

Archive Fever

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Sophisticated self-deception, some will say; others: an absence of discernment; and no verdict will be reached (Freud 2002:251).

Once a year a judge has the opportunity to grant amnesty to one prisoner. When the allotted time arrives there are three recently convicted prisoners standing before him. Each is no less guilty than the others and he soon wearies of their pleading and incessant oaths of loyalty. Anticipating such a situation, experience had taught him to be prepared. Yawning, he shows the prisoners five small, engraved disks, each threaded on a leather string. 'You will see that three of these circles are white and two are black. You will sit in a triangle and close your eyes. The jailer will fasten one fetish to the forehead of each of you. Then you will open your eyes and remain silent. The first of you to correctly name the colour of your own *uphawu*, and provide a convincing account of how you reached that conclusion, can leave'.

The first possibility is that you see two black disks, and so conclude that yours is white. The second is that you see one black and one white. You reason that yours could be white or black. But if yours is black then the prisoner with the white disk would see two black disks and leave. Since he does not do so, you therefore conclude yours must be white.

However, after some time the three prisoners simultaneously and correctly shout out 'I am white!'. How did they reach this submission?

The third possibility is that I see two white disks. If mine is black then the other prisoners would each see a black and a white disk, reasoning

that if their own is black then the prisoner with the white disk would leave immediately. Since he does not, and since the others hesitate, it means that mine is white too.

This sophism foregrounds, among others things, the desire for recognition whereby more complex processes of reasoning are involved in determining one's symbolic identity through the other via an anticipatory recognition. I am X through the perceptions of another, and the interplay of this overlapping interaction is as irreducible as it is open to reinvention. In other words social identity has a performative dimension whereby the act of recognition strives to create that which it claims to identify¹. In this parable the gamble of understanding amounts to a phantasmatically synchronized hesitation and reciprocal anticipation, a precipitous subjective gesture, that produces yet another problem for the judge. It can also be read as an allegory of reading whereby the identity of both author and audience is set to work.

In what follows I shall indicate aspects of this problematic in two texts that have taken up the formidable challenge of interrogating South African archival and academic discourse. The first, *Refiguring the Archive* edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, June Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid and Razia Saleh, introduces itself as seeing in archival transformation an opportunity to correct the selectivity of official memoriality within the context of the new South African political dispensation. The second, Carli Coetzee's essay 'Creating an Audience', focuses on one element of the existing archive to argue for the ameliorative and uniting effects of the work that archivists and academics can do.

I argue that a compressive and mobile complex of misrecognition links *Refiguring the Archive* and 'Creating an Audience', and has consequences for the claim to legitimacy and responsibility motivating the rhetoric of both texts. Here the avoidance of certain determinate complicities, or at least a choice between them, distinguishes post-apartheid critical theory. As you will see, the following profile of post-apartheid *méconnaissance* is also a self-portrait in which progress and regression, consent and dissent, are intertwined.

¹ See Slavoj Žižek's (1993:74-5) discussion of Lacan's 'Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty' in terms of identifying oneself with a symbol that is potentially one's epitaph.

I

... like the outcome, the origin of every contract also points toward violence (Benjamin 1986:288).

The eighteen essays collected in *Refiguring the Archive* form an extension of thirteen seminars that attracted twenty-two speakers, including Jacques Derrida, hosted in 1998 by the University of the Witwatersrand Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences. In their introduction Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris and Graeme Reid claim to want 'to engage the idea of the taken-for-granted, often implicit, 'archive' that is the foundation of the production of knowledge in the present, the basis for the identities of the present and for the possible imaginings of community in the future' (Hamilton *et al* 2002:9). The project created the opportunity for the National Archives 'to participate in a partnership which promised to open that institution to transformational energies and to provide a forum in which it could reach out to new constituencies' (Hamilton *et al* 2002:10).

A key figure in the opening section of the collection is Derrida's presentation, 'Archive Fever in South Africa'. This opening part of the book is, according to the 'Introduction', concerned with 'extending its [the archive's] boundaries and theorising its exclusions, thereby setting the scene for the two sections that follow' (Hamilton *et al* 2002:14). Derrida's title 'Archive Fever in South Africa' refers to his short book on Freud, memory and psychoanalysis, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*, itself based on a lecture delivered in London. In that text Derrida (1996:1-3) points out that 'archive' is linked to *arkhe* as origin and commencement, the place and moment of a new beginning or departure, where authority and social order are exercised via legitimate hermeneutic authority. In contrast to Foucault's idea of the archive as the law of what can be said, this nomological and legislative force is tied up with the citizens who hold and signify political power and possess the power to make or to represent the law². This signals a productive labour tied to valorization and the slide between a proxy and a portrait that has auxiliary (subaltern rather than plenipotentiary) facilitators

² See Sandya Shetty and Elizabeth Bellamy (2000:28) on the difference between law as discursive formation and law as violence of identifiable inscription.

such as academics and archivists. These participate, however indirectly and subject to mediation, in the inscription of the mystical foundation of authority that can also be held up for scrutiny. As Gayatri Spivak (1999:205) suggests, the desire for power in the relation between practices in the past and historical accounts of them can be usefully refigured as transferential; a repetition of the past into the present as it necessarily bears on the future.

In his contribution to *Refiguring the Archive*, 'Archive Fever in South Africa', Derrida (2002:44) shuttles between Freud's account of the psychic apparatus and the nature of the archive to argue that 'the social and political power of the archive', its selectivity, arises, in part, from a question of economy or 'finitude'. After all not everything can be preserved. This constitutive limitation of the archive is contrasted with the death drive, the radical desire for the destruction of the archive, for the erasure of the traces of memory. You will recall that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud argues that development and involution are part of the same dynamic of expenditure and conservation. Development consists in part of an impetus to regress to an earlier stage—for Freud the state of inanimate, dead matter from which life evolved—that is the object of desire that must be repeated. The repression of this repetition compulsion or 'death instinct' is the motor of actual development. Rather than a triumphal procession Freud offers an ambivalent picture of forced progress, resignation even, and compensatory achievement. On an individual scale this is the war of human development as 'the only war without memories or memorials' (Althusser 1971:206) with which psychoanalysis is concerned.

In Derrida's (2002:44) reading, what threatens the archive as memory trace is not finite time and resources but also 'something in the psychic apparatus [that] is driven to destroy the trace without any remainder'. Without this threat there would be no archive, it is what makes the desire for archive a burning one. Out of this conflict or competition comes a sense of the orientation of the archive to the future: 'And this future-oriented structure of the archive is precisely what confronts us with a responsibility and ethical and political responsibility' (Derrida 2002:46). Subsequently ethical and political responsibility is defined by Derrida as a responsibility to articulate the law and justice to one another: 'to make the law more just and to make the justice more effective. That's the ethical and political responsibility' (Derrida 2002:76). In short, the existing practice of

the law does not accord with justice. Responsibility demands, as a necessary step not unrelated to the dream of the philosophy of praxis, the possible and always useful desedimentation of the superstructures of law that both hide and reflect the economic and political interests of the dominant forces of society.

Derrida focuses these issues on the TRC as archive and as therapeutic healing of 'wounds from which this country, and these nations [!] in this country, suffer' (Derrida 2002:52)³. Noting that it is possible to experience reconciliation without justice and to subject truth to the need for reconciliation, he emphasises that 'the archive is also an act of forgetting' (Derrida 2002:77f). The death instinct, the fever of destruction and its preservation, does not come to the archive from outside. There is a perverse desire for forgetting within the economy of the archive itself: 'The death drive is not simply at work in killing, in producing death, but in trying to save, in a certain way, the memory' (Derrida 2002:68)—no forgetting without memory, no preservation without destruction. When we write, when we archive, we produce a substitute for what is represented, and this mnemonic trace is also the means of erasure, repression, and forgetting of what it is supposed to keep safe. And, as the deconstructive lesson runs, to attempt to be free of all mediations and grasp the living presence of the thing itself is also a desire for pure life that is death.

To accumulate documentary monuments and artefacts is an act of mourning that seeks to internalise, to swallow and keep it safe, rather than simply preserve, and this is why mourning must have a time limit. Imagine, says Derrida (2002:54) in hyperbolic mode once again, that one day South Africa will have accomplished the full archive of its history and it could be locked away in a safe, never to be lost again, so everyone could just forget it:

³ Ranjana Khanna's (2003:271) comments on Derrida's meditation usefully foreground the stakes for the nation and nation-building: 'Memorialization thus assists in assimilation because of the apparent introjection of traumatic events that highlight conflict and betrayal. But they become archived precisely at the moment when they fail to exist in memory, that is, when they must appear to be accounted for in the national narrative. The creation of a collective memory is thus an instrument of laying to rest, or of not needing to remember, remembering to forget'.

And perhaps, perhaps, this is the unconfessed desire of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. That as soon as possible the future generation may have forgotten it just let us forget it to go on, to survive.

The archive is subject to Nietzsche's active forgetting, for the sake of life and health. Such is Derrida's provocation in the context of South Africa's official commitment to expanding an inclusive commemorative archive.

It is clear that for Derrida 'archive' has an extended and multi-faceted extension beyond the usual meaning. It plays over a number of paleonymic resonances as well as weaving through Freud's texts and, equally importantly, Derrida's own archived corpus, particularly 'Freud and the Scene of Writing' and 'Force of Law: The "Mystical Foundations of Authority"' Such intricate intertextuality is slippery ground on which to orientate the essays gathered in the opening section of *Refiguring the Archive*. Susan van Zyl (2002:39) adopts the wisest strategy by staying close to Derrida's 'Archive Fever' and resisting the temptation 'to identify with Derrida, to enter into the spirit of his text by adopting his style and method'. As she comments, there are other alternative readings that psychoanalysis could contribute that might trouble the archive in 'less mysterious ways' (Hamilton *et al* 2002:59). This guards against the sway of the paternal metaphor and a vaporous Derrida-fever⁴.

Two expository essays are printed on the right hand page while Derrida's address and answers to questions run on the left, forming a centrepiece of the collection. In their 'Introduction' Hamilton, Harris, and Reid explain the reason for this elaborate presentation:

⁴ For example: 'Derrida in the archive is as Derrida is wherever he chooses to be—relentlessly, radically, subversive Bob Dylan expressed it well in his "Ballad of a Thin Man" ...' (Verne Harris 2002:79). 'Gordimer herself has said, quoting Nietzsche in an utterance of ontological significance, that "truth begins in dialogue"' (Roberts 2002:317). 'Like the archive, this essay creates the illusion of constituting a single corpus but unlike the archive I attempt to perform this failure by acknowledging it'. (Brent Harris 2002; 165, note 30) 'We begin our ending—for this is our editorial summation—with a lexical interlude' (Hamilton *et al* 2002:7).

It is our intention to present the essays figured by parallel, supplementary, superimposed and juxtapositional texts—writing and images, reproduced either partially or fully. This is an intellectual (re)figuring using as vehicle a technical (re)figuring. The resulting intertextuality—which both acknowledges and plays the blurred boundaries between form and content, text and context—provides a shifting space for multiple voices (Hamilton *et al* 2002:14).

Stress falls on the existence of an archival contract: ‘His [Derrida’s] etymological analysis demonstrates that every archival deconstruction must both respect and work with the stuff of tradition’ (Hamilton *et al* 2002:16). Transposed to a context in which the reality principle coincides with the realm of necessity this is read as the imperative that ‘archivists should aim to engage new realities with a passionate commitment to fulfilling the archival contract’ (Hamilton *et al* 2002:17). In emblematic fashion the introduction to *Refiguring the Archive* stages, for the record, its own prescriptive moment of contract and reveals what has been hidden:

This book challenges that silence: what is it that archivists undertake to do in return for the enormous power invested in them by society? (What constitutes an acceptable exercise of what Derrida calls ‘archontic power’? What does it mean to ‘preserve’ a document, lapel badge or dress?) Everything in this book, indeed the book’s very rationale, assumes the contract to be indispensable This book represents a challenge to the assumptions that underpin their [archivists’] activities, suggesting that a refigured archive might escape the kinds of boundaries they enforce, and find expression in new sites and in new forms (Hamilton *et al* 2002:16f).

Given the diagnosis that there has always been a contract and an exercise of power, the desire to make the present a new *arkhe* faces a formidable contamination. If archivists have in the past defaulted on the spirit of that contract, then the present diathetic re-inscription is both necessary and fragile. Exactly how to reconfigure or sublimate the previously broken contract—moving from bad faith to authenticity—is the challenge. In the context of post-1994 South Africa the advocacy of

inclusiveness and representivity plays a key part⁵: 'Such commitment is much needed in a South Africa that seeks to imagine itself and its past in ways not constrained by the colonial and apartheid pasts' (Hamilton *et al* 2002:17). Within the ceremonial of this discourse of rights and duties the self-reflective contract, considered performatively, initiates a hypothetical future and has the illocutionary mode of a promise. And since a performative force is always an interpretative force what is invoked is a future that deflects the instability threatening the construction of present legitimacy⁶.

The parties to the 'archival contract' are archivists and academics who mine archives and construct their own via research, and a more general public: 'We wanted to ensure that the project was not confined to two circles, researchers and academics on the one hand and practising archivists on the other' (Hamilton *et al* 2002:14). Capitalising on the resonance of (social) contract and the fiction of consenting parties submits the interconnection between State, property relations, archivists, benefactors, their capital and institutions, to a compelling indirection⁷. Yet, while endowments and bequests may result from social capital accumulated at the expense of the very people now being represented, one may hope that the advent of a more benign and representative state might hold out a future

⁵ 'The apartheid regime was not overthrown. The revolution fought for by the liberation movements over nearly three decades did not happen 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' (Harris 2002a:142).

⁶ Verne Harris (2002a:143f) points out that the transformational National Archives of South Africa Act (1996) only came into operation on January 1, 1997, and 'most of the transformational programmes defined by it are still in their infancy, and many of the system's elements are not yet operative'.

⁷ Achille Mbembe (2002:19) observes that, except for private documents, 'the majority of documents deemed archivable are related to the general work of the state'. To some extent it answers Bhekizwe Peterson's (2002) plea for the inclusion of marginalised knowledges and experiences in the refigured archive. Pointing to the funding difficulties of centres that have been on the cutting edge of black creativity, Peterson implores archivists to innovate and glosses over the role of the state in this dereliction.

organic reciprocity between archons and those they desire to ultimately serve⁸. A foundation, after all, is a promise. Before the law exhortation carries away commitment:

The figuring by our apartheid and longer pasts must be challenged, and spaces must be opened up in the archives by a transforming society. Undoubtedly *Refiguring the Archive*, the book, can be positioned within this imperative. However, it is our hope that it will invite—and deserve—other positionings (Hamilton *et al* 2002:7).

Appeal to good standing or credit endorses a talismanic ‘transformation’ that is never defined. The debate about along what lines, at what cost and to whom, this particular form of ‘transformation’ precedes is shelved. Any hope of dissension is met by the dogmatic realism of the banausic assertion that this is where we begin/continue from, so let’s get to work on anything but interrogating the violent configuration of this new departure. A forgotten but familiar figure digs in on the perimeter, like the enemy in front of a beleaguered city, and starves it out.

Despite the heralding of ‘a post-apartheid critique’ this metonymic functioning of the archive is perhaps not radically different from the frigidity of the bad ‘positivist assumptions of the apartheid era’ (Hamilton *et al* 2002:10). Spaces within the archive will be opened up as the archive reflects a transforming society and thereby contributes to the transformation of society by reorganising the hierarchies of representation⁹. A mirrored

⁸ According to Phaswane Mpe (2002:229): ‘In the apartheid days some of them, working for the National Archives and other institutions, would have been committed to archiving material in ways that were of positive use to the separatist, discriminatory ideology After the April 1994 general elections and the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, this commitment assumed a new face: rather than collect and document data and narratives for the apartheid government, these archives are now archived for other political purposes’.

⁹ If ‘[t]he positivist paradigm posits archival records as providing a reflection of reality’, then freeing oneself from ‘a positivist paradigm rooted in the nineteenth-century birth of “archival science”’ (Verne Harris 2002a: 149) surely must involve examining the concept of representation.

relationship of arbitration and circular reappropriation marks the process of archive formation and excludes its previous pathological form. The rearrangement of constituents within the old structure in the name of the law of equivalence constitutes an interminable process of self-preservation. Honesty demands that accord with the force of the law as *Real politik*—grasping transformation as ameliorative reticulation—is not yet a common sense that has become sick with its health. However, it is a lure that has implications for the claim to ethico-political responsibility before the heterogeneity of law and justice.

I would like now to try to intensify the borders of these theoretical debates by turning to a cameo that sharpens the issue of legitimate hermeneutic authority, foregrounding representation as both tropology and rhetoric. Reparative apologetics are cast aside together with the organizational and connective functions associated with the manufacturing of consent integral to political governance. What ought perhaps to have remained concealed steps forward, as mundane as it is uncanny.

II

Every nation, every race, has not only its own creative, but its own critical turn of mind; and is even more oblivious of the shortcomings and limitations of its critical habits than those of its creative genius (Eliot 1972:13).

Carli Coetzee's 'Creating an Audience' defends Pippa Skotnes' various representations of the San 'Bushmen' from the charge of colonialist complacency. Coetzee is responding to the critique by Okwui Enwezor (1997:33) that locates Skotnes' 'Miscast' exhibition within the context of other 'redemptive colonial errands':

Thus to examine the charged descriptive detail and what strikes at the mortal heart of the 'New South Africa'—multilingual, and hopefully, multivocal—is to keen one's ears to the new uses and revindication of whiteness (in very subdued and barely registered forms) as an idiom of cultural identity, that is, as a renewed and

authoritative presence in the country's iconographical text.
(Enwezor 1997:22)

Coetzee's (2002:94) *antistasis* is mounted despite conceding Skotnes' clumsy exposure of herself to criticism; she ended up inadvertently 'encouraging the kind of reception that had her on trial for being white'. The ethics of individualism are at stake both in Skotnes' work and in the historico-racial attacks upon it:

Here Skotnes restates her position of the singularity of each individual, of the dangers of generalizing that she refers to in her work on tracing and its depletion of the individual artwork (Coetzee 2002:101).

This is an aesthetic that 'Creating an Audience' notes has its roots in Skotnes' interest in T.S. Eliot's seminal essay of 1919, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent'¹⁰. In short, the rebuttal goes: while Skotnes herself has tried to resist the masquerade of generalisation, she has been subjected to compulsive stereotyping of her own social identity. The one that sees the other looking is not the same as the one that is seen.

The problems with the 1996 exhibition opening at the South African National Gallery and the events surrounding it have overshadowed Skotnes' attempt to bring the 'Bushmen' into view as our artistic contemporaries. As 'Creating an Audience' puts it, 'while the exhibition may have had as its structuring idea multiple viewpoints and conflicting versions, it proved unable to address audiences with competing expectations' (Coetzee 2002:94). Specifically, the title of the exhibition (which mentioned 'History and Material Culture') and its invitation lead a section of the audience to expect 'the exhibition and its curator to intervene in land rights and contemporary political struggles' (Coetzee 2002:100). Even if it cannot and should not ever be total, politicization is seemingly interminable. The price paid for this activist misdirection is part of a larger battery of inquisition.

¹⁰ See Skotnes (1996:235). This interest in the historicity of the artwork, aesthetic relations of production, and the dialectical process of canon formation points to an affinity with reception aesthetics.

The sheaf of accusation that Coetzee sets out to rebut is centred on representation and is, I think, familiar enough to tolerate repetition: Skotnes is replicating the power of colonialism by mediating the representation of its victims; even if she foregrounds the violence of colonial representation (and problematises her own role), she entrenches the continuity of power residing in the hands of the beneficiaries of colonialism; she has not succeeded in recovering the authentic voice of those who have been silenced and ‘miscast’; if she had attempted to recover such an authentic voice this would confirm the charge of presumptive (neo)colonialism. This kind of kettle logic¹¹ that guards an epidermal schema invites ridicule and Coetzee gestures the resistances with some restraint.

What is valuable is the tendency of ‘Creating an Audience’ to accumulate its own questionable assumptions in the process of deriving a general lesson from Skotnes’ tribulations. An argument against invidious forms of identity politics provides a useful means of appreciating the hostility behind identitarian attacks on white intellectuals inscribing communality. We shall see that an intimate economy is secured concerning a taxonomy apparently so wounding and so raw, yet so homely.

The psychic wound of Skotnes’ mock trial serves as a kind of pass or entry ticket, purloined in parenthesis, in the process of self-legitimation:

Her exhibition has as its ideal (although of course not only) viewer an academic interested in issues of representation, of mutuality and collaboration. When she talks of the ‘presence’ of the Bushmen, it is less land rights that she invokes than a spiritual presence informing the way she (and we) see ourselves and others (Coetzee 2002:96).

What is the subject-effect, and who is the premonitory ‘we’, here? ‘Creating

¹¹ In *Jokes and the Unconscious* (1905) Freud rehearses the trial of the borrowed kettle: A borrows a kettle from B, to whom he returns it. B points out that the kettle has been returned damaged. A replies: I never borrowed a kettle from you; I returned it to you unbroken; the kettle was already broken when I got it from you. In the present context the accumulation of contradictory arguments to bring about a satisfactory decision is more often the logic of the prosecution rather than the defence.

an Audience' informs us that we ourselves are primarily, but not exclusively, 'other intellectuals interested in questions of representation and the asymmetrical relationships of the colonial encounter' (Coetzee 2002:101). The intended audience is also described as that 'group of academics and literate viewers who share her interests and concerns' (Coetzee 2002:96). While we know that not all intellectuals are academics, and still fewer academics are consistently intellectuals, the demarcation of audience here raises some crucial questions. What collusion are you and I, legatees all in the parasubjective matrix reader-as-audience, countersigning here? Does the deeply meshed company of this arrogated 'we' include all of you?

The concluding paragraph of 'Creating an Audience' illuminates the nodal point of desire:

Finally, many have speculated on the appeal of the Bushmen for contemporary South Africans, and on the persistence of images drawn from Bushmen rock art I want to suggest that the Bleek and Lloyd archive offers (white) South Africans something in addition to a stock set of images for what is most 'South African' about us, namely a way of talking about issues of loss and reconciliation, about contact and recognition (Coetzee 2002:101).

The incorporated identity of the plenary audience has now shifted beyond 'intellectuals' and 'academics' (although it was never limited to us) to '(white) South Africans'. A displacement from Skotnes' audience to the current audience renders a dispersed and differentiated subject as a transparent place onto which loss is projected and through which it is simultaneously disavowed. One can speculate in kind that, beyond the psychic topography of the individual subject, a stranger returns across family history arriving to consolidate an imaginary inside¹²—a step by which a text proclaiming solidarity with the ethic of individualism seen as antithetical to homogenizing racialization exhibits and archives its own implosion.

Let us rejoin the quotation, the final words and emblematic destin-

¹² See Abraham (1994:175) on trans-generational haunting: 'The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other'.

ation of the essay:

It is not coincidental that the interest in the archive was so strong in the early 1990s, against the momentous backdrop of the South African political transition. The Bleek and Lloyd archive places white transcribers central, or at the very least next to the Bushmen narrators. The moment of the transcription of the narratives becomes a benevolent allegory of the work that white academics can do, to remember and transcribe and collect, and the archive itself offers up a hopeful vision of our past and the historical development of our academic disciplines in South Africa (Coetzee 2002:101).

The seductive self-image of the scholar as intermediary between past and present, fashioning reassuring allegories from the amber of the archive, goes some way toward deferring recognition of the historical forces that have determined exactly who is in a position 'to remember and transcribe and collect'. In our war of development hope lies in the regressive anticipation of mythic insight on behalf of a tradition of 'white academics' blinded by the unmistakable aura of legacies. At a glance a decision is made: the dangerously compressed image of the symptom is switched, as if by magic, into a token of the cure.

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