Hedstrom team up to advocate reinventing archives for the digital age, and Linda Henry weighs in to assert the virtues of traditional ideas. Anne Gilliland-Swetland looks at the possibilities of extending accessibility in the digital age. We will be struggling with the implications of the digital world on archives and our work for a long time. These three articles give the flavour of relatively early reactions to the changing landscape of technology and its effect on archival work.

What then of the questions Jimerson prompts us to ask? First, a great many of the writers give due prominence to considerations of theory, which indeed they do not separate from practice (for that would be ridiculous in an applied discipline), but most of the discourse in this book is rooted firmly in consideration of method and how to improve it: the need for improvement arises from ordinary observation and thinking about the effectiveness, results, and impact of practice. It is hard to avoid concluding that archivists in the United States reflect the pragmatism permeating their society. It is not an unattractive way of operating. When O'Toole tilts at absolutes or Finch and Greene muse about how things can be made better for those who use archives, they are expressing just that sentiment for practicality and utility animating American society in general. These things are bred in the bone. But there is another side to it. There has been something of a sea change in American writing since the publication of *A Modern Archives Reader* seventeen years ago. The deductive spirit intrudes in many of these articles when the authors consider, however briefly, the nature of the things they are dealing with and the ideas that animate method. It is impossible to do that without indulging in abstract thought. American archivists have always concerned themselves with the concepts and principles that provide the foundation of practice, but that interest has deepened and broadened in remarkable ways in the last twenty years, something this volume makes quite evident. Jimerson and his colleagues do well to celebrate their intellectual achievement. It neither lacks rigour nor resists the quest for abstract understanding, however much it is rooted in the American tradition of pragmatism, on the one hand, and the course of archival development, on the other.

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Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa, 2d ed. VERNE HARRIS. Pretoria: National Archives of South Africa, 2000). 152 p. ISBN 0-7970-3876-0.

In 1997, *Archivaria* published Verne Harris's article "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South

Africa."[1] In it, he demonstrated forcefully the implications of a postmodern paradigm for archival discourse as well as for archival policies. In this second edition of *Exploring Archives,* Harris extends his arguments, especially in the four chapters (out of fifteen) that were added to this second edition: "Meanings and significances in archives," "Of power and politics," "Of fragments and fictions," and "Archival discourse in South Africa." The book is therefore much more than "an Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa": it is the world's first comprehensive text of archival theory and practice treated in the postmodern or deconstruction paradigm.[2]

The epistemological foundations of that paradigm are summarized by Harris in four points: the event is, in its uniqueness, irrecoverable; the archiving trace, the archive, is not simply a recording, a reflection, or an image of the event: it shapes the event – as Jacques Derrida writes, "the archivization produces as much as it records the event"; scholars (including archivists) can never be exterior to their objects; and the object does not speak for itself: in interrogating and interpreting the object, the archive, scholars inscribe their own interpretation on it.

These points are not totally new, especially not to a Canadian readership. "Good archivists," as Carolyn Heald wrote, "have always studied not just what is said, but how the message is expressed: the language, the medium, the technology of production, the genre of the document, the historical circumstances and the context of writing (who the author is, who the intended audience is)."[3] But what is new indeed is that Harris, while connecting "archival exploration more overtly to broader philosophical debates," tries to deconstruct "the dominant orthodoxy." Deconstruction, as Harris writes, "demands space for contestation. No right is more important than the right to question the very orthodoxy."

In 1998 the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa hosted a series of seminars entitled "Refiguring the Archive," in which Jacques Derrida participated (he was introduced by Verne Harris).[4] The impact of this seminar, according to Harris, "was dramatic. For the first time, significant numbers of archivists began reading the works of Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard and other 'postmodernists'." *Exploring Archives* is a testimonial of that reading (Harris makes his "epistemological assumptions explicit") and it stimulates further (or a renewed) reading of postmodern writing.

1 Verne Harris, "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa," *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 132–41.

2 A review of the first edition of *Exploring Archives* (1997), prepared by Terry Cook, appeared in *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998), pp. 205–208.

3 Carolyn Heald, "Is There Room for Archives in the Postmodern World?" *American Archivist* 59 (1996), p. 93.

4 Derrida's contribution to the seminar is to be published in *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, 2001).

Harris follows Derrida, who has written that every interpretation of the archive is an enrichment, an extension of the archive. That is why the archive is never closed: it opens out into the future. At every stage of the record's trajectory some "archiver," while activating the record, tells a story. These stories resound, in Verne Harris's words, the voices of the authors of the documents, the bureaucrats, the archivists, and the researchers who all used and managed the files. Those voices have to be recorded and recovered. The peeling back of layers of intervention and interpretation, Harris writes, is about *context*. The document does not speak for itself, but only through its contextualization. I agree: once we no longer assume that there is only one reality or meaning or truth, but many, no one better than the other, we can try to find these multiple meanings by interrogating not only the administrative context, but also the social, cultural, political, and religious contexts of record creation, maintenance, and use. Is that a neo-positivist approach: striving for the knowable? Harris firmly says that the event is irrecoverable, unfindable: "even if there is 'a reality', ultimately it is unknowable." And he goes further by saying that he rebuts the assumption, "aligned with the values and fantasies of Positivism," "that the meanings and significances of records are located in the contextual circumstances of their creation and subsequent use." I would suggest, on the contrary, that the archive is opened into the future by contextualization that encompasses all stages of archivalization and archiving and provides the opportunity for any construction or deconstruction of what all the people involved in the archives' creation and use may have meant. In doing so, archivists are reconfirming their commitment to the principle of provenance: not the traditional provenance, but the provenance which, as reformulated recently by Tom Nesmith, "consists of the social and technical processes of the records' inscription, transmission, contextualization, and interpretation which account for its [the record's] existence, characteristics, and continuing history."[5]

Rediscovering that provenance will bring the archivist, more often than in the past, into situations where he or she has to decide on conflicting rights and interests of records' creators, successors, records' subjects, researchers, and archivists. Chapter 11 of *Exploring Archives* deals with archival ethics. As a point of departure for his discussion of archival ethics, Harris takes the novel *The Archivist* by Martha Cooley and some of the arguments concerning this novel that I developed in my inaugural address at the University of Amsterdam in 1998. In my address, I stated that I considered Matt Lane, the archivist in the novel, to be guilty of a serious offence against the professional code of archivists. By burning the letters written by T.S. Eliot to his friend Emily Hale, Lane decided to give precedence to the dead over the living, to

5 Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), p. 146.

favour the wish for secrecy expressed by Eliot over the wishes of Emily Hale (who had donated the letters to the archivist's collection) or the interests of posterity.

The aspect I criticized was that of the archivist as a censor who decides that the memory of Eliot should be kept through his poetry, not through these letters. I censured the archivist who was guided by changes in his personal life to take a decision he was not entitled to take, neither legally nor morally. Harris, too, questions the archivist Lane "playing memory god. In destroying the letters is he protecting Eliot's rights, serving the writer's desire, or merely playing god? Is he obeying his conscience, or is he in a symbolic act, literalising his struggle with the memory of another writer – his wife?" But, contrary to my opinion, Harris suggests that the fictional archivist's decision may have been justifiable, not right.

Harris agrees with me that the way in which Lane reached his decision to destroy the letters cannot be justified. It is essential for any archivist, when forced to take a stand on an ethical issue, to follow an accountable procedure, to have, as Harris puts it, the "how" right. In *Exploring Archives*, a number of procedural guidelines are proposed.[6] The "what," however, is not answered by procedural guidelines: they are not a blueprint for resolving competing rights and interests, as Harris forcefully demonstrates in presenting his own experience as a whistle-blower in 1993 when he went public to denounce a threatening, large-scale illegal destruction of records requested by the South African Security Secretariat.

Real-life stories like this one inspire *Exploring Archives*, making the eleven chapters which were adapted from the first edition fascinating reading for any archivist, in or outside South Africa. The twenty-three pages of "Further Reading" are of an international scope, too. Three additional appendixes contain the texts of the *South African Archives Act*, the *National Archives Regulations* and the South African Society of Archivists' code of ethics.

As Pat Oddy from the British Library remarked, "The postmodern library is a library where securities have been lost, but where freedoms have been gained."[7] The same applies to the postmodern archive, as Verne Harris demonstrates in *Exploring Archives*.

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6 See my "The Ethics of Preserving and Destroying Private Archives," in the *liber amicorum* presented to Verne Harris upon his leaving the National Archives of South Africa, to take up a post as lecturer in archival studies at the University of the Witwatersrand (30 April 2001).

7 Pat Oddy, "Who Dares, Wins: Libraries and Catalogues for a Postmodern World," *Library Review* 16 (1997), p. 309.