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

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Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective

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For over a decade, South African archivist Verne Harris has contributed a compelling voice to international archival discourses, sharing professional experiences from the vantage point of his native country's transition from an apartheid state to a democracy. In 2004, he became the project manager for the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory and an honorary research associate at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, where he teaches postgraduate courses on archives, memory, and society. His archival career has been multifaceted. He entered the profession as an archivist with the South African State Archives Service in the 1980s, and was affiliated with that institution and its successor, the National Archives of South Africa, until 2001. Following South Africa's transition to democracy, Harris served as that institution's liaison with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He next worked for the South African History Archive, a human rights organization that documents the movement against apartheid and promotes access to information and with which he remains active in his current capacity. While Harris has been characterized as a postmodern thinker, he himself eschews that label, in part because, "So wide and indiscriminate has its application been, that its meaning has lost all coherence" (p. 61).

Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective is a compilation of writings drawn from Harris's post-1994 essays, speeches, and conference presentations (several of the pieces are co-authored). That date holds special significance, Harris writes, because, "For South Africa, that year marked the formal ending of apartheid. For me, as an archival thinker and writer, it marked my release from a straitjacket" (p. 3). Though, as the title indicates, this work is rooted in its author's experiences as a South African archivist, its messages are profoundly relevant to the archival profession, to a growing number of academic disciplines, and to society as a whole. With *Archives and Justice,* Harris invites the reader to enter into an ever-evolving and unfolding dialogue about the nature of the archive, records, and memory; their significance in the lives of individuals, communities, and societies; and the roles and responsibilities of archivists.

Terry Cook's foreword, "Archival Music: Verne Harris and the Cracks of Memory," provides a fitting context for *Archives and Justice.* As a mentor and friend to Harris, Cook sheds insight into Harris's evolution as an archivist and a thinker (we learn, for instance, of the central role that music—jazz in particular—has played in Harris's life, and of his career outside of archives as a novelist). Cook assesses this work as one that defies neat categorization, blending within its pages elements of professional autobiography in process, advanced archival theory, the

politics of archival work, ethics, and philosophy (pp. xii–xiii). Cook rightly credits Harris with providing an anthem for the professional work of twenty-first-century archivists: "The anthem that Verne would have us sing as the 'group' called archives is one for justice, to find in the inexorable calling to justice our central 'responsibility,' or else *we* are 'nothing at all' " (p. x). This notion of justice incorporates hospitality, the inviting of story, into archives, through openness to the "other," those who are different from us. It entails welcoming multiple voices into archives and embracing diverse ways of seeing and knowing. It resists the privileging of dominant and mainstream narratives over those of the marginalized. While acknowledging the human tendency to slip into the metanarratives of the powerful, this justice challenges us to guard against that instinct. In *Archives and Justice,* Cook writes, "Verne gives us the poetry and music of a new archive, and so many rich arguments for freeing ourselves from constraining shibboleths so that archives may be transformed for justice" (p. xxviii).

How are we, as a profession and as a society, to achieve this justice, this hospitality that Harris envisions? We must look for the cracks. "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in." With this epigraph, borrowed from Canadian singer, songwriter, and poet Leonard Cohen, Harris points the way toward transformation. In the brief introduction, "Reaching for Hospitality," he exhorts archivists to resist insularities, which tempt us to privilege dominant assumptions, concepts, practices, and stories above others. Instead, Harris urges us to situate professional dialogue and work within the realm of broader public discourses, consciously identifying those "cracks" that let the light in; actively welcoming in the light (with its multiple stories, perspectives, and ways of knowing and seeing); and inviting, through hospitality, an engagement with the other. The essays in *Archives and Justice* achieve this objective on multiple levels, challenging archivists to be open to ongoing reconceptualizations of their notions about the archive, archives, and the archival endeavor.

Archives and Justice is organized into five sections, the first four consisting of five chapters each, and the final one composed of a single chapter of op-eds based on versions originally published in South African newspapers. The first section, "Discourses," illuminates Harris's engagement with writings and discussions related to archives. "Narratives," the second, "explores the stories that archivists tell in certain domains of professional work—appraisal, electronic recordmaking, and arrangement and description" (p. 4). The third and fourth sections, "Politics and Ethics" and "Pasts and Secrets," respectively, recount and reflect on events and issues with which Harris has wrestled as a South African archivist. The op-eds contained in the final section, "Actualities," provide evidence of Harris's "deliberate endeavors to bring awareness of archive to popular debates in South Africa" (pp. 1–2). Perhaps appropriately, given the heavy deconstructionist orientation of *Archives and Justice,* it is a work best apprehended around themes rather than structure, as Harris's exploration of

archive and record, memory and forgetting, and justice and hospitality runs throughout the entire volume.

The issues with which *Archives and Justice* grapples are impossible to discuss without reference to the work of Jacques Derrida, which has inspired Harris's ways of viewing and interacting with the world. His reading of works by Derrida (as well as those about him) extends far beyond the popular 1996 *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression.* While this influence permeates the whole, readers wishing to gain insight into how Derrida has shaped Harris's thinking will find chapter 3: "A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive" and chapter 5, " 'Something is Happening Here and You Don't Know What It Is': Jacques Derrida Unplugged" particularly informative. In the latter, Harris suggests that "This is . . . the central challenge that Derrida poses to archivists. How do we make our work a work of justice? How do we practice a hospitality to otherness, a hospitality to every other?" (p. 77). Harris presents that same challenge to us throughout *Archives and Justice,* conceding that such a challenge is impossible, yet exhorting us to be open to—and to reach for—the impossible in our work and in our lives.

Above all else, Harris urges us to question, to contest, to trouble, to undefine and redefine, our professional and societal assumptions, stories, and narratives. He calls us to participate in dialogue. "I wish to stimulate your imaginations rather than persuade you by argument, open a discussion rather than define one, get us asking questions rather than finding answers" (p. 101). What Harris suggests, in essence, is that we as a profession learn to love the questions, even when they lead to uncomfortable answers. This marks the point at which transformation can occur, if we have sufficient will to work toward it. *Archives and Justice* provides us with glimpses of an archive, a profession, and a society always in transformation, in the process of becoming, as together we as archivists and the "other" (creators and users of records, diverse users of archives, cultural heritage professionals of all types) strive to achieve Derrida's (and Harris's) vision of an impossible, ever-coming justice.

A reinvigorated, re-imagined professional discourse that reaches beyond rationalist traditions is vital to this type of change. Harris laments "the absence of dance in archival discourse" (p. 228) and anticipates the possibilities that arise if we make space for dreaming, mystery, and imagination as well. He challenges the profession to reassess long-standing and deeply ingrained ideas of the archive, archivists, and the archival endeavor. He calls upon it to trouble positivist notions of records as mere by-products of process and reflections of reality. Instead, he postulates, "Whatever else it is, or might be, 'the record' is always already the bearer of mystery. And, in its opening to the future, the (limitless) bringer of mystery. Unless archivists . . . cherish and tend this mystery, they risk reducing themselves to arid (and dispensable) functionaries. Worse, they risk becoming archons, hostile to contestation and comfortable in the exercise of power" (p. 122). Harris questions the Jenkinsonian legacy of

archivists as impartial recordkeepers, suggesting that archivists are instead recordmakers, and, as such, "are, from the beginning and always, political players" and "active participants in the dynamics of power relations" (p. 241). His belief that "the call of justice—which comes from outside of 'the record,' outside of any archival or recordmaking theory—is a calling more important than any other calling" (p. 248) leads to a conviction that we must strive toward a just politics of recordmaking, wherein "the work of recordmaking is justice and resistance to injustice" (p. 257). This is a politics animated by an ethics of hospitality, which incorporates inviting in—and listening to—the many voices of the "other."

Yes, in *Archives and Justice,* Harris is calling on archivists to do the impossible. But then again, haven't we, as archivists, always embraced the impossible? Our work is at the same time one of remembering and forgetting, of memory and mourning. The decisions we make in appraisal are impossible, determining those "stories [which] will be consigned to the archive and which will not" (p. 104). That fundamental activity of archivists, contextualization, is impossible, as contexts shift, change, and reshape in the telling. Context is elusive, ever partial, always interpreted. And yet, as a profession, we continue to tell stories, because to do so is human and because stories are worth telling. Let us then, with Harris, strive for the impossible: a just politics of recordmaking, animated by an ethics of hospitality to the other. Let us welcome multiple, competing voices and stories into the archive, valuing their richness and diversity. The true gift of *Archives and Justice* to the archival profession is that it frees us—individually and collectively—to make space in our work and in our discourses for mystery, dance, imagination, and passion.

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