

## The Ida Partenza Collection

Hernan Diaz's virtuosic and beguiling novel *Trust*, the focus of the Theories and Methodologies cluster in this issue, is a book made up of books. Rather than a single narrative, *Trust* is a compendium of narratives in different genres (novel, ghostwritten autobiography, memoir, diary) offering divergent and competing perspectives on the lives of the fictional Wall Street financier Andrew Bevel and his wife, Mildred. Part of the allure of *Trust* is that it is constructed as a kind of unexplained archive, an assemblage of found texts whose correlations and disparities are left ambiguous.

At the same time, *Trust* is also what Suzanne Keen calls a "romance of the archive," a novel in which "scholarly and amateur characters seek information in collections of documents" (3; see also Cloutier 28). As much as the novel revolves around the complex parallels between finance and fiction, the impetus for its plot is intriguingly archival. If *Trust* can be said to have an origin point, it is not provided in the stolid and tediously burnished family genealogies that open the first and second sections of the novel, or in its depiction of the dizzying heights of financial speculation in the stock market before the 1929 crash, but instead in the decision in 1985 of the writer Ida Partenza to visit the former Bevel mansion on East 87th Street in Manhattan to see the Bevels' recently processed personal papers. "A few months ago, around the time of my seventieth birthday," Ida writes in "A Memoir, Remembered," the third part of *Trust*,

I happened to read in *Smithsonian Magazine* that the Bevel Foundation had recently placed the personal papers of Andrew and Mildred Bevel at the collection. "The archives include correspondence, engagement calendars, scrapbooks, inventories, and notebooks, documenting the lives of Mr. and Mrs. Bevel," states the brief article. "These materials provide a unique insight into the history of a couple whose philanthropic legacy continues to shape America's public and cultural life to this day."

Perhaps because I had just turned seventy, this news—learning those documents were available—had a profound effect on me. I have never cared much for anniversaries or decimal fetishes of any kind.

Still, I could not stop thinking about the events that have shaped my writing life throughout almost five decades. And the Bevel papers are at the beginning of it all. (196)

Just as they are at the origin of her literary career, the Bevel papers, and Ida's compulsion to visit them, are also "at the beginning" of the peculiar quartet gathered in *Trust*.

Looking back, Ida describes herself as an amateur researcher at the point when she was hired by Andrew Bevel to help him write his autobiography: when she goes to the library to study various memoirs by prominent men (Andrew Carnegie, Henry Adams, Henry Ford, Ulysses S. Grant, Calvin Coolidge) in an attempt to glean the necessary tone for Bevel's book, she explains that she "went through them in a chaotic, haphazard fashion, skipping from one to the other without much method, taking random notes without attribution" because she "had no training in archival research or how to properly manage a bibliography" (270). But by the time she writes "A Memoir, Remembered," nearly fifty years later, as the accomplished author of numerous books, Ida presents herself as a seasoned researcher, mentioning in passing that in her efforts to understand her Italian immigrant father's involvement in anarchist movements, she found that "between 1870 and 1940 about five hundred anarchist periodicals were published in the United States. That virtually no trace remains of that vast number of publications and the even vaster number of people behind them shows how utterly anarchists have been erased from American history" (282). In recounting how she came to be hired by Bevel, a fortuitous detail (she remembers that, on the day she went to interview for the position, there was a review in the newspaper of Graham Greene's novel *Brighton Rock*, in which the protagonist's name is Ida) allows her to reconstruct the date with precision: "This detail made it easier, decades later, when I was browsing through reels of microfilms of *The New York Times*, to establish that morning's date. June 26, 1938" (200–01). Likewise, one of the ways the novel signals Mildred Bevel's intelligence and worldliness is by hinting that Mildred

herself was an inveterate researcher, compiling thick scrapbooks of newspaper clippings about developments in global politics, economics, and current affairs marked up with "dense annotations and marginalia" (298), and a passionate reader with a library of books "heavily underlined in pencil, dogeared, spotted with tea or coffee" (330).

The research story in *Trust* culminates in Ida's discovery of Mildred Bevel's diary in a charity ledger in the archive, which sets the stage for the novel's "gratifying" (as Arne De Boever puts it in his essay in this issue) albeit improbably elegant conclusion; the book's final section consists of what appears to be Ida's transcription of Mildred's elliptical entries. Given the mysterious and wildly conflicting portraits of Mildred in the first two sections of the novel, *Trust* in its very arrangement primes us to receive the miraculous surfacing of Mildred's diary as "a message finally arriving at its destination," even if we cannot help, like Ida herself, being "bothered" by her "certainty that Mildred would have liked me to have these papers" (357).

If the third section of the novel is a ghostwriter's memoir—Ida's recounting of her work on Bevel's autobiography (which is also framed as the first public revelation of that project, since it remained unfinished at the time of his sudden death and was therefore never published)—then *Trust* as a compendium is something more curious: a ghostwriter's archival collection. Ida does encounter drafts of the ghostwritten autobiography she was working on in 1938 in Bevel's papers, but the manuscript included as the second section of the novel (under the title "My Life" and attributed to Andrew Bevel) is manifestly not those materials, since it does not include what Ida describes as Bevel's "notes to my text" and editorial emendations: "he strikes through this line, crosses out that paragraph, moves a circled passage to the top or the bottom of the page with an abrupt arrow. Scattered all over the pages are several asterisks indicating sections to be discussed in person so that he could point out inaccuracies, correct the tone or address other issues that were too long for him to put in writing" (299). Instead, what is included in *Trust* appears to be the working draft that Ida had

in her possession when Bevel died unexpectedly, replete with her curt notes to herself about elements to be filled in or expanded later: "His math treatise. Title. Summarize" (141); "More about mother" (145); "More home scenes. Her little touches. Anecdotes" (164). She mentions that, given the secrecy of their arrangement and the chaos following his death, she was never asked to return the manuscript or to vacate the apartment that Bevel had provided for her (352).

The inherent drama of the minor genre of the ghostwriter's memoir is rooted in the open antagonism between what Deborah Brandt points out are "competing concepts of authorship, one associated with the power of contractual control and the other with the power of the act of writing itself" (554).<sup>1</sup> *Trust* documents Andrew Bevel's megalomania and vindictiveness in enough detail to convey the risk Ida senses in penning her memoir about their collaboration, even decades after his death. "I have never allowed myself to tell the story" of the ways "I owe the fact that I am a writer to the Bevels," Ida writes, "possibly because I was still afraid of Andrew's retaliation, even beyond the grave" (197). When she is hired, she signs a contract explicitly stating that, as Bevel summarizes it, "under no circumstances may you discuss, share or comment on any of the things that will be mentioned here" (257). The contractual acquiescence to invisibility haunts her even as she dares to write her memoir, even if the lingering peril remains inert: "It is not unlikely that I am still bound to confidentiality by that agreement. This particular document has not come up in my archival research into Bevel's papers so far. The estate's counsel has told me that the law firm held on retainer back then no longer exists. And this is as far as I intend to take the matter" (257).

But *Trust* is a transgression not only in that the ghost speaks. Ida does not simply provide her own perspective on her work with Bevel; the book also contains the incomplete and unapproved manuscript of the autobiography. Moreover, *Trust* opens not with Bevel's self-portrait but with Harold Vanner's novel "Bonds," the very book whose supposedly slanderous inaccuracies prompted Bevel to commission his autobiography in the first place.

"The imaginary events in that piece of fiction now have a stronger presence in the real world than the actual facts of my life," Bevel tells Ida. "I won't allow for this opprobrious fabrication to become the story of my life, for this vile fantasy to soil the memory of my wife" (237). Ida notes in detail Bevel's extraordinary efforts to eradicate Vanner's novel—which include acquiring the publisher of "Bonds" in order to pulp each and every copy of the book (287), and even using his influence at the New York Public Library to erase any trace of Vanner's work from the card catalog (313). And her evocative reminder that she still possesses what may well be the only extant copy of Vanner's book ("As I type these words, I am looking at that very book that Andrew Bevel gave me that day" [236]) seems intended to hint that she is the source of the text of "Bonds" that is relaunched into circulation as the first section of *Trust*.

In the wake of Ida's memoir, this supposition is only cemented by the fourth and final section of *Trust*, which consists of a transcription of Mildred's handwritten diary. The only copy of that "slim notebook" is in Ida's possession, we learn in the memoir, because she brazenly stole it from the Bevel House archives:

I am shocked at myself as I hide the journal among my papers and pack it into my bag. . . .

But this is not theft, I tell myself. This is a conversation starting after a decades-long delay. A message finally arriving at its destination. These pages have been waiting a lifetime to be read. If they can be read.

Still, I am bothered by my arrogance—the feeling that the words in there are addressed to me. I am bothered by how easy it is to convince myself that I have a right to this notebook. . . . I am bothered by my certainty that Mildred would have liked me to have these papers. And yet I get up, thank the librarians and walk out of the building and into the cold with Mildred Bevel's diary in my bag, thinking how lovely it would be to finally hear her voice. (356–57)

The "cornerstone" of the field of archival science is the concept of *respect des fonds*, which refers to the "basic principle" that the archivist must strive

to maintain as a “group, without mixing them with others, the archives (documents of every kind) created by or coming from an administration, establishment, person, or corporate body” (Duchain 64; see also Cook 26). In English this principle is commonly summarized as the principle of *provenance*, the commitment to preserve the “integrity” of the records of a given creator as distinct from other groups of records (Cook 25). From an archivist’s perspective, it would be hard to overstate how shocking Ida’s act is. In stealing the diary, she is not simply rearranging materials or mixing documents from different sources; she spirits a unique artifact out of the repository altogether.<sup>2</sup> Even if the memoir admits to this theft, and even if the inclusion of the transcribed diary in the compendium of texts in *Trust* might be considered a means of partial redress by making it available, still in pilfering the diary out of the charity ledger where it had been lodged, Ida is guilty of an irreparable violation of the “integrity”—the wholeness as a repository—of Mildred Bevel’s papers.

Unlike other examples that come to mind, such as J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Foe*, which is similarly divided into four strikingly different sections but which concludes with an enigmatic first-person narrator in the final few pages,<sup>3</sup> *Trust* does not seem to provide what Pieter Vermeulen (in his essay in this issue) terms its “articulating instance”: that is, it does not identify the agent who gathers its multiple voices, the “ultimate focalizer” (Ina Gräbe qtd. in Head 123) who stands outside and above their competing narratives. But even if that agency is never quite explicitly associated with a particular character, the ghostly trace of an articulating hand is woven into the very form of the novel, in the gathering and ordering of the texts of which it is composed, which can be attributed only to Ida Partenza. If *Trust* is best understood as a particular sort of metafiction, as Vermeulen argues—or even as an “anarchist novel,” as De Boever cleverly suggests—its self-reflexivity is rooted in its form as what Marco Codebò calls an archival historical novel (194). Ida is “emphatically *Trust*’s writer,” De Boever concludes, “who is still playing with us here long after the detective plot in the finance

novel has been resolved”; but if this is so, one of the ways she is toying with us is that she is equally emphatically *Trust*’s archivist. *Trust* is and can only be the Ida Partenza collection.

It would perhaps be more precise to say that just as Ida is the book’s ghostwriter, she is equally its ghost archivist. Put differently, *Trust* takes advantage of the fact that spectrality is the condition of the archive. Whether state or institutional records, business files or personal papers, archives are never accompanied by a statement of purpose or testament from their originators, explaining which traces matter in an overarching rationale that would somehow resolve the ambiguities and internal tensions among their contents. An archive’s guiding principles of preservation and value are intimated only by the discursive and material relationships (sometimes cryptic, sometimes shifting) within and among the documents themselves. If the novel ultimately asks readers to question the “tacit contracts” behind any assumption of trust in the broadest sense—as Diaz himself puts it, “as you read *Trust* and move forward from one section to the next, it becomes clear that the book is asking you to question the assumptions with which you walk into a text” (“Writing”)—the primary mechanism it uses is its archival form: its preservation of disparate documents in a single collection.

In saying that the novel takes the appearance of a *collection* I mean to underline that it is not quite correct to describe *Trust* as Ida Partenza’s personal papers or *fonds*, in the sense of a group of materials from a single creator. If the book includes some documents she herself had a hand in making, such as the incomplete autobiography and the memoir, it also includes the notebook stolen from the papers of Mildred Bevel. At a number of points, Ida’s memoir explicitly indexes items that could be considered proper to her own personal papers, including not only the copy of Vanner’s “Bonds” given to her by Andrew Bevel but also a single edition of her own short stories that her father printed for her as a present when she was nine years old (“I have the only existing copy of this book here, before me” [202]) and a photo of her mother (“This is the only picture of my mother, taken before she got married. She

must be around the same age I was during my interviews for Bevel Investments” [227])—referencing them in the scene of writing but not providing them in the compendium that is *Trust*, as though to remind us that as much as it looks like an archive, this book is not her *fonds*.

In the vocabulary of archival science, there is a distinction between the organic creation of the *fonds*, as a cache of materials that are the result of the natural self-documentation of a person or organization in the course of its activities, on the one hand, and the artificial production of a *collection*, as a deliberately constructed assemblage of materials from various sources, on the other. One might go so far as to say that in its form as a collection, *Trust* must be understood as what Carol Couture and Jean-Yves Rousseau call an “anti-*fonds*,” in that its very composition is a violation of the logic of the *fonds* (qtd. in Cook 27). Even if a neat distinction between “organic” and “artificial” modes of documentation may be untenable, as Geoffrey Yeo points out (52), it is still useful to distinguish between a *fonds* as an “intellectual construct” (53)—representing what Terry Cook describes as “the conceptual ‘whole’ that reflects an organic process in which a records creator produces or accumulates series of records which themselves exhibit a natural unity based on shared function, activity, form or use” (33)—and a collection as a primarily *physical* mode of arrangement (Yeo 52).

As satisfying as the revelation of Mildred Bevel’s diary in the fourth section of *Trust* may be, the fact that Ida repeatedly emphasizes that Mildred’s script is “almost impenetrable” (294) serves to cast doubt on its reliability. As a number of the contributors to this issue’s cluster point out, if Mildred had such “terrible handwriting” (254), then the transcription in part 4 seems unbelievably clean and complete, written in a distinctive shorthand but with no explicit gaps or markers of illegibility.

But there is also an archival explanation for this insistence on her “runic” penmanship (294). When Ida requests to consult the papers, the chief librarian at the Bevel House tells her that the staff’s inability to decipher Mildred Bevel’s handwriting “has affected the way in which her documents are cataloged.

We’ve been forced to group things based merely on format and size, rather than on subject. So we apologize in advance if you find that the content of the boxes is somewhat heterogeneous” (254–55). In addition to file folders with papers and documents, the librarians allow her to peruse “little parcels wrapped in brown paper tied with twine that contain fragile notepads and notebooks that sometimes contain loose sheets and even slim journals or calendars wedged between their pages” (293). Ida realizes that “no one has read them since they were stored away” (293). In other words, the materials haven’t been separated into series by type and chronology, which is what makes possible Ida’s dramatic discovery of Mildred’s diary where it shouldn’t have been, “wedged into the middle section” of an expense ledger from one of her charities (356). In what is perhaps an exorbitant flourish, Mildred actually explains her ad hoc filing in the diary itself, noting in one entry that she has started hiding it in the ledger (382), so that her husband will not come across it and realize that she has been writing about their “queer collaboration” in stock market speculation (386).

In her groundbreaking work on approaches to personal papers in archival processing, Catherine Hobbs notes insightfully that the specific ways individuals compile the materials they keep are “meaningful because their physical and intellectual arrangement can demonstrate thoughts and actions. If we look carefully, we see a granularity of linkages between physical and intellectual arrangement; the placement of items within files can indicate working patterns or ideas or decisions” (“Reenvisioning” 228). But these practices of arrangement can be difficult for researchers to discern because they are all too often ironed out or “filtered”<sup>4</sup> in the standardization of archival processing:

Researchers who are familiar with finding aids will be accustomed to knowing very little about these original states of order and re-order. Yet what is the advantage of seeing this type of information? At the very least, it keeps vestiges of the process of work and the uses of the document by the creator. By not typically including such information in finding aids, archivists give

the impression that the fonds, or at least the fonds conveyed through the description, is consistent in form. These descriptions imply orderliness. This “dressing up” of personal lives diminishes the human aspect of the material and borders on the unethical. (Hobbs, “Personal Ethics” 185)

The archival term for these states is “original order,” which is, along with provenance, the other key component of the concept of *respect des fonds*. The term signals the archivist's core commitment to the preservation of “the logical structure and internal arrangement of the records of each creator” (Cook 25). In the example of Ida's discovery of Mildred's diary, what is thrilling is not only that Ida finds the notebook itself, but also that she discerns the original order of Mildred's handling of her own papers: the ways her idiosyncratic and improvised practices of arrangement—how Mildred kept her own stuff—came to be meaningful to her in the context of her life.

If *Trust* asks to be read as a sort of archival collection, then it should compel us to ask about its own original order as well. Why are the pieces arranged in the order they are? Once the reader has read through the entire book, the sequence no longer seems to make sense. By the internal logic of the documents gathered in the novel, it should start with Ida's memoir, followed by the Vanner novel, the unfinished manuscript of the Bevel autobiography, and Mildred's diary as appendixes—items that emerge as pieces of evidence in the course of Ida's explanation of her work with Bevel decades earlier. However, rather than assume that there is a “correct” order, Hobbs argues powerfully, we must learn to accept the “ambiguity of . . . purpose and intention” in the arrangement of records (“Character” 132). In this instance, it is tempting to surmise that the seemingly illogical order of the novel's contents is precisely what creates the mystery of *Trust*: reading the Vanner novel and then the fragmentary Bevel autobiography without having their relationship explained in advance creates a dissonance between the two portraits of the tycoon and his wife, and provokes the reader to question their

own assumptions about what it means to trust a fictional narrative.

Ida recalls that when she read Vanner's “Bonds” as a young woman she was impressed with the way its prose seemed to conjoin “ambiguity” with “extreme discipline”: “Lucidity, [Vanner] seems to suggest, is the best hiding place for deeper meaning—much like a transparent thing stacked in between others” (246). This observation echoes something one could say about *Trust* itself at the level of its form: its limpid organization—a sequence of “books” arranged neatly in a row—is the means by which it teaches us to read with an archival sensibility.

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## NOTES

1. See Knapp and Hulbert 49–51 for a discussion of John McDonald's *A Ghost's Memoir*, about the infamous backroom attempt to cancel publication of *My Years with General Motors*, the memoir McDonald wrote for the General Motors executive Alfred P. Sloan, Jr. See Einhorn (“Ghosts Talk,” “Ghosts Unmasked,” and “Ghostwriting”) for revelatory interviews with a number of political speechwriters; see Moehringer for a vivid behind-the-scenes take on the particular dynamics of the ghost-written celebrity memoir.

2. See Leff's engrossing study of the ambiguous legacy of the pioneering historian and collector Zosa Szajkowski, who may be the most notorious “archive thief” in the history of French Judaica.

3. Much of the voluminous scholarship on Coetzee's *Foe* grapples with the implications of the two short first-person passages in the last section of the novel; as Bongie observes, “given all of the cautions that have preceded this affirmative moment, the narrator's arrival at ‘the home of Friday’ can only seem an altogether unlikely invention of the non-figural. . . . This encounter with the very thing that the rest of the novel has put into question cannot, for that reason, be fully credited” (278).

4. On the ways the processing and organization of papers can impose an “archival filter,” see also Douglas, who observes: “Although the archivist is able to view records in their ‘original’ state—that is, in the state in which they arrive at a repository before they are re-folded, re-boxed, and described using archival concepts and language (e.g., fonds, series, sub-series, etc.)—the researcher who later uses these records does not have this privilege and is therefore always viewing the archive through the archival filter. This filter adds one more barrier between the researcher and the ‘real’ or historical ‘I,’ to whom the researcher may be hoping—or expecting—to be granted access” (84).

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