

# Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa

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## **Introduction**

The struggle against apartheid and the building of democracy has worked, and continues to work, fundamental changes in the sphere of social memory. And, increasingly, the manifold repositories and dynamics of memory in South Africa are being reshaped by technological revolution, international engagement, and exposure to the conditions of postmodernity.<sup>1</sup> This is the shifting ground on which archives – as discipline, profession, repository of memory, public service – finds itself. The 1990s have seen the supplanting of a sterile, outmoded archival discourse by what I call a transformation discourse – one informed by the assumption that archives require reinvention for a democratic South Africa.<sup>2</sup> This discourse connects assuredly with the country's new societal dynamics, and underpins endeavours to transform South Africa's archives system.<sup>3</sup> And yet, as I shall argue in this article, in the same way that apartheid patterns in society are proving extremely resilient, in archives many of our core ideas resist new realities, at most entertaining re-formation (rather than trans-formation). These ideas, or formulations, are still embedded in a paradigm I would describe as pre-postmodern or, more precisely, as Positivist. They continue to shape fundamentally how archivists conceptualize themselves and their endeavours.<sup>4</sup> They also raise significant questions about the nature of transformation in South African archives.

## *Positivist Formulations*

By "Positivist" I refer to ideas stemming from the Positivism first given coherent expression by Auguste Comte in the first half of the nineteenth century and developed along various strands of Western philosophy into this century. Positivism posits a universe governed by natural laws, and a reality which is knowable. This knowledge is attainable through the exercise of reason and the application of empirical methods. The one who knows, the subject,

stands apart from the natural world, the object. Science, and scientific enquiry, hold pre-eminent intellectual authority and carry the key to an inevitable human progress towards peace, prosperity, wisdom, and dominion over nature.

This is the crucible of ideas out of which modern archives – “archival science” – emerged in the nineteenth century. We have travelled a long road since then, but, it is my contention, many of the route markers continue to bear a Positivist imprint.

At the outset, I wish to record several disclaimers. Firstly, I am not suggesting the existence of a coherent Positivist position or school of thought. Secondly, I am not suggesting that there is any one individual who would align (him)herself with all the formulations which I outline below. Thirdly, I am not denying the impact on South African archival discourse of later manifestations of modernism in Western philosophy. And fourthly, I am not disputing the fact that meaningful transformation is taking place in South African archives. What I am suggesting is that archival discourse in this country is dominated by a Positivist paradigm which has been dominant for a very long time and which cries out for interrogation.

Let me offer an outline of what I regard as the core Positivist formulations:

1. The meaning of the word “archives” is simple, stable, and uncontested. Archives are documents or records, in whatever medium, identified for preservation in archival custody; an archives is the place where such records are preserved or an institution providing such places.<sup>5</sup> The same attributes apply to a host of related words – archive, archivist, record, document, copy, original, unique, and so on.
2. Archives, in the sense of archival records, are the organic and innocent product of processes exterior to archivists and reflect, provide an image of, are evidence of, those processes.<sup>6</sup> Stated more crudely, the idea is that archives reflect reality.
3. While it is true that transformation discourse has substituted the notion of archivists as *impartial* custodians with the view of them as active shapers of social memory,<sup>7</sup> this discourse:
  - still defines archival endeavour in terms of custodianship and conceptualizes archives in terms of physical things and places of custody;
  - proposes a (narrower) shaping of the record as the carrier of memory rather than a (broader) participation in the processes of memory formation; and
  - posits the primary archival challenge as being the preservation of a wider and richer reflection of reality.
4. Archives are South Africa’s central memory institutions, preserving (holding, keeping) the collective memory of the nation.<sup>8</sup>
5. South Africa’s transformation project in archives is interpreted in triumphalist terms.<sup>9</sup> Particular emphasis is placed on the following:

- the emergence of numerous new archival institutions in the last decade;
- the formulation of national policies on heritage, archives, and related fields through broadly participative processes;
- the passing of the *National Archives of South Africa Act* as the first of several interlinking pieces of legislation that will form the framework within which a new national archives system will develop;
- the considerable support given by public archives to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Commission on the Restitution of Land Rights, the Investigation Task Unit, and other public bodies;
- the growing number and range of archives users;
- the expansion of oral history projects; and
- the National Archives' new mandates to fill gaps in its collections and to reach out to less privileged sectors of society.

### *A Critique*

#### *Words*

I would now like to take each of the formulations in turn, beginning with the word "archives," and offer a critique from what could be called a postmodernist (certainly a post-Positivist) perspective. The French philosopher Jacques Derrida regards the word "archive" as the least reliable, least clear of any today.<sup>10</sup> It was Freud, with his unfolding of the unconscious and repression (that instinct of forgetfulness at the very heart of memorization), who made possible the idea of an "archive" without "archives."<sup>11</sup> Michel Foucault defined "the archive" as the assemblage of all discursive formations existing in a given society.<sup>12</sup> Derrida himself, with his insistence on sign rather than image, questions any simple notion of archives as the documentation of process, let alone as a reflection of reality.<sup>13</sup> Within archival discourse narrowly defined, on the international stage there are a growing number of theorists indebted to postmodernism who are reconceptualizing the word "archives." Much of their endeavour involves finding meaning for the word in the electronic environment. This is a complex tapestry, but let me pull out a few threads to illustrate what is involved:

- "... The structure, content, and context of electronic records exist in virtual or conceptual rather than in physical reality ... there is information scattered in many places which the software and operating system stitch together at a particular moment in time to form that logical or virtual document."<sup>14</sup>
- With technologies like geographical information systems, relational databases and hypertext formats, where users are presented with a series of constantly changing data "views," it is difficult to "detain" or "fix" a record.
- What constitutes "the record" in a database environment? The whole data-

base? “Views” of the database in electronic or hard copy form? The trace of a transaction between a user and the database?

- Electronic record-keeping renders the words “original” and “unique” meaningless, and invests others – such as “archive,” “copy,” and “file” – with extraordinary complexity.

My point, simply, is this: the words and concepts which are archivists’ basic tools are anything but simple, stable, and uncontested. The ground is shifting.

### *A Reflection of Reality*

And it slides away precipitously beneath notions of the archival record as a reflection of reality. Of course, the assumption that there is “a reality” capable of reflection in records is debatable from a number of perspectives. This full frontal attack I shall forego, offering instead three outflanking manoeuvres. Firstly, even if there is “a reality,” ultimately it is unknowable. The event, the process, the origin, in its *uniqueness*, is irrecoverable, unfindable. As Derrida points out: “The possibility of the archiving trace, this simple *possibility*, can only divide the uniqueness.”<sup>15</sup> Secondly, while it is self-evident that the record is a product of process, it must be acknowledged that process is shaped fundamentally by the record or, more precisely, by the act of recording. Compare, for instance, someone penning a letter to a friend with the same person sending an e-mail communication to the friend. Not only are the experiences vastly different – in terms of duration, susceptibility to response, use of materials, use of the human body, and so on – but each medium stimulates particular thought patterns, encourages particular tones, or registers and fosters particular uses of language. Essentially, e-mail communication is a combination of conversation and correspondence; it is both, and it is neither. And thirdly, if archival records reflect reality, they do so complicitly, and in a deeply fractured and shifting way. They do not speak by themselves. They speak through many voices, including those of archivists. Far from enjoying an exteriority in relation to the record, archivists participate in the complex processes through which the record feeds into social memory. Let me illustrate these various points with the example of a researcher consulting a correspondence file originating from a government office:

- There are the voices of the documents’ authors, formal and informal. Who are they? What functional-structural context animates and shapes them? What are their purposes, explicit and implicit? What are they hiding? What do they fail to see?
- There are the voices (usually silent) of the bureaucrats who used and managed the file. Did they place all relevant documentation on the file? It could be that related documents were placed on other files. It could be that

material was never filed officially, but rather kept informally by officials and subsequently disposed of. Documents, even whole files, may have been destroyed to protect the interests of individuals or the office. So the researcher might be, and in most cases will be, looking at a partial, deliberately constructed representation of process. And the representation, as Foucault has demonstrated in various contexts, will bear indelibly the markings of the bureaucratic systems which spawned it.

- There are the voices of archivists. Why did they choose to preserve the file? What related records did they choose not to preserve? What policies, strategies, and methodologies informed the decision? How have they arranged and described the file? What descriptive connections to other records have they provided? How are they making the file available? And in all of this, what narratives, what sectors of the state, what societal processes, what categories of record, what user groups are archivists privileging?

(This interrogation of the file is about *context* – context to the text which the researcher reads in the file. Any reading of the text without this accompanying peeling back of layers of intervention and interpretation will be deeply flawed. And here, precisely, is the heart of archival endeavour – disclosure of context. The primary archival challenge, I would argue, is not the preservation of a wider and richer reflection of reality – although I would concede that a wider and richer documentation of *realities* is a major challenge – but rather the provision of a richer contextualization of what is preserved.)

- But to return one last time to the government correspondence file, there are the voices of the researchers who use the file. Each one brings to the reading a unique perspective, and each one adds his/her own voice to the many others through which the file speaks. So there can be no closing of the file, no closing of the archive. Each new user voice, indeed merely the *possibility* of a new user voice, will keep it open, as, of course, will the constantly changing archival context. Over time the file will be joined in archival custody by other records, its description will be expanded or revised, and it will be made available in different ways and contexts. And, if the file were an electronic record, it would continually be renewed (and reshaped) as it is migrated forward to new generations of technology. The archive, as Derrida puts it, “opens out of the future.”<sup>16</sup>

### *Defining the Role of Custody and Custodianship*

The ground is also shifting under the notion that custody and custodianship define the archive. The electronic age is moving archivists inexorably into what has been called a post-custodial era.<sup>17</sup> One of the more tangible indications of this is the growing practice by national archives of requiring archival electronic

records to be managed in environments other than archives repositories.<sup>18</sup> But there are many other indicators. Electronic record-keeping is forcing archivists into active involvement in the processes of record creation. There they are confronted by complex and fluid organizational structures and systems, information in vast quantities, records not visible to the human eye, and virtual rather than physical records. These realities are reshaping profoundly core archival functions. We are having to shift our focus from archives to archiving, from physical things to processes. Success in this new world hinges to a large extent on our willingness, in the words of Terry Cook, to “... stop being custodians of things and start being purveyors of concepts.”<sup>19</sup>

### *Archives as Memory of the Nation*

The notion that custody and custodianship define the archives underpins, of course, the view of South African archives as holding the collective memory of the nation. Setting aside the question of whether the term “collective memory” means anything at all, this view dismisses the role of libraries, museums, art galleries, and other repositories of memory, not least the memories of individuals. It also suggests a glibness about the complex processes through which archives record and feed into social memory. I have already addressed several aspects of this. At this point I wish simply to focus briefly on the *extent* of the archiving trace offered by archives. I shall not revisit my argument on the irrecoverability of the event, except to assert that the record provides just a sliver of a window into the event. Even if we were to preserve every record generated throughout South Africa, and conceding the remarkably comprehensive and detailed documentation of process offered by the computer, we would still only have a sliver of a window into South African experience. But of course in practice this record universum is substantially reduced through deliberate and inadvertent destruction by records creators and managers, leaving a sliver of a sliver from which archivists select what they will preserve. And they do not preserve much – for instance, at present the National Archives aims to preserve five per cent of all public records. Moreover, no record, no matter how well protected and cared for by archivists, enjoys an unlimited lifespan. Preservation strategies can, at best, aim to save *versions* of *most* archival records.<sup>20</sup> So archives offer researchers a sliver of a sliver of a sliver.<sup>21</sup> If the repositories of archives are South Africa’s central memory institutions, then we are in deep, amnesic trouble.

Let me at once insist that I am not counselling despair, nor am I portraying the archival endeavour as a Sisyphus-like act of heroic futility. A Rationalist, or worse, a Positivist reading of the “sliver of a sliver of a sliver” would lead to this conclusion. An *imaginative* reading would emphasize the preciousness of the complex fragment which we preserve and feed into social memory. Moreover, the fragment plays a fundamental role in the documentation of citizens’ endur-

ing civic, legal, property, and other rights. And archivists with records management responsibilities promote corporate efficiency, accountability, and transparency. The archival endeavour, I would argue, is of critical importance to any society. But Positivist notions prevent us from unfolding the full richness of archives and, ultimately, undermine the archival endeavour.

### *Triumphalism*

Finally, I turn to the triumphalist interpretation of our archival transformation project. All the tangible indications of change and development which I recounted earlier in this article constitute a sound foundation on which to build. Indeed, I would go further and say that what has been achieved in a very short space of time is remarkable. Nevertheless, the sounding of a strong cautionary note is appropriate. Much of my critique up to this point has attempted to do so indirectly. Let me complete the note by making two final direct points :

1. Derrida has argued compellingly that control over the recording of memory – what he calls consignment – is at the heart of political power.<sup>22</sup> It follows that if archives were indeed so central to social memory, then archival institutions would be powerful, well-resourced, and controlled tightly by the state. The contrary, of course, is true. Even in the public sector, archives enjoy substantial professional autonomy. And with very few exceptions South African archives, in both public and private sectors, are struggling to keep the ship afloat as budget cuts and staff reductions take their toll. The same can be said of libraries, museums, and art galleries. Indeed, it could be argued that archives receive an inordinately high proportion of funding relative to their impact on society in comparison with these institutions.<sup>23</sup> My point, simply, is this: none of these institutions is as central to social memory as professional practitioners like to believe
2. Transformation discourse places particular emphasis on the need for archives to reach out to society<sup>24</sup> – to *create* rather than merely *serve* users – and to document societal processes more fully, with special emphasis on endeavours to give voice to the voiceless.<sup>25</sup> These are laudable objectives, and they are generating many innovative initiatives in archives. But let me flag issues which highlight the need for caution:
  - On the one hand, archives are reaching a fraction of the audience being reached by libraries, museums, art galleries, and other repositories of memory.<sup>26</sup> On the other, in pressing to reach out more effectively, too frequently archives are opting for the neatly packaged information product rather than the rich contextualization of text. And in doing so we are contributing to what Jean-Francois Lyotard has called the commodification

of knowledge.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, much of our outreach provides little or no space for competing narratives. We adopt the language of meta-narrative too easily, using our exhibitions, posters, pamphlets, and so on to tell the story of, for instance, the struggle against apartheid, or of nation building, or of transformation. The counter-narratives, even the sub-narratives, too frequently are excluded, and so we deny our audience the very space in which democracy thrives.

- South Africa has a wealth of experience with oral history and tradition, and extensive resources in these fields.<sup>28</sup> However, both in the work that has been done and in the planning of future projects, there is a worrying tendency to underestimate, or simply not to grasp, the problematic of converting orality into material custody. There are two aspects to this. The first is a determination to view and to utilize recorded oral history as “source” rather than as “history” in its own right.<sup>29</sup> This is to privilege certain forms of history, particularly academic history, over other forms. The second is a failure to understand the extent to which oral history, in the words of Isabel Hofmeyr, “live(s) by its fluidity.”<sup>30</sup> As Lyotard has argued, “a collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence ... finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts, but also in the act of reciting them.”<sup>31</sup> The act of recitation *carries* the meaning. This fluid context to the “text” is inextricably linked to *inter alia* social situation, space, landscape, physical landmarks, and items of material culture,<sup>32</sup> and sustains (and validates) a collectivity’s re-telling, re-vision, re-interpretation of its narratives. The recording of narrative, the archiving of orality, can so easily destroy the fluidity, destroy the contextual links, alienate the speaker from the word. And the attempt to give voice to the voiceless ironically becomes a reinforcement of voicelessness.

### ***Conclusion***

South African archivists, I have argued, are on shifting ground. While we are coming to terms with post-apartheid societal realities, we have been less successful in coming to terms with technological revolution and the conditions of post-modernity. We cling to outmoded Positivist ideas which underpin inappropriate strategies, distorted notions of our role, and inflated accounts of our accomplishments. In doing so we invite the kind of criticism offered by Richard Tarnas of contemporary Western culture: “In the absence of any viable, embracing cultural vision, old assumptions remain blunderingly in force, providing an increasingly unworkable and dangerous blueprint for human thought and activity.”<sup>33</sup> Instead, we need to rediscover ourselves as contextualizers in an age where context is more complex and more fluid than ever before. We need to broaden our concept of context to accommodate our



own intervention, the interdependence of the many fields and institutions making up the arena of social memory, and the importance of disclosing what is absent from the archival sliver. We need to embrace *process* rather than *product*. And we need to foster the contestation of social memory, seeing ourselves, conducting ourselves, not as referees but as contestants. Some would regard all this as a sure way of handicapping ourselves terminally – of subverting our capacity to provide services through excessive philosophizing, contextualizing, self-reflection, self-disclosure, self-deconstruction, and engagement in processes not strictly “archival.” I see it as a way of opening up space for imagination, for connection, for soul. And I see it as a way toward providing a more profound and enriched transformation of South African archives.

## Notes

- \* I must record my gratefulness and indebtedness to Terry Cook (National Archives of Canada) and Tim Nuttall (University of Natal) for commenting on a first draft of this article. I remain, of course, fully responsible for the final text. On 24 September 1997 I presented it as a paper at the seminar *The Role Records Play in Revealing the Past*, hosted by the Alan Paton Centre and the South African Society of Archivists in Pietermaritzburg.
- 1 The word “postmodernity” means different things to different people. In this article I use it in the sense employed by Jean-Francois Lyotard in his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis, 1984). He uses the word “postmodern” to describe “... the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies ... it designates the state of our culture following the transformations which, since the end of the nineteenth century, have altered the game rules for science, literature, and the arts” (p. xxiii). Richard Tarnas employs it similarly, positing an intellectual sensibility “increasingly bereft of established certainties, yet also fundamentally open in ways it had never been before. *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas that have Shaped our World View* (New York, 1991), p. 394.
- 2 For an extended account and contextualization of this discourse, see my “Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–1996,” *Archivaria* 42 (Fall 1996).
- 3 The extent to which this discourse informed the *National Archives of South Africa Act* (1996) is explored in my “Transforming Discourse and Legislation: A Perspective on South Africa’s New National Archives Act,” *ACARM Newsletter* 18 (1996).
- 4 These Positivist ideas also, of course, shape what archivists understand by “the past,” what archivists understand by “revealing the past,” and how archivists go about “revealing the past.”
- 5 This understanding of the word “archives” is pervasive in South African archival discourse. A good example appears in the South African Society of Archivists’ *Professional Code for South African Archivists* (Pretoria, 1993), section one.
- 6 Numerous examples of this type of formulation could be cited. One appears in the 1995 Annual Report of the Director of Archives: *Annual Reports of the Directorate State Archives and Heraldic Services*, RP41/1996, p. 1. Another appears in the “Report on Archives in South Africa by Luli Callinicos and André Odendaal, Convenors of the Archives Sub-committee of the Arts and Culture Task Group (ACTAG),” *South African Archives Journal* 38 (1996), p. 35 (par. 3.1).
- 7 See Harris, “Redefining Archives in South Africa,” p. 16.
- 8 The 1995 Annual Report of the Director of Archives, for instance, asserts that “the State Archives Service is responsible for preserving a national archival heritage ... In a sense this

- heritage is the collective memory of the government and the people" (p. 1).
- 9 While it is true that this note is sounded loudest from political platforms, it is also heard in institutional annual reports, publicity materials, conference floors, and in the professional literature.
  - 10 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London, 1996), p. 90.
  - 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 66, 91, and 92.
  - 12 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York, 1992), pp. 128–30.
  - 13 Barbara Belyea, "Images of Power: Derrida/Foucault/Harley," *Cartographica* 29, no. 2 (1992), pp. 4, 5, and 7.
  - 14 Terry Cook, "Keeping Our Electronic Memory: Approaches for Securing Computer-generated Records," *South African Archives Journal* 37 (1995), p. 89.
  - 15 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 100.
  - 16 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
  - 17 For a powerful articulation of this argument, see Terry Cook, "Electronic Records, Paper Minds: the Revolution in Information Management and Archives in the Post-custodial and Post-modernist Era," *Archives and Manuscripts* 22, no. 2 (1994). See in particular p. 307 of this article.
  - 18 The National Archives of South Africa utilizes a state computer bureau (Bureau Nucleus) for the management of its archival electronic records. It also has a policy identifying categories of electronic record which are best preserved by the creating body. See also Terry Cook, "Leaving Archival Electronic Records in Institutions: Policy and Monitoring Arrangements at the National Archives of Canada," *Archives and Museum Informatics* 9, no. 2 (1995).
  - 19 Cook, "Electronic Records, Paper Minds," p. 304.
  - 20 See the section on preservation in David Bearman's *Archival Methods, Archives and Museum Informatics Technical Report 9* (Pittsburgh, 1989).
  - 21 And this sliver of a sliver of a sliver is seldom more than partially described.
  - 22 Derrida, *Archive Fever*, pp. 4 and 5.
  - 23 Of course, the role played by archives, particularly public archives, in documenting rights and supporting records management, needs to be built into the equation.
  - 24 See Harris, "Redefining Archives in South Africa," p. 18.
  - 25 *Ibid.*, pp. 17–18.
  - 26 A comparison of visitor statistics at four Pietermaritzburg institutions illustrates the point. In 1996 the Pietermaritzburg Archives Repository received 2,096 visitors, the Tatham Art Gallery approximately 40,000, and the Natal Museum received 48,633. The Natal Society Library averaged over 2,000 a day. Of course these statistics demand interrogation. A two hour visit to the library by someone wanting to read national newspapers has a weight very different to that of a day-long visit to the archives by an historian researching a text book which will impact on thousands of students. By the same token, a family of three's morning at the museum or art gallery has a different weight to a day at the archives by three Land Commission researchers investigating a land claim which might affect the lives of a large community. Nevertheless, the statistics do tell a story.
  - 27 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, pp. 5, 45, and 51.
  - 28 See Andor Skotnes, "People's Archives and Oral History in South Africa: A Traveller's Account," *South African Archives Journal* 37 (1995).
  - 29 Carolyn Hamilton explores this aspect in her "'Living by Fluidity': Oral Histories, Material Custodies and the Politics of Preservation," paper presented at the Conference, *Words and Voices: Critical Practices of Orality in Africa and African Studies*, Bellagio, Italy, February 1997.
  - 30 Quoted by Hamilton, "'Living by Fluidity,'" p. 17.
  - 31 Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 22.
  - 32 See Hamilton, "'Living by Fluidity,'" p. 27.
  - 33 Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, p. 409.