, lines, and scratches on what I know of my experience.

The process of mark-making feels endless and we might not have any control over what is left to be imprinted. The floated-away hairs were once growing and part of me. They abided by their own rules while I lean on the language of external forces and spaces. Nonetheless, every dialogue I had with this part of myself remained within me, even if I moved into the next moment of critique or rearrangement. In such a way, it could be dissected that the carrying of my

gendered hair is compared to the Wunderblock-esque impression on my psyche. Of course, most writing pads get covered in sentences. “Giving [somebody] my word” implies a marking of promise. Old-Babylonian prophetic oracles would send their messages to rulers along with cut pieces of their hair to symbolize the authenticity of their words (Esztári & Vér, 2015, p. 27). The remaining memory of my lost hair not only represents me in the world, but it leaves an imprint on my conscience and the information has weight in the transactional space as a symbol.



Figure 4 Weems, C. M. (1990). *Untitled (Woman brushing hair)* [Photograph]. National Gallery of Art. <https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.211457.html>

Gananath Obeyeskere’s touching and intensive anthropological study of Sri Lankan ecstatic women can set a basis for the connection between symbols and memory-imprints. Multiple Hindu-Buddhist women were interviewed due to a common trait between them: snake-like dreadlocks that sprouted on their heads out of nowhere. Most of these women suffered through traumatic events and losses throughout their lives, leading them to gain the ability to receive prophetic dreams in which Gods would claim to gift them thick and painful matted locks. Firstly, according to his research, Obeyeskere reasoned that female hair can be interpreted as a public symbol that takes on a personal dimension through its interpretation. The gendered hair is not only untangled by society due to its appearance out in the open but also the dialogues are then marked into the minds of the women who must grow it (1984). I, and the ecstasies, have no consent over the cultural standards that are set into place that dictate gendered hair as a symbol of whatever. *Medusa’s Hair* also claimed the idea that each individual chooses certain symbol sets that are deeply influenced by both culture and social ranking (Obeyeskere, 1984). We all

may be entrenched not only in the processes of choosing symbols but also in accepting varieties of markings to make impressions on our memories. The Sri Lankan analysis led me to ponder about my worry with the memory of my hair. The ownership of my hair may be temporary but the memory of it lasts. It may be worthwhile to maintain the memoryscape-archive to replace society's commodification and the death drive that it beholds with an appreciative spirituality and personal meaning-giving. According to the culture of the ecstatic women, hair is *dhatu* - a life force (Obeyeskere, 1984).

In a modern sense, hair as a symbol imprints itself not only into my psyche, but into a more grandiose database. Beyond the bothersome feeling of loss and lack of agency over my existence, there is another precarious factor to consider: the positioning of my hair in the surveillance age. With the advancement of the technological age, the most profitable material to harvest from the economy may be the personal information of consumers, leading huge corporations to operate entirely with surveillance tactics and information mining (Zuboff, 2019). In the archival space of our society, how much hair has been absorbed into the vents, walls, and carpeting? What part of the physical DNA has gone into building the structures housing those who watch? Although Big Tech is so involved in the collection of my data, police enforcement has been playing this role for decades. I remember well the visits of local police officers to my kindergarten class and how they would take my fingers, as well as my classmates', and press them into black pieces of foam and collect my prints onto large sheets of paper. Such situations recurred in various formats throughout my upbringing. I am always aware of the surveillance state in front of me, but in the context of this analysis, what about my curls that were once me and now turned into dust? This impression has the potential to be eternal and personal, but also be used for the categorization of myself within a policed society.

Conclusion

Derrida's discussion on the archive serves as an important text aspect to uncover our subconsciousness, one that throws various agents and factors into a deep well of obsession. Within the consciousness there is a certain space for memory to develop and this occurs based on countless external factors. What is important to note is that this processing takes place in our

heads and according to cultivated cultural tropes, a feminine existence must be separated from a patriarchal system through various subordinating methods. Society has often decided that the hair that grows from female heads must be the symbol to control (cover) and conquer (cut). A struggle for ownership of the body ensues, often with violent results that center around fixating on surveillance, self-punishment, and death. Existence (and female existence may be emulated through hair) may skew as subversive by way of choice to uphold personal symbolism in the face of disciplinary culture. After every experience of hair growth, shedding, chopping, or covering, traces are left on the memory/archive. And just like the processes of categorization and archiving, there is a certain endless spiral regarding the gendered hair experience.

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