

Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective. VERNE HARRIS, with a foreword by Terry Cook. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007. 476 p. ISBN 1-931666-18-0.

South African archivist Verne Harris characterizes his approach to archival work as “a resistance to insularities” (p. 4). This is the central concern that frames this collection of writing, published during the first decade of South African democracy: a resistance to insularities between archives and politics; between the technical and the conceptual; between archival scholarship and other intellectual currents; between the narratives of the powerful and of the silenced other. For Harris, who worked at the South African State Archives Service during the 1980s, “with my head well down and my energies focused around the role of mole” (p. 2), insularity was a daily reality – indeed, the very foundation – of the apartheid regime, which had transformed South Africa into a global pariah, hermetically sealed from transnational information and capital flows. The State Archives Service served to reinforce the governance structures of the oppressive state regime.

The notion of “transformation discourse” animated South Africa’s post-apartheid heritage and memory sectors, reconfiguring the National Archives as a cultural site for the negotiation of a better future through intense engagement with the memory of its oppressive past, and the reconstruction of a new, democratic nation-state based on the principles of truth, reconciliation, transparency, and social cohesion. The twenty scholarly essays (three of which were first published in *Archivaria*) and sixteen newspaper articles in this collection are a product of that first decade of transformative post-apartheid memory work. While informed by his experience in South Africa, Harris intends that the repositioning of archives for justice should transcend geographic and socio-political insularities. To that end, *Archives and Justice* is not only a case study of the evolution of archival activity and thought in a particular geopolitical context, told from an insider perspective, but it is also a lively, accessibly written polemic that deftly punctures traditional archival pieties and exhorts us to reconsider the foundational assumptions of our profession. At the same time it encourages us to embrace a fundamental reorientation of the goal of our work: the use of archives as tools for justice and democracy. Terry Cook’s foreword contextualizes the volume poetically. Harris’s idea of “justice,” as Cook explains, not only calls for more judicious archival administration to allow citizens to right past wrongs, or for the promotion of records as fundamental to democracy and good governance, but compels, above all, a willingness to allow oppositional interpretations to expand the discursive space of the archives.

Harris is primarily influenced by French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s views on deconstruction. Though Harris explicitly rejects the label of post-modernist, wincing at the potential for association with meaningless relativism

and preferring instead what he considers the less loaded “deconstructionist,” he positions himself in the tradition of such other postmodern archivist-scholars as Hugh Taylor and Terry Cook, who have argued that the archives confers power and shapes the politics of memory. Those unfamiliar with the deconstructionist school need not be wary of the text, for Harris’s writing on Derrida is always accessible and engaging; he uses Derridean deconstruction as a tool to read normative theory against the grain and as such concerns himself with its enduring relevance and application to the front lines of archival work.¹ Within this context, Harris compels archivists to consider stories not told in the archives. “What stories are told matters. How well they are told matters,” he stresses (p. 103). Archivists cannot avoid telling stories, he contends; they are record makers, not merely recordkeepers, because they continually shape the archival record by according archival status to some records and not others through appraisal, and by the ways in which they describe and contextualize records designated as archival through description.

In an essay on description, he asserts that “archivists tell stories about stories; they tell stories with stories” (p. 143) and that “pulsing insistently beneath these formulations is the reality of power” (p. 144). Harris implores archivists to not only recognize and make transparent the power they wield, but also to actively situate the archives at the fulcrum of the discourse between opposing publics as a space for welcoming the narratives of the subaltern and the silenced: “archivists need to foster the contestation of social memory, seeing ourselves, conducting ourselves, not as referees but as contestants” (p. 19). In essence, Harris is advocating what Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls “a balance of stories,”² while acknowledging that a “perfect” balance of stories, like Derrida’s notion of justice, is always coming, never wholly realized, and so “the time for activism is never past” (p. 263) and “the archive is never closed. It opens out of the future” (p. 42).

These integrated themes of justice and hospitality illuminate the five sections of this book. “Section I: Discourses,” flirts headily with a deconstructive theoretical framework to engage a critique of the positivist stream that has dominated the aforementioned South African triumphalist transformation discourse in particular and the canon of archival theory in general. In “Section II: Narratives,” Harris interrogates the epistemological assumptions that have

- 1 Normative or positivist archival theory subscribes to an evidentiary paradigm whose preoccupation with the supposed neutral-custodial role of the archivist is undergirded by assumptions about records as neutral carriers of information. The deconstructive frame, by contrast, presupposes that memory as a process of representation is always brought to us by a form of “fictional fashioning”; in other words, memory is fluid and subversive, and every act of remembering necessitates an act of forgetting.
- 2 Chinua Achebe, “Today, the Balance of Stories,” in *Home and Exile* (New York, 2000), p. 73.

guided conventional understandings about archival functions and issues, from appraisal to description to electronic records. For Harris, the work of archivists is intimately bound up with questions of power and needs to be refigured to make room for contestation. “Section III: Politics and Ethics” and “Section IV: Pasts and Secrets,” draw from Harris’s experience grappling with archival issues in different institutions. Case studies cited in the book address issues ranging from African identity to the destruction of apartheid-era records, access to information legislation, archival ethics, and oral history. “Section V: Actualities,” illustrates Harris’s effort to spread awareness of archives to populist audiences.

Archivists of a positivist ilk will find here numerous pointed critiques of their theory and practice (Harris is particularly critical of the Australian continuum paradigm). Canadian readers will note the numerous references to Canadian archivy, as Harris credits the influence of archival scholars such as Terry Cook and Hugh Taylor, Tom Nesmith, Brien Brothman, Joan Schwartz and Rick Brown. Wendy Duff of the University of Toronto also co-authors a piece included here. As Harris further reflects, “Terry pre-eminently, but Canadian archival discourse generally, taught me that archives is a terrain for philosophy and poetry, as well as one for political struggle, community endeavour, and hard professional work” (p. 24).

In only a decade of work, Harris has raised enough questions to sustain successive generations of archival professionals. His application of Derridean deconstruction demonstrates the powerful potential of encouraging multidisciplinary insights in archival studies. He teases us with the possibilities of new roles for archivists, not only within the narrowly-defined realm of archivy but in the broader society and culture of which they are a part – not just in South Africa but internationally.

Wendy Smith
Archival Studies Program
University of Manitoba

The Vatican Secret Archives. LUCA BECCHETTI et al. Foreword by Cardinal Raffaele Farina; translation by Monsignor James O’Brien; photography by Philippe Debeerst, Andrea Marini, and Enrico Ottaviani. Brussels: Paul Van den Heuvel – VdH Books, 2009. 252 p. ISBN 9789088810077.

Upon opening this book, one cannot help but be taken aback by its impressive beauty and size. A magnificent tome (30 cm x 30 cm) it is the result of a collaborative effort between the Archivum Secretum Vaticanum and a Belgian art book publishing company, VdH Books. Currently available through Chapters and Amazon.ca in Canada, the book has been published in four languages: English, French, Italian, and Dutch. The written portions of