



The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa *

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Abstract. Far from being a simple reflection of reality, archives are constructed windows into personal and collective processes. They at once express and are instruments of prevailing relations of power. Verne Harris makes these arguments through an account of archives and archivists in the context of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. The account is deliberately shaped around three themes – race, power, and public records. While he concedes that the constructedness of memory and the dimension of power are most obvious in the extreme circumstances of oppression and rapid transition to democracy, he argues that these are realities informing archives in all circumstances. He makes an appeal to archivists to enchant their work by engaging these realities and by turning always towards the call of and for justice.

Keywords: apartheid archival system, archival legislation, discourse, justice, memory construction, positivism, postmodernity, power, race, recordness, South Africa

Introduction: Mapping a perspective

One's understanding of and feeling for a concept inevitably are shaped by the weighting of one's experience. Experience, of course, is never unmediated. Discourse, ideas, language, all shape how living is turned into experience. In my case, both as a South African and as a practising archivist, experience has been dominated by the drama of South Africa's transition from apartheid

* This essay draws heavily on four articles published previously by me: "Towards a Culture of Transparency: Public Rights of Access to Official Records in South Africa", *American Archivist* 57.4 (1994); "Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990–1996", *Archivaria* 42 (1996); "Transforming Discourse and Legislation: A Perspective on South Africa's New National Archives Act", *ACARM Newsletter* 18 (1996); and "Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa", *Archivaria* 44 (1997). I am grateful to Ethel Kriger (National Archives of South Africa) and Tim Nuttall (University of Natal) for offering sometimes tough comment on an early draft of the essay. I remain, of course, fully responsible for the final text. I presented a version of it in the "Refiguring the Archive" seminar series, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, October 1998. That version was published in revised form in Carolyn Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002).

to democracy. This drama has absorbed the complex elements of personal experience, and transcribed my thinking around the word “archives” into an indelible metaphor – “the archival sliver.”¹ As process the transcription probably began in the late 1980s, when my spare time was occupied largely by volunteer work for an organization providing support to political detainees, trialists and prisoners. At the time we needed no documentary evidence to demonstrate that organs of the state were conducting a dirty-tricks campaign against opponents of apartheid. We *knew* they were. Later, as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) unfolded the details of that campaign,² it was oral rather than documentary evidence which carried the story. The archival record is but a sliver of social memory. It is also but a sliver of the documentary record. Between 1996 and 1998 I represented the National Archives in a TRC investigation into the destruction of public records. This investigation exposed a large-scale and systematic sanitisation of official memory authorised at the highest levels of government and, while embracing all organs of the state, targeted the records of the security establishment. Between 1990 and 1994 huge volumes of public records were destroyed in an attempt to keep the apartheid state’s darkest secrets hidden.³

One must, needless to say, be wary of delineating general patterns from extreme circumstances. However, I would argue that in any circumstances, in any country, the documentary record provides just a sliver of a window into the event. Even if archivists in a particular country were to preserve every record generated throughout the land, they would still have only a sliver

¹ My disclosure of the major shaping pre-impressions carried in my head as I started writing this article reflects a recognition that no observer, no writer, is exterior to the object of his or her observation. In my case the complicity verges on the obscene. I was, and am, an active participant in virtually every process which I critique in the article. So I am irrevocably caught in the tensions between the archival record conventionally defined, Foucault’s assemblage of society’s discourses, and the psychic archive explored by Freud, Jung, Derrida, Hillman, and others.

² The seventeen-member Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established in 1995 with a four-fold mandate: to establish as complete a picture as possible of the causes, nature, and extent of gross human rights violations committed in South Africa between 1960 and 1994; to facilitate the granting of amnesty to perpetrators of gross human rights violations associated with a political objective; to recommend appropriate reparation for the victims of gross human rights violations; and to compile a report of its activities, findings, and recommendations. The Commission’s final report was submitted to President Mandela in October 1998. However, the work of the Commission’s Amnesty Committee proceeded well into 2001. A Codicil to the final report will be submitted at the end of this process.

³ The National Intelligence Service headquarters, for instance, destroyed an estimated 44 tons of paper-based and microfilm records in a 6–8 month period during 1993. For a detailed account of the 1990–1994 purge, see my “‘They Should Have Destroyed More’: The Destruction of Public Records by the South African State in the Final Years of Apartheid”, *Transformation* 42 (2000).

of a window into that country's 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.⁴ Moreover, no record, no matter how well protected and cared for by archivists, enjoys an unlimited life span. Preservation strategies can, at best, aim to save *versions* of *most* archival records. So archives offer researchers a sliver of a sliver of a sliver.⁵ If, as many archivists are wont to argue, the repositories of archives are the world's central memory institutions, then we are in deep, amnesic trouble.

A notion common in archival discourse is that archives reflect, or provide an image of, process, the event, the action. Stated more crudely, the idea is that archives, mirror-like, reflect reality. My archival "sliver of a window" offers a direct challenge to this metaphor. 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. First, even if there is "a reality," ultimately it is unknowable. The event, the process, the origin, in its *uniqueness*, is irrecoverable. As Jacques Derrida has pointed out: "The possibility of the archiving trace, this simple *possibility*, can only divide the uniqueness."⁶ Secondly, while it is self-evident that the record is a product of process, it must be acknowledged that process itself is shaped fundamentally by the act of recording. And thirdly, if archival records reflect reality, they do so complicitly, and in a deeply fractured and shifting way. They do not act by themselves. They act through many conduits – the people who created them, the functionaries who managed them, the archivists who selected them for preservation and make them available for use, and the researchers who use them in constructing accounts of the past. Far from enjoying an exteriority in relation to the record, all these conduits participate in the complex processes through which the record feeds into social memory. To return to my "sliver of a window" metaphor, the window is not only a medium through which light travels; it also reflects light, transposing images from "this side" and disturbing images from the "other side."

In this essay I explore the connections – a fractured, shifting play of light – between the archival sliver and social memory in the context of South Africa's transition from apartheid to democracy. I have chosen to do so in the form

⁴ The appraisal programme of the National Archives of South Africa, for instance, aims to secure the preservation of 5 per cent of records generated by the state.

⁵ And this sliver of a sliver of a sliver is seldom more than partially described.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 100.

of a narrative, a particular kind of memory construction determinative to a greater or lesser degree of the memory content.⁷ Moreover, as storyteller, I found myself confronted by numerous possible plots and sub-plots vying for position and space. The account which follows is deliberately shaped around three themes, or foci: race, the central apartheid fault-line; power, the fundamental conceptual category in any analysis of societal processes; and public records, the dominant element in the apartheid archival system.⁸ Of course, what is “central,” “fundamental,” and “dominant” to me might not be so to another narrator. The following section, a necessarily brief overview of the apartheid era, posed especially daunting problems. In the interests of economy, I have risked underplaying the complexities of people’s experiences by holding firmly to the big picture, with the state and class relations occupying the foreground.

Apartheid and archives

Race, capitalism, and domination

South Africa’s apartheid era began in 1948 with the National Party’s victory in the general election of that year. The term was used by the party as an election slogan, and although over the years substitute appellations were utilised by both Party and the state, “apartheid” stuck as the term of choice world-wide for a system of governance (and a legitimising ideology) which endured in its essentials until 1994. As with all periodisations, unqualified reference to the period 1948-1994 as the apartheid era is problematic. On the one hand, apartheid patterns in society are proving extremely resilient, so that 1994 constitutes the demise of apartheid only in a formal sense. On the other, the system’s roots stretch back to a colonialism inaugurated in the seventeenth century and built upon by the post-1910 era of segregation.⁹ Moreover, apartheid underwent several substantive systemic changes (with

⁷ For an extended account of the relationship between form and content in narrative, see Hayden White, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987).

⁸ There is no clear conceptual distinction, of course, between appraisal and collecting. Active documenting is an integral part of appraisal, and collecting presupposes appraisal decisions. But in South African archival discourse and practice, the distinction has been made firmly, with appraisal a function related to public records and collecting to non-public records. The National Archives’ new appraisal programme is beginning to break down this distinction.

⁹ In 1910 the British colonies of the Cape, Natal, Orange River, and Transvaal joined together to form the Union of South Africa, an independent state within the British Commonwealth.

attendant ideological shifts) between 1948 and 1994. The starkest occurred in 1990, when South Africa's formal transition to democracy began.

Apartheid has been described, most usefully, as a form of racial capitalism in which racial differences were formalised and pervasive socially, and in which society was characterised by a powerful racially defined schism:

to one side, a dominant section with disproportionate control over economic resources, a presumptive privilege in social relations, and a virtual monopoly on access to the state; to the other side, a subordinate section with constrained economic resources and with little standing in social or political relations.¹⁰

Amongst the world's racial orders, South Africa's was unique in its rigidity and, arguably, in its pervasiveness. The danger is to view its form of domination as an amorphous, all-encompassing relationship between social groupings distinguished by their physical characteristics.¹¹ This would be to miss the complex interplay of identities – ethnic, social, gender, cultural, linguistic, political and, crucially, class – which informed apartheid's fundamental schism. Indeed, it has been argued persuasively that racial domination is best understood as “a series of specific class relations that vary by place over time and that change as a consequence of changing material conditions.”¹²

There is strong evidence to suggest that in South Africa's pre-colonial era neither race nor ethnic consciousness shaped identities. Colonial social engineering, focused and energised by the industrialisation of the late nineteenth century, fashioned the “European,” “African,” “Indian,” and “Coloured” social groupings, with “corresponding colour-tainted identities gradually (emerging) as a result of common interest. . . .”¹³ South Africa's capitalist development in the first half of the twentieth century, founded on the need to accommodate resilient non-capitalist modes of production, fostered the development of ideologies informed by the segregation and control of pre-capitalist societies. This was the crucible out of which both Afrikaner and African nationalism emerged.

The mythology of Afrikaner nationalism posits its origin in centuries of struggle by white Afrikaans-speakers to put down roots in a harsh environment contested by rapacious indigenous peoples and a vicious British imperi-

¹⁰ Stanley Greenberg, *Race and State in Capitalist Development: Comparative Perspectives* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 406.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Irina Filatova, “History through the Prism of Identity: Interpretation at the Crossroads”, in Robert Morrell (ed.), *Political Economy and Identities in KwaZulu-Natal: Historical and Social Perspectives* (Durban: Indicator Press, 1996), p. 11.

alism. The individual found meaning, identity, as a member of this embattled community, or “volk,” which was defined by a God-given calling to tame the promised land. A more compelling analysis is offered by scholars such as Dan O’Meara, who argues that Afrikaner nationalism coalesced in the 1930s and 1940s as a “historically specific, often surprisingly flexible, always highly fractured and differentiated response of various identifiable and changing class forces – in alliance – to the contradictions and struggles generated by capitalism in South Africa.”¹⁴

Afrikaner nationalism, O’Meara asserts, was at once a response to and a fundamental shaper of class struggle. In 1948 its class alliance assumed power with a broader racial ideology offering not only protection of the “volk,” but also the maintenance of white hegemony. Until the mid-1970s, the National Party presided over a period of rapid economic growth and substantial ideological unity and dominance, despite shifting relations and competing interests in the dominant section. Resistance by the subordinate section was easily contained, and splintered along ethnic and racial lines.

From the mid-1970s, however, forces in capitalist development began to undermine South Africa’s framework of racial domination, producing what Stanley Greenberg has called a “crisis of hegemony.”¹⁵ Rapid population growth and urbanisation were placing pressures on the system. As was a changing economy, the growth of which began to be inhibited by apartheid. Pressures from outside the country began to build up. Resistance from the subordinate section intensified, increasingly bridging ethnic and racial divides. Led by the African National Congress and allied organisations, the considerable energies of African nationalism began to be channelled increasingly into a struggle for a democracy defined by non-racism. Attempts by the state to reform the system were frustrated by the inertia of its racial apparatus and the deepening divides between elements within the dominant section. By the early 1980s Afrikaner unity had disintegrated and apartheid as a legitimising ideology was no longer tenable. As the state plunged deeper into crisis, it attempted to forge a new alliance of classes organised not around racial or ethnic identities, but around the protection of capitalism (the “free enterprise” system) and “democracy” against a perceived onslaught by world communism. “Total strategy” replaced apartheid as an ideological weapon; the suspension of law, the destabilisation of neighbouring countries, and the unleashing of state terror on oppositional groupings, became the primary instruments of power. Only when it became clear that these would not stem

¹⁴ Dan O’ Meara, *Volkskapitalisme: Class, Capital and Ideology in the Development of Afrikaner Nationalism 1934–1948* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1983), p. 16.

¹⁵ Greenberg, *Race and State*, p. 398.

the system's disintegration, did the regime engage its opponents in a process of negotiated settlement.

Through four decades, the apartheid system demonstrated an extraordinary capacity to secure the support of most white South Africans as well as the acquiescence or collaboration of significant sections of the black population.¹⁶ A key element in this exercise of hegemony was the state's control over social memory, a control which involved both remembering and forgetting. The public service, managed largely by English-speaking whites until 1948, was rapidly "Afrikanerised." The educational system, particularly at primary and secondary levels, was secured within the framework of "Christian National Education." Radio and, from the 1970s, television were controlled directly by the state. A powerful Afrikaner nationalist presence was built in the press. And the network of state-funded libraries, museums, art galleries, historical monuments, and archives was shaped profoundly by an apartheid imprint. By their silences and their narratives of power, their constructions of experience, apartheid's memory institutions legitimised apartheid rule. A vast, simmering memory of resistance and struggle was forced away into informal spaces and the deeper reaches of the underground.

Apartheid's huge bureaucracy, which reached into almost every aspect of citizens' lives, generated a formidable memory resource. Control over racial classification, employment, movement, association, purchase of property, recreation and culture, sport, and so on, all were documented by thousands of government offices. This was supplemented by the record of surveillance activities by the security police and numerous other state intelligence bodies, as well as by large quantities of records confiscated from individuals and organisations opposed to apartheid. Obscenely, registries and record strong-rooms (or vaults) converted the abnormal into the normal. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot has observed, "Built into any system of domination is the tendency to proclaim its own normalcy."¹⁷ Of course, bureaucratic memory was tightly controlled. While all governments are uncomfortable with the notion of transparency; in apartheid South Africa government secrecy was a *modus operandi*. Interlocking legislation restricted access to and the dissemination of information on vast areas of public life.¹⁸ These restrictions were manipulated to secure an extraordinary degree of opacity in government, and the country's

¹⁶ I use the term "black" here to incorporate three of apartheid's "population groups": "Africans," "Indians," and "coloureds." The apartheid state, however, used the terms "black" and "African" synonymously.

¹⁷ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 84.

¹⁸ These included *inter alia* the *Archives Act*, *Criminal Procedure Act*, *Disclosure of Foreign Funding Act*, *Inquests Act*, *Internal Security Act*, *Nuclear Energy Act*, *Official Secrets Act*, *Petroleum Products Act*, *Protection of Information Act*, and *Statistics Act*.

formal information systems became grossly distorted in support of official propaganda. This obsessive secrecy was served not only by legislation, but also by a range of judicial and executive tools. The most effective tool to ensure secrecy, ultimately, was the selective destruction of public records. (In the introduction to this essay, I referred to the large-scale destruction exercises of the 1990–1994 period. The selection of records for archival preservation (and concomitant identification of other records for destruction) by state archivists is addressed in the next section of the essay.)

Record destruction by the state embraced not only public records. The TRC investigation referred to earlier revealed that all the records confiscated by the security police from individuals and organisations opposed to apartheid were destroyed before the 1994 General Election. The state also destroyed many other non-public records during raids on and bombings of anti-apartheid structures and premises, both inside and outside the country. And a story which still awaits telling is the impact of apartheid on the record-keeping practices of anti-apartheid individuals and organisations, in particular the reluctance to commit certain types of information to paper and the readiness to destroy records rather than allow them to fall into the hands of state operatives. More chilling processes of memory erasure were also utilised widely by the apartheid state, with many thousands of oppositional voices being eliminated through means such as informal harassment, media censorship, various forms of banning, detention without trial, imprisonment, and assassination.

Apartheid's archival system

Until the late 1970s and 1980s, which saw a flowering of small non-public collecting institutions, the South African archival terrain was dominated by the State Archives Service (SAS). By 1990 SAS had facilities in seven cities across the country, including six archives repositories and five records centres. From its formal establishment in 1922, SAS's custodial mandate embraced the archives of central and provincial government offices; in 1962 this was extended to incorporate all local government offices.¹⁹ Also from the outset, SAS enjoyed a mandate to supplement its public record holdings by collecting non-public records. Its functions vis-à-vis public records still in the custody of government offices – its records management functions – remained modest and purely advisory until 1953. Thereafter, especially after the passing of the 1962 *Archives Act*, SAS developed a significant

¹⁹ Excluded from this mandate were the South African Defence Force, the homelands, and so-called "offices of record"; the latter were defined as offices "responsible for documents which require special treatment in order to ensure that the authenticity and legality of the contents cannot be questioned." State Archives Service, *Handbook*, 15:35.

records management capacity sustained by wide-ranging regulatory powers. Apartheid's public archives system also included the South African Defence Force Archives and the various bantustan (or homeland) archives services.²⁰

Apartheid realities and SAS's status as an organ of the state combined to ensure that many of its services were fashioned into tools of the apartheid system. Three examples illustrate this. First, despite the fact that user services were open to all and offered free of charge, black South Africans made up only a small proportion of the users. Systemic barriers – low educational standards, high rates of illiteracy, physical isolation from city centres, competency in languages other than the official Afrikaans and English – ensured that most South Africans enjoyed only nominal access to public archives. SAS did very little to overcome these barriers. Outreach endeavours were modest, uncoordinated, and targeted at white users. Service provision was geared to supporting white users, until the 1980s specifically white academics.²¹ Secondly, SAS's records management functions – designed in the first instance to identify and safeguard public records with archival value, but also effective in promoting administrative efficiency – in effect oiled the wheels of apartheid bureaucracy. Thirdly, in its relationships with the bantustan archives services, SAS was placed in a classic apartheid dilemma: cutting them loose professionally would have meant reinforcing bantustan underdevelopment; providing comprehensive support would have meant buttressing grand apartheid policy. In practice, SAS's approach fell uncomfortably between the two stools.

Another dilemma confronted SAS in the form of powerful state organs obstructing its legitimate activities and flagrantly ignoring or defying its legal

²⁰ The apartheid government allocated a homeland to each of South Africa's major African ethnic "groups." In terms of separate development policy, Africans were to exercise full political rights only in these homelands. The ultimate goal was to establish each homeland as an independent country; by 1994, four of them had taken "independence." Although excluded from my analysis, it should be noted that the SADF Archives and the homeland archives services in both conception and administration faithfully reflected apartheid logic. Under a system awarding inordinate power and autonomy to the military, it is not surprising that the SADF Archives, although legally subject to the professional supervision of the State Archives, in practice sustained an independent operation. Nor is it surprising, in the context of apartheid homeland policy, in particular the inadequate professional, financial, and administrative assistance made available by central government, that the homelands either neglected public archives entirely or maintained only rudimentary services.

²¹ Academic users were predominantly historians. Even today, the discipline is dominated by white males, with South Africa possessing less than twenty black History Ph.D.'s. Greg Cuthbertson, "Postmodernising History and the Archives: Some Challenges for Recording the Past", *South African Archives Journal* 39 (1997): 13. From the 1980s, the State Archives Service began shaping its user services around the needs of its largest clientele grouping, genealogical (almost exclusively white) researchers.

instruments. Given the apartheid system's disregard for accountability and SAS's junior status within government,²² SAS was poorly positioned to resist. Again, three examples serve to illustrate this dimension. First, a number of government offices persistently refused to subject their records systems to design analysis and archival appraisal or to co-operate in the transfer of records into SAS's custody.²³ Secondly, in the 1990–1994 period of mass records destruction by state offices, SAS intervention achieved nothing. SAS's leadership was intimidated by the security establishment and lacked the will to act decisively.²⁴ Thirdly, in the 1980s, SAS was forced by its political masters to withdraw unrestricted access to certain records in its custody.²⁵ This incident contributed to a perception of SAS as a willing collaborator in state-imposed public amnesia.

Not that willing collaboration with the apartheid system was not a powerful dynamic in SAS. Indeed, I would argue, it was moulded as an institution by apartheid and absorbed apartheid bureaucratic culture. Until the mid-1980s, public service legislation laid down that only whites could be appointed to professional and many administrative posts.²⁶ As in the rest of the bureaucracy, senior positions were dominated by white, Afrikaans-speaking males.²⁷ SAS's structure was rigidly hierarchical and its management ethos authoritarian. Transparency and broad participation in

²² In the 1980s, the senior public servant in a government department held the rank of a director-general. As a director, the head of the State Archives Service was three levels lower.

²³ Notable examples were the Department of Foreign Affairs and the National Intelligence Service.

²⁴ An incident from my own experience illustrates this. When I and some of my colleagues in the State Archives Service discovered in 1993 that state offices were destroying classified records in terms of a Security Secretariat authorisation, we pushed the Director of Archives to intervene urgently. When he did not do so, I leaked the authorisation first to the press, then to Lawyers for Human Rights. The latter challenged the authorisation in court, and were able to secure an out-of-court settlement in which the state agreed to manage the disposal of classified records strictly in terms of the *Archives Act*. See also my "They Should Have Destroyed More."

²⁵ Unrestricted access was withdrawn to records less than fifty years old of six government offices, and to all post-1910 records of a further four offices. In terms of the 1962 *Archives Act*, unrestricted access applied to records more than thirty years old, unless the responsible Minister imposed restrictions on the grounds of "public policy." These restrictions were lifted in 1991, and in practice constituted only a minor infringement of public access to the records concerned. State Archives Service records indicate that between 1980 and 1990 requests for permission to consult 2,381 items in the archives of these offices was received, and access was denied to only nine items.

²⁶ By 1990 not a single professional post in the State Archives Service had been occupied by a black person. In 1990 the Service's professional staff comprised seventy people. All of them were white, with thirty-nine women and thirty-one men.

²⁷ In 1990 only one of the twelve most senior officials was not an Afrikaans-speaking male; she was an Afrikaans-speaking woman.

decision-making were given short shrift. Official language policy was implemented, with Afrikaans dominant except in isolated lower reaches of the organisation. Much core policy documentation was produced only in Afrikaans. Language usage, needless to say, also influenced SAS's interface with users and the public generally, as did SAS's provision of racially segregated reading room and toilet facilities until the 1970s – to say nothing of the fact that SAS staff collaborated with the security police in spying on reading room users.²⁸

The absorption of apartheid bureaucratic culture and, at a deeper level, of apartheid ideology, shaped SAS's functions and left indelible marks on SAS's contribution to social memory. Its archival appraisal programme, fashioned in the 1950s, was characterised by incoherence in both theory and methodology.²⁹ In practice, appraisers made decisions around one central question: does this record possess actual or anticipated usefulness to researchers? Until the 1970s blossoming of social history and revisionist historiography began to influence the programme in the late 1980s, SAS's fashioning of appraisal into a tool for academic researchers, particularly historians, resulted in the experience of apartheid's marginalised and oppressed being poorly reflected in the public records chosen for preservation. The fact that most of SAS's appraisers were taught as undergraduates by establishment-aligned Afrikaner historians was an important contributory factor. Of course the public records chosen for preservation reflected apartheid power relations and carried the reductionist constructions of process typical of any bureaucracy.

A more fundamental skewing of social memory is evident in SAS's collections of non-public records. With the exception of the Boer resistance to British imperialism, they documented poorly the struggles against colonialism, segregation, and apartheid. Black experiences were also poorly documented, and in most cases were seen through white eyes. Similarly, the voices of women, the disabled, and other marginalised people were seldom heard. This is partially explained by the difficulty experienced by SAS in securing donations of records from other than establishment-aligned

²⁸ From 1963 reading room supervisors were under instruction from the Director of Archives to report the presence of any banned person (Circular instruction of 5 June 1963.) The evidence suggests that this information, together with details of the records being consulted by such persons, was passed on to the security police.

²⁹ For accounts of this programme, see my "Exploratory Thoughts on Current State Archives Service Appraisal Policy and the Conceptual Foundations of Macro-appraisal", *Archives News* 37.8 (1995), and "Appraising Public Records in the 1990s: A South African Perspective", *ESARBICA Journal* 16 (1996). Between 1926 and 1953, the appraisal of public records was the function of the Archives Commission, a statutory body appointed by the responsible Minister. Thereafter, the function was assumed by the State Archives Service, although the Commission retained the power to authorise destruction until 1979.

sources. But the heart of the issue was a collecting policy which quite deliberately directed archivists away from grassroots experience towards society's pinnacles, and which eschewed the documentation of orality. A more blatant ideological intervention was demonstrated by SAS's official history project, which involved the production of a multi-volume official history of one of the central events in Afrikaner memory, the South African War of 1899–1902.³⁰

"It was," according to historian Albert Grundlingh, "the Afrikaner's answer to the *British Official History of the War* and *The Times History of the War*."³¹ Ideological considerations also informed the selection of theses for publication in SAS's *Archives Year Book for South African History*. Introduced in 1938, the series became an important vehicle for Afrikaner nationalist historiography, with the legitimisation of white rule and the exclusion of oppositional voices being key objectives in the selection policy.³²

Characterisation of apartheid's archives system as one controlled by whites, preserving records created by whites, and providing services to whites is an over-simplification. It misses the specificities of shifting class alliances in apartheid's dominant section. It misses the role played by black bureaucrats, including archivists, in the bantustan administrations and, from the 1980s, in black local authorities' "own affairs" administrations and other branches of the state.³³ It misses the increasing numbers of black users of archives in apartheid's twilight years. It misses the emergence in the 1980s and early 1990s of institutions dedicated to giving voice to the voiceless through archival collections. But it captures nonetheless the essential character of the system.

During the 1980s an increasing number of anti-apartheid organizations and of individuals prominent in the struggles against apartheid began depositing archival materials with collecting institutions, particularly university libraries. Significant accumulations were collected by the Cory Library (Rhodes University), the Killie Campbell Africana Library (University of Natal), the University of Cape Town Library, the University of South Africa Library, and the William Cullen Library (University of the Witwatersrand). Several universities initiated projects for the collection of oral history and

³⁰ The project was initiated in 1959 and continued into the 1990s.

³¹ Albert Grundlingh, "Historical Writing and the State Archives in a Changing South Africa", *South African Archives Journal* 35 (1993): 81.

³² Albert Grundlingh, "Politics, Principles and Problems of a Profession: Afrikaner Historians and their Discipline, c.1920–c.1965", *Perspectives in Education* 12.1 (1990): 11–13. Theses were selected by the Archives Commission, on which the State Archives Service was represented by the Director.

³³ In 1984 the apartheid government introduced a House of Parliament for "Indians," the House of Delegates, and the House of Representatives for "coloureds." Each was supported by a similarly racially-defined "own affairs" administration.

oral tradition. A significant development was the establishment of the South African History Archive under the auspices of the United Democratic Front and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. This archive was committed to documenting the struggles against apartheid. After 1990 these archives as well as newly-established ones acquired significant quantities of records documenting anti-apartheid struggles, from both within and outside the country.

Transformation

The apartheid regime was not overthrown. The revolution fought for by the liberation movements over nearly three decades did not happen. Instead, between 1990 and 1994, the apartheid government and its political allies negotiated a transition to democracy with the opponents of apartheid.³⁴ Although the African National Congress won a sweeping victory in South Africa's first democratic general election in April 1994, it would manage at least the first five years of democracy-building through a Government of National Unity. Crucial to the success of this process was the efficacy of the major players on the ideological terrain in shaping a new national identity. This identity coheres around the notion of a rainbow nation united in its diversity and finding reconciliation through confronting the injustices of the past. Its most powerful symbolic embodiment is in the person of Nelson Mandela.³⁵ The nature of the transition to democracy meant that there would be no dramatic dismantling and reconstruction of the apartheid archival system. Rather, the new would be built out of the old through a process of transformation.

A transformation discourse – one informed by the assumption that archives required redefinition, more precisely reinvention, for a democratic South Africa – quickly emerged after 1990. This despite the fact that participants in this discourse, unlike in many other spheres, had very little to build on. They were confronted by a paucity of revisionist thinking and debate, and in the early stages of transition were forced to rely on ideas from international archival literature and from more broadly-based debates around social

³⁴ The unbanning of the African National Congress and numerous other organisations in February 1990, and the subsequent initiation of formal negotiations on the dismantling of apartheid, marked the beginning of what many journalists and other commentators dubbed South Africa's period of "Pretoriastroika." Useful accounts of the "Pretoriastroika" period are given by William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa* (Cape Town and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Allister Sparks, *Tomorrow is Another Country: The Inside Story of South Africa's Negotiated Revolution* (Sandton: Struik, 1995).

³⁵ For a brilliant account of the Mandela myth, see David Beresford, "Mandela's Greatness is From Being Here", *Mail and Guardian* (7–13 November 1997): 30.

memory within the country.³⁶ These debates had gathered momentum in the 1980s and informed a burgeoning praxis of oppositional memory construction. In a fundamental sense, resistance to apartheid in this period was a struggle of remembering against forgetting. Engagement by the liberation and broader democratic movements in cultural practice had become ever more vigorous. Activists and academics collaborated in conceptualising a “people’s education” in opposition to the apartheid educational system. The radical historiography which had emerged in the 1970s became more influential both in the academy and in public space. “Struggle literature” and “struggle theatre” – a discourse of opposition in fiction – flourished. “Alternative” publications and publishers, running the gauntlet of state censorship, provided an ever-shifting space for oppositional voices. A growing number of art galleries, libraries, and museums began to question long-established orthodoxies. As mentioned above, a number of archives – concentrated in the universities – began documenting orality and the struggles against apartheid.

After 1990 there was a flowering of non-public institutions committed to filling apartheid-fashioned gaps in social memory – for instance, the African National Congress Archives at the University of Fort Hare, the Alan Paton Centre at the University of Natal, the District Six Museum, the Gay and Lesbian Archives (a special project of the South African History Archive), the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape, a reconstituted South African History Archive, and the Robben Island Museum. They contributed significantly to transformation discourse and played an important role in demonstrating an alternative archival practice. Crucially, they were at the forefront of endeavours to bring back to South Africa archives generated by the experience of exile or located outside the country as a result of the exigencies of struggle. The records of the African National Congress and the Pan African Congress, for instance, were brought from around the globe to the University of Fort Hare. A large accumulation of International Defence and Aid Fund (IDAF) records were deposited with the Mayibuye Centre at the University of the Western Cape. Gradually the SAS, now renamed National Archives of South Africa, began securing the credibility to begin participating in these endeavours. Bringing the hidden, the marginalized, the exiled, the “other” archive, into the mainstream, allowing that archive to trouble conceptualizations of the “mainstream,” became powerful currents

³⁶ A survey of pre-1990 South African archival literature, for instance, reveals a predominance of work positioned comfortably within the status quo. The only significant exception was Jill Geber’s 1987 University of London dissertation, “The South African Government Archives Service: Past, Present and Future,” which attempted an historical analysis of the State Archives Service and offered a vision for public archives in a post-apartheid South Africa. This seminal work marked the birth of transformation discourse, but its immediate impact was slight.

in transformation discourse. After 1994 the South African History Archive broadened its mandate to a documenting of and contributing to continuing struggles for justice.

In 1996 transformation discourse delivered the *National Archives of South Africa Act*, which established the National Archives out of SAS and provided the legislative framework for the development of a new national archival system.³⁷ It is not my intention here to attempt an analysis either of the nature or the efficacy of this system. Suffice it to say that most of the transformation programmes mandated for it are still in their infancy, interlinking legislation is either still to be passed or has only very recently come into operation, and many of the system's elements are not yet fully functional. What I propose to offer is an account of what I regard to be the core issues in transformation discourse – the issues which give the discourse its fundamental shape. While in each instance the focus is heavily on public archives – the main target for transformation, the ground being contested, I would suggest, is the very identity of all archives, anywhere.

In my view, the defining idea, the leitmotif, of transformation discourse is that archivists, far from being the impartial custodians SAS liked to portray, are active documenters of society and shapers of social memory. Exploration of its implications has occupied centre stage, developing several strands and generating fierce debate. Perhaps the least contested argument is that the stranglehold enjoyed by whites over the archival profession needs to be broken. It matters, in terms of power relations, in terms of the construction of social memory in archives, that whites control archival institutions and dominate transformation discourse. It matters that only Western epistemes have been deployed in the re-imagining of South African archives. The drive for representivity in the public service since 1994, facilitated by affirmative action policies, has begun to effect meaningful change in this crucial area.³⁸ Significant numbers of black archivists have also been employed by non-public institutions. Another argument enjoying wide acceptance is that archives, because of both their role as active documenters and their apartheid legacies, must be subject to high levels of transparency and accountability within a framework of professional autonomy. The apartheid model for public archives – answerable only to the state and their operations largely opaque – has been firmly rejected. Debate has revolved around mechanisms for achieving transparency and accountability, and the question of how an appropriate balance of accountability to the users of archives, to society, and to the state is to be achieved. The *National Archives of South Africa Act* accords the

³⁷ For an analysis of the *Act* as a product of transformation discourse, see my “Transforming Discourse and Legislation.”

³⁸ In July 1998, the National Archives had 18 black professional staff members.

National Archivist full managerial and professional responsibility, but in the context of a delicate balance of power and accountability with Parliament, the National Cabinet Minister responsible for archives, and the National Archives Commission. The latter's role is crucial – appointed by the Minister through a process of public nomination, it is the Minister's and society's watchdog over the National Archives. It must be noted that this model will be changed fundamentally by an amendment to the *Act* in 2001 that replaces the Commission with an advisory council and places the National Archivist firmly under the direction of the Director General of the Department of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology. At the time of writing the amendment had not been brought into operation.

Mechanisms for the exercise of state control over non-public institutions, with two exceptions, have attracted little support. The role of the state is seen as one of co-ordination, support, and advice rather than of control. The *National Archives of South Africa Act* gives just such a role to the National Archives and the National Archives Commission. The two exceptions to this voluntary model relate to access provisions and the disposal of records. The *Promotion of Access to Information Act* (passed in 2000 and brought into operation in 2001) legislates the constitutional right of access to the records of "private bodies." In this the *Act* is unique amongst the world's family of freedom-of-information legislation. And there is consensus on the need for state control over the disposal of records in non-public archival custody: the *National Archives of South Africa Act* makes it an offence to destroy, export from South Africa, or otherwise dispose of records recorded on a National List by the National Archives Commission without the Commission's approval.³⁹ As I noted above, the 2001 *Cultural Laws Amendment Act* replaces the Commission with an advisory council, which will not have this control function. Hardly significant, it might be argued, in light of the fact that, in over three years of operation, the Commission failed to produce a National List.

In the formative stages of transformation discourse, powerful voices expressed the view that the shaping power of archives should be harnessed by the state to promote particular narratives, for instance that of reconciliation and nation building. Mercifully, this view did not shape the National Archives of South Africa Act. History is littered with examples of states – not least the apartheid state – controlling their public archives to manipulate social memory. In 1993 Albert Grundlingh warned against it by raising the spectre of SAS being "... called upon to provide a legitimising historical

³⁹ The *National Heritage Resources Act* (Number 25 of 1999) provides an additional mechanism for acting against the alienation from South Africa of records determined to be part of the national heritage.

project for the new state. Will that,” he went on to speculate, “involve the appointment of an official state historian . . . to narrate the anti-apartheid struggle in the same way that Breytenbach started some thirty years ago to chronicle the Afrikaner struggle against the British Empire?”⁴⁰ This has not happened, but there are worrying signs, outlined below, that this is a spectre not entirely banished. More encouraging has been a strong emphasis on the active promotion of archives as a tool in the interrogation of South Africa’s past. Heavy use has been made of archival holdings by bodies such as the TRC, the Commission for the Restitution of Land Rights, the Investigation Task Unit, and attorney-general’s offices. There is poetic justice in records of the apartheid state, which documented so densely and so obscenely the state’s control over citizens’ lives, being used to unfold the intricacies of oppression, expose the perpetrators of human rights violations, support the claims of the dispossessed to restitution, and prosecute those who refuse to ask for, or who fail to get, amnesty from the TRC.

Similar questions have permeated discussion of those two core “shaping” functions of public archives, appraisal and collecting.⁴¹ With the former, the focus has been on appraisal as an institutional process: who should be responsible for appraisal? To whom should appraisers be accountable? How transparent should the process be? How reliable are the appraisals done during the apartheid era? These questions are rooted in an intense distrust of SAS’s appraisal practice, which was characterised by an unrelenting opacity. Some have gone so far as to recommend that the appraisal function be taken from public archives and given to independent boards comprising academics and other “stakeholders.” The intensity of this distrust was illustrated in November 1995, when South Africa’s National Cabinet imposed a moratorium on the destruction of all public records – irrespective of whether or not they had been appraised by SAS – until the completion of the TRC’s work. By 1995, however, debate had yielded substantial agreement that appraisal is an archival function and archivists should be responsible for it. Nevertheless, democratic imperatives demand that levels of transparency be high, that public account of appraisal decisions be given, and that there should be some measure of public participation in the decision-making. These positions are reflected in the *National Archives of South Africa Act*, which charges the National Archives with the appraisal of public records, subject to the approval of its overarching appraisal policy and monitoring of the policy’s implementation by the National Archives Commission. Debate around the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of appraisal practice has been less widespread, but equally vigorous. Located mainly within

⁴⁰ Albert Grundlingh, “Historical Writing and the State Archives”, p. 83.

⁴¹ See note 8 above.

SAS (later National Archives) structures, the debate has pitted defenders of SAS's established practice against advocates of macro-appraisal.⁴² Not surprisingly, SAS's older practice – outlined earlier in this essay – has proved an easy target for advocates of macro-appraisal, who question the validity of previous approaches' intellectual foundation and its appropriateness to the realities of the 1990s. Macro-appraisal, they argue, provides an explanation of archival value which is rooted in the archival bedrock of provenance, which, unlike the idea of usefulness, secures a workable yardstick and meshes with a methodology appropriate to modern records environments. Moreover, it displaces the notion of the appraiser as a neutral handmaid to users of archives and replaces it with the view of the appraiser as an active documenter of societal processes. In 1996 SAS formally embarked on a macro-appraisal-inspired overhaul of its appraisal programme, which has now been inherited and developed by the National Archives.

SAS's old collecting function – also outlined earlier in this essay – has proved an equally easy target. Its critics have developed broad consensus on the defining characteristics of an alternative vision for collecting by public archives, one deeply influenced by the concept of "total archives." Policy, it is asserted, should direct archivists not only to society's pinnacles, but also, firmly, to grassroots experience and the full gamut of experience in between. Policy should accommodate the complementing of official holdings, but be directed primarily at the filling of its gaps. Collecting should be driven by the post-apartheid imperative to "give the voiceless voice." Public archives should not compete with the country's numerous non-public collecting institutions for material which would be more appropriately preserved by the latter. This vision has already found expression in the *National Archives of South Africa Act*, but two key questions remain unresolved. First, to what extent, if at all, should the collecting function be subordinated to the management of official holdings?⁴³

Secondly, what should public archives' involvement be in the collection of oral history? In South Africa, with its strong oral traditions and high rates of illiteracy, it is clear that giving voice to the voiceless will require a strong commitment to the documenting of orality. Still being debated is whether

⁴² Macro-appraisal first became an issue in South African archival debate during Eric Ketelaar's visit to the country in 1992. His account of the Dutch PIVOT Project was received with scepticism within the State Archives Service. However, subsequently, the writing of Terry Cook on appraisal and the Canadian macro-appraisal approach raised considerable interest. This was the primary consideration behind the State Archives Service's invitation to him to visit the country in 1994. His explosive impact led directly to the Service's establishment of an Appraisal Review Committee which in 1996 recommended the adoption of macro-appraisal.

⁴³ The State Archives Service subordinated the collecting function firmly; in 1995, non-public records made up only 5.4 percent of the Service's total holdings.

public archives should collect oral history themselves, acquire oral sources collected by experts in the field, facilitate access to oral sources by means of a national register, co-ordinate and promote the documenting of orality, or be invested with a combination of these functions. Most recent signs suggest that the National Archives is embracing the latter option.⁴⁴

Debate around the use and availability of public records has followed numerous streams. Much attention, for instance, has been paid to the question of public rights of access, with substantial cross-fertilisation taking place between the archival debate and the wider public debate on freedom of information.⁴⁵ In 2000 the *Promotion of Access to Information Act* was passed, legislating the Constitution's recognition of the right of access to records held by both "public" and "private" bodies, and fundamentally transforming the terrain of access to information. However, the defining issues in transformation discourse, in my view, have hinged on the assertion that it is not enough for public archives to ensure equal access to their holdings, even if they do so in terms of constitutionally-entrenched rights of public access. They must go beyond being merely servers of records users. They must become *creators* of users; in the words of the popular slogan, they must "take archives to the people." From the outset, this position formed one of the dominant streams in transformation discourse, and quickly secured hegemony, even within SAS. Its proponents pointed to the array of systemic barriers to access raised by the apartheid system, the alienation from public archives of most South Africans, and the urgent need to utilise public resources in addressing the huge inequalities and imbalances inherited from apartheid. Public archives, in short, should be transformed from a domain of the elite into a community resource. This position has found expression in the *National Archives of South Africa Act*, which requires the National Archives to "make known information concerning records by means such as publications, exhibitions and the lending of records . . . with special emphasis on activities designed to reach out to less privileged sectors of society. . . ."

⁴⁴ The National Archives has launched an automated National Register of Oral Sources, run its own pilot oral history project, and initiated discussions around the establishment of a national oral history programme.

⁴⁵ The *National Archives of South Africa Act* reduced the restricted access period on public records in archival custody from thirty to twenty years. The new Constitution's recognition of the right of access to "any information held by the state" (section 32(1)(a)) was legislated for by the *Promotion of Access to Information Act* (Number 2 of 2000).

Conclusion: An enchanted sliver

Apartheid's sterile archival discourse has been vanquished by a successor born of and connecting assuredly with South Africa's new societal dynamics. Although in the ascendancy and possessing a remarkable coherence, this transformation discourse is open-ended, accommodating sometimes intense debate. Moreover, it is characterised by many consensus positions arrived at by compromise – reflecting, I would argue, the contours of South Africa's political terrain. The discourse, then, is distinctively South African. Nevertheless, it has been influenced by and meshes with recent developments in international archival discourse, which in turn reflects the post-1990 ending of South Africa's isolation.

As South Africa enters the new millennium, it is set apart from most other nations by the intensity of its embrace of a future through re-negotiating of its past. For over a decade now, in the academy, in memory institutions, school classrooms, courtrooms, the media, people's living rooms, and, crucially, the TRC, South Africans have been searching for meanings in a myriad narratives of the past. For some, the meanings are borne by "facts;" the "truth" of what happened. For others "fact" and "fiction," "history" and "story," coalesce in imaginative space. In her account of two years as an investigative reporter covering the TRC, Antjie Krog, for instance, concedes that "I have told many lies in this book about the truth."⁴⁶ The writer, André Brink, argues that "the best we can do is to fabricate metaphors – that is, tell stories – in which, not history, but imaginings of history are invented."⁴⁷

Yet others occupy a middle ground, believing that story adds texture to the text of history, fills its gaps: "the lacunae in the archives are most usefully filled through magical realism, metaphor, and fantasy. . . ."⁴⁸

This negotiation of the past, which is unfolding many new dimensions in social memory and generating huge quantities of archives, constitutes the ground on which the transformation of archives is being played out. However, I would argue, transformation discourse is failing to engage the realities of this ground fully, or to utilise all the space this ground provides, because it remains wedded to a Positivist paradigm rooted in the nineteenth-century birth of "archival science." In this paradigm the meanings of words like "archives," "archivist," "record," and a host of others are simple, stable, and uncontested. There is little attempt to address the new realities being

⁴⁶ Antjie Krog, *Country of My Skull* (Johannesburg: Random House, 1998), p. 281.

⁴⁷ André Brink, "Stories of History: Reimagining the Past in Post-Apartheid Narrative", in Sarah Nuttall and Carli Coetzee (eds.), *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Memory in South Africa* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 42.

⁴⁸ "Introduction", *Negotiating the Past*, p. 3. The editors mistakenly identify André Brink as a proponent of this view.

fashioned by technological revolution and postmodernist epistemologies. The Positivist paradigm posits archival records as providing a reflection of “reality.” There is no space in it for the “sliver of a window” concept which I explicate in the introduction to this essay. 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, the discourse still defines archival endeavour in terms of custodianship, conceptualises archives in terms of physical things and places of custody, and proposes a (narrower) shaping of the record as the carrier of memory rather than a (broader) participation in the processes of memory formation and storytelling. And South Africa’s transformation project in archives is interpreted in triumphalist terms, with the notion of archives holding the collective memory of the nation muscling out my image of a contested, ever-shifting archival sliver.

In my view, then, while South African archivists have successfully reimagined what they do and who they are in a post-apartheid South Africa, they have been less successful in engaging technological revolution and the conditions of postmodernity. And they have not begun to allow space for, less explore, the contribution offered by what have been called “African” or “indigenous” epistemologies.⁴⁹ It is not enough for black South Africans to establish a representative presence in the archival profession and its discourses. What is needed are voices in these discourses employing conceptual frameworks for meaning-construction which are rooted in South African societal realities and indigenous pasts. Archivists, then, cling to outmoded Positivist ideas which underpin inappropriate strategies, distorted notions of their role, and inflated accounts of their accomplishments. I offer four examples to illustrate this. First, in pressing to reach out to users, to create new users, too frequently archives are opting for the neatly packaged information product rather than the rich contextualisation of text. And in doing so, they are contributing to what Jean-Francois Lyotard has called the commodification of knowledge.⁵⁰ Moreover, much of archival outreach provides little or no space for competing narratives. We adopt the language of metanarrative 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

⁴⁹ An encouraging movement in this direction was marked by the joint University of the Witwatersrand/National Archives series of seminars and workshops, “Refiguring the Archive,” July–November 1998. The series was characterised by participants from many disciplines wrestling with the implications for the archive of electronic technologies and a range of competing epistemologies.

⁵⁰ Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 5, 45, and 51.

frequently are excluded, and so we deny our audience the very space in which democracy thrives. Secondly, both in the work that has been done and in the planning of future projects related to oral history, there is a worrying tendency to underestimate, or simply not to grasp, the problematic of converting orality into material custody. There are three aspects to this: a determination to view and to utilise recorded oral history as “source” for historiography rather than as “history” in its own right; a failure to understand the extent to which orality, in the words of Isabel Hofmeyr, “live(s) by its fluidity”;⁵¹ and an inability, or refusal, to engage orality as a form of archive. The result, in my view, is that oral history programmes frequently promote the further disempowerment of marginalised voices. Thirdly, amongst archival appraisers, there persists the notion that their appraisal work is simply about the building of a coherent reflection of “reality” through the jigsawing of individual appraisals. There is little perception of the fact that the appraiser participates in the processes, the “reality,” which the archival record “reflects.” The appraiser’s values, quality of work, perspectives, interaction with the records creating agency, engagement with the policy s(he) is implementing, and so on, all shape and are reflected in the appraisal. The appraiser is not simply identifying records with archival value; s(he) is creating archival value. This participation becomes part of the broader context to the text which is preserved. So the archival record provides a window into the appraisal process as much as it does into anything else. This demands an approach which embraces the individual appraisal report or study itself as a record, a text with a very specific ontological status. And fourthly, in the contextualisation of text which is central to all archival endeavour – whether it be in appraisal, the preparation of finding aids, exhibition commentaries, or direct user support – most South African archivists remain wedded to the notion that their objective is the detaining of meaning, the resolving of mystery, the closing of the archive. There is little awareness of the imperative for contextualisation to reveal the multiple layers of construction in text, nor of the need to disclose their own archival contextualisation as yet another layer. Such an awareness would transform archival endeavour into an exercise in releasing meanings, tending mystery, opening the archive. It would foster passion for the different, the wholly other (Jacques Derrida’s *tout autre*), the impossible.

The archival record, I have argued, is best understood as a sliver of a sliver of a window into process. It is a fragile thing, an enchanted thing, defined not by its connections to “reality,” but by its open-ended layerings

⁵¹ Quoted by Carolyn Hamilton, “‘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, p. 17.

of construction and reconstruction. Far from constituting the solid structure around which imagination can play, it is itself the stuff of imagination. Another metaphor is provided for it by Ouma, a character in André Brink's novel, *Imaginings of Sand*:

I am a very ordinary person in most respects. . . . But in one respect I know I am extraordinary. My memory. You're right. I have an amazing memory. At times I even surprise myself. I can remember things that never happened.⁵²

The archival record, like all repositories of memory, is an extraordinary creation of remembering, forgetting, and imagining. Moreover, as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and others have argued, and as recent South African history has demonstrated, the archival record is at once expression and instrument of power. Only when it is understood as such, respected and treasured as such, will its enchantment be fully released to enrich South Africa's negotiation of the past.

The dimension of power in archives is made plain in the extreme circumstances of oppression, and in the heady processes of rapid transition to democracy, as shown above for South Africa. However, even in the relatively calm backwaters of established democracies, we ignore the dimension of power at our peril. Archivists, wherever they work and however they are positioned, are subject to the call of and for justice. For the archive can never be a quiet retreat for professionals and scholars and craftspersons. It is a crucible of human experience, a battleground for meaning and significance, a babel of stories, a place and a space of complex and ever-shifting power-plays. Here one cannot keep one's hands clean. Any attempt to be impartial, to stand above the power-plays, constitutes a choice, whether conscious or not, to replicate if not to reinforce prevailing relations of power. In contrast, archivists who hear the calling of justice, who understand and work with the archival record as an enchanted sliver, will always be troubling the prevailing relations of power.

It would be presumptuous of me to prescribe an archival praxis based on such an approach to archives. But let me conclude by suggesting tentatively a few attributes of archivists who embrace such a praxis. They understand that the language they use, the very words that are available to them, are instruments of power. They know that every move they make is a construction of knowledge, an exercise of power. They feel compelled to disclose their complicity in these constructions and exercises. Of crucial importance, they are bound by the principle of hospitality to "otherness." They respect every "other," invite every "other" in to the archive. So that whether they are

⁵² André Brink, *Imaginings of Sand* (London: Minerva, 1997), p. 4.

making records available, or describing records, or appraising record-keeping systems, they listen intently for the voices of those who are marginalised or excluded by prevailing relations of power. An impossible challenge of course! How to invite in what is always beyond the limits of understanding? How to avoid the danger of speaking *for* these other voices? How to avoid reinforcing marginalisation by naming “the marginalised” as such? How to invite in what one wishes to resist – the voices, for instance, of white supremacists, hard drug dealers, paedophiles, rapists, pimps, and so on, and on and on? In the memorable words of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Let us, then, for the moment at least, arrest the understandable need to fix and diagnose the identity of the most deserving marginal. Let us also suspend the mood of self-congratulation as saviors of marginality.”⁵³

These new archivists are not romanticisers of “otherness.” They fear it even as they respect it. They know that, as much as it is “outside,” it is also already “inside” as the converse spectre of power. But ultimately, they know only that justice calls them to engage it continually, honestly, and openly, without blueprint, without solution, without answers.

⁵³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York and London, Routledge, 1993), p. 61.