

Book Reviews

Refiguring the Archive. CAROLYN HAMILTON, VERNE HARRIS, JANE TAYLOR, MICHELE PICKOVER, GRAEME REID, and RAZIA SALEH, eds. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002. 365 p. ISBN 1-4020-0743-4.

In 1998, the final report of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was issued. The Report formed the keystone of the negotiated transformation of the apartheid system to liberal democracy in South Africa. In that same year, a remarkable seminar series, "Refiguring the Archive," was sponsored by four co-operating institutions and hosted by the University of Witwatersrand. The seminars, with twenty-two speakers, were complemented by art exhibits, theatre, film, and dance presentations. This is not the first time that the concept of the archive has been examined from diverse epistemological perspectives, but this instance is unique in being set against the stark history of the repressive apartheid regime in South Africa, and in being structured with an avowed political agenda. It was assumed that an essential component for any meaningful transformation of the state would involve, firstly, the identification and exposure of document distortion, record destruction, induced silences, and deliberate gaps in the archive of colonialism and apartheid, and, secondly, the conviction that the archive of South Africa, including the newly established National Archives (1996), would benefit from new knowledge provided by a thorough deconstruction of assumptions and sureties. This book, *Refiguring the Archive*, is one product coming out of the space opened up for such discussions.

The eighteen articles in this volume are interspersed with graphic reproductions of documents of repression, correspondence relating to secret missions, records of interrogations, and reports on suspicious researchers: assorted textual remnants providing chilling reminders to the reader that here theories of the archive and its power will not be separated from the context of the lives, and deaths, of black South Africans and others who were cast as enemies of a

racialised and divided state. The project of refiguring the archive in South Africa is inextricably interwoven with an awareness of the materiality of the lives and deaths of citizens and informed by their testimonies or re/constructions of their experiences.

It is appropriate that at the physical centre of the book are pages of extracts from transcripts of Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. The excerpts point out observations made by many of the writers with regard to the hearings, and anticipate many cautionary tales regarding the archive in general. As in any court of law, there existed tacit agreement as to who could speak and what the parameters of such speech might be in form and substance. The article by Brent Harris and a transcription of the Derrida seminar, in particular, deal with the issue of TRC hearings: the discursive nature of the Report archive; the constrictions on those who testified; and the problem of reconciling contending interpretations.

The papers which comprise *Refiguring the Archive* are challenging. Their authors demand a reappraisal of every aspect of our understanding of what an archive is, what it should be, in whose service it works, and in whose service we work. They demand that we look again at our efforts to be inclusive and give space to the marginalised to speak and be heard. However well-meaning those efforts, it seems that neither archivists nor historians need yet congratulate themselves on this score. Several authors take issue with oral histories that pay inadequate attention to the difficulties of translation and transcription. Verne Harris writes that all too often, oral history is used only as a source for history rather than being accepted as actual history (p. 150), an opinion reiterated by Carolyn Hamilton (p. 215). Phaswane Mpe emphasises that one needs to use as many media as possible for the preservation of data. The archivist is asked to consider carefully the links between the oral, the written, and the electronic forms and Mpe reminds readers that even with awareness and sensitivity, translations between forms create new meanings and frequently alienate the text from its creator (p. 236). There are commonalities, too, between the problems presented by oral history and by photographs. Physical impairment in the form of missing captions, misread labels, cropping, representation in other formats such as books, postcards, and magazines all serve to keep the narrative characteristics of photographs fluid, constantly evolving and always subject to the whims and agendas of viewers. The article by Hayes, Silvester, and Hartman reminds us of the modernist desire to contain meaning, and to systematise knowledge, when no such actual, once-and-for-all ordering is possible. Fixing the meaning of a photograph is impossible, given the vagaries of the political climate of the times through which photographs travel (p. 113) and the ever-shifting gaze of the researcher. Stability of meaning as an unattainable goal is explored in the article by Ann Stoler, who uses a Foucaultian approach to tease out the strands of “how” colonial archives were accumulated and how they created truth-claims rather than asking the ultimately

unanswerable “why.” Using a genealogical approach to reach some understanding of the present, Stoler draws on theorists ranging from Mary Poovey to Carlo Ginsburg and Natalie Davis. Her “turn to the social and political conditions that produced those documents” (p. 85) complements much of the writing on macro-appraisal in its emphasis on investigating the circumstances of document creation rather than focusing, in the first instance, on the documents themselves. The close involvement of the archive with citizen groups is forcibly argued by Ronald Suresh Roberts, too, who advocates a never-ending interplay of cause and effect between the imaginary, the archive, the self, and society. Roberts engages in close textual readings of the works of Nadine Gordimer to see the archive as, simultaneously, subject of, and subject to, both the larger social context and the self. As such, he describes an unstable archive, invariably in a state of flux and by no means a neutral repository of uncontested fact. Finding anchors in this conceptualisation of the archive and in society more generally is worked out through Roberts’ invocation of the “imaginary” and the enlivening of the archive through the action upon it of dynamic onlookers.

Some of the writers featured in *Refiguring the Archive* advise against allowing the archive too much significance. Verne Harris warns that we tend to promulgate inflated accounts of archivists’ accomplishments (p. 150). Achille Mbembe eloquently explores both the power and the limits of archives. The repression of archives is one form of state control but one which leaves the state to grapple with the spectre of the archive. Mbembe argues that we need also to be aware of another form of more insidious displacement of the power of the archive: the rendering of the archive as talisman. Once an archive is elevated to iconic status, its power to be subversive is neutralised. It has become unassailable. The user of such an artifact approaches it with reverence and the anger, shame, and guilt of past wrongs can be put to rest with a sigh of relief. The commodification of memory obliterates the difference between the victim and the executioner and we have, thus, a new kind of forgetting (p. 25). We are only starting to see that archives are, as Verne Harris insists, about forgetting as much as remembering. Jacques Derrida, in his pivotal seminar, remarked that we write things down to keep them safe; we consign important things to a safe, to preserve them – so that we can, “safely,” forget them (p. 54). Forgetting must not extend so far as to obliterate knowledge of the suffering of victims. Forgetfulness in the service of reconciliation is a particular, nuanced form of forgetting which equates to a particular and equally nuanced form of remembering. This tension, this positioning of the archives between these two poles, suffuses the works of all the authors.

Two authors, David Bearman and Martin Hall, directly address the effect of technology on the archive. Bearman sees the advent of the electronic record, with concomitant adequate electronic record-keeping, as creating the potential for democratisation while Hall persuasively draws on examples of ethnic con-

flict in northern India and the Balkans, as well as the spread of white supremacist Aryan groups in the United States, to argue that technology has played a major role in increasing existing opportunities, and creating new spaces, for violence. Hall notes the nineteenth-century colonial processes through which accumulations of cultural artifacts were physically removed far from their roots and placed in capital cities throughout the “heart of whiteness.” This dispersal of materials and their reconstitution in a foreign, “scientific” environment resulted in a cool, objective gaze which conferred authority to artifacts as sources of identity construction. According to Hall, the weakening of nation states and the proliferation of cultural symbols via electronic media has contributed to numerous deadly local conflicts in which the dispersed symbols of culture, no longer imbued with the unassailable logic of authority, are now available for any number of contending ethnic claimants to use in the process of identity creation. The mobilisation of local identity is facilitated by the unrestrained flow of information around the globe. Attending the disintegration of any concept of place and the “material authority of records of the past” (p. 337), archives as well as other cultural artifacts can be called into play in the self-interests of competing claims for “veracity of identity” (p. 347). The power of the archive as a symbol of rightful belonging is noted. Hall in particular remarks that “ethnic cleansing” in the Balkans didn’t just mean the destruction of individuals and communities, but of museums, archives, art galleries, and monumental buildings as competing voices attempted to purge all inconvenient evidence which ran counter to their particular sense of entitlement.

One of the more controversial articles in this volume is supplied by Himla Soodyall, Bharti Morar, and Trefor Jenkins. The authors are all scientists involved in genetic research who have used DNA testing to map human migrations and to reconstruct population histories. They aspired to prove the value of genetic markers “... in reconstructing history without biases introduced from cultural data or information gleaned from oral traditions” (p. 184). Two case studies are described. In one study, the investigators used genetic testing to analyse the claim of Jewish ancestry made by the Lemba population of southern Africa. In another case study, DNA testing was used to disclose discrepancies in existing historical data. Certainly the use of hard science to prove (or disprove) what might well be deeply felt and long-held beliefs of origin and culture which commonly serve as sources of identity production, and through which individuals and communities are sustained and nourished, is potentially problematic. Self-identity is dependent on the construction and maintenance of a coherent narrative. The potential for the destruction of family and community stories by irrefutable scientific “proof” should be of some concern. Sober contemplation of the possibility for abuses of DNA testing in repressive states such as the former apartheid South Africa is also warranted.

Perhaps the provisional, contestable nature of traditional archival records is one of their most endearing characteristics after all?

The current which runs through this book is Power. Writers look at the archive from their perspectives as anthropologists, archivists, playwrights, artists, scientists, historians, literary critics and activists, but their common objective is the explication of the archive, however construed, as part of the technology of disciplinary power; as a source and site of knowledge production; as the servant of both hegemony and contestation; and as imbued with unstable, contingent, ceaselessly evolving significations. Power, understood as a Foucaultian phenomenon – as a web of disciplinary technologies, available to anyone, productive as well as oppressive – is a critical aspect of the archives and of the professional practices of the archivist, yet we seem reluctant to acknowledge the scope of that power and its potential for transformations of our own “imaginary.” The article by Susan van Zyl, for example, expands on certain psychoanalytical elements in Derrida’s *Archive Fever*. She undertakes an investigation of the relationships between time, space, and authority. Moving through a labyrinth of arguments, the archive and the archivist are assessed as a nexus of power.

We have just started to explore the role that archives have played throughout history in subjugation, violence, colonialism, racial, and sexual marginalisation. This book is a moving portrayal of the archive and its relationship to memory, to identity, and to the potential, when used with diligence, to testify to truths. Notwithstanding that, any lingering reliance on elements of positivism, any easy complacency, any belief in certainty, any reliance on the possibility of finality and closure, should surely be permanently dislodged from the archival conscience by this book. *Refiguring the Archive* is an example of postmodernism at its best: rigorous and lively debate in an arena which clearly allowed room for, indeed encouraged, multiple perspectives. No aura of gloomy nihilism, dead-end relativism, or endlessly deferred meaning troubles the reader of this volume.

Yet, above all else, this collection of articles and the associated events of the seminar series at Witwatersrand in the autumn of 1998 attest to the fact that there are no easy answers and that even a resolve to disengage from the modernist project must be tempered with discretion. It is instructive to note that Bhekizizwe Peterson cautions the reader against throwing him/herself wholeheartedly into postmodernist critique without first looking at such metanarratives as African nationalism. He insists that the unauthorised, uncatalogued experience of black people must be found, assembled, and brought into formal legitimacy if the refiguring of the archive is to attain something more than the status quo (p. 30). New critical literary theory also comes into question in the article by Sarah Nuttall who argues that there is plenty outside the text and that, in fact, without the context, understanding of how texts evolve is impossible

and leaves us unable to understand the final text in all its complexity (p. 291). She discusses the first novel written by a black woman, Miriam Tlali, in South Africa. Published in 1975, this novel went through a number of incarnations before appearing in its final form. The porous boundaries between biography, literary text, and archive are seen as valuable and important; they are to be encouraged, understood, and maintained. The experiences of GALA (Gay and Lesbian Archives of South Africa) and the decision to formally institutionalise records which chronicle the struggles of gays and lesbians, thus making them generally available to a larger constituency, are described by Graeme Reid. GALA is housed at the University of Witwatersrand and as such is part of the general research arena, but GALA also maintains outreach services to the community thus preserving some aspects of a radical archiving practice (p. 203).

One of the greatest strengths of this book is that readers have an opportunity to hear from scholars whose opinions and perspectives on the subject of the archive are of great significance but whose names are generally unknown in the archival literature of the “global hub.” And what a benefit to our profession it would be someday to devise a method of hearing from other observers and commentators, whose viewpoints on the archive, and its power, could help us see ourselves as the political entities that we are, but who do not have access to any forum currently available. The silent periphery haunts us still.

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Managing Records as Evidence and Information. RICHARD J. COX. Westport, Connecticut: Quorum Books, 2001. 243 p. ISBN 1-56720-231-4.

This companion volume to Richard Cox's *Closing an Era: Historical Perspectives on Modern Archives and Records Management* (2000) is a recitation of the errors and omissions of the archival and records management professions under the guise of a critical consideration of “the fundamental principles supporting” archives and records policy. The apparent deception is a disappointment only if you are truly seeking a comprehensive, critical examination of the varied and complex principles and contingencies supporting archives and records policy that have a resonance with the management of such programs. Otherwise readers will find a “series of discourses on the fundamentals of archives and records management needing to be understood *before* any organisation attempts to define and set ... policy affecting records and information” (p. xi). This work has little to do with policy per se and more to do with Cox's critique of archives and records management issues ranging from electronic records management to advocacy and archival education. The