REFIGURING
the ARCHIVE

A C.I.P. Catalogue record for this book is
available from the Library of Congress

First published 2002

in Africa by David Philip Publishers, an imprint of New Africa Books (Pty) Ltd,
99 Garfield Road, Claremont, Cape Town, South Africa

and in the rest of the world by Kluwer Academic Publishers,
P.O. Box 17, 3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands

Sold and distributed in North, Central and South America
by Kluwer Academic Publishers,
101 Philip Drive, Norwell, MA 02061, U.S.A.

In all other countries except Africa, sold and distributed
by Kluwer Academic Publishers,
P.O. Box 322, 3300 AH Dordrecht, The Netherlands

ISBN 1-4020-0743-4 (Kluwer)
ISBN 0-86486-507-4 (David Philip)

Printed by Clyson Printers, Cape Town

REFIGURING the ARCHIVE

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Kluwer Academic Publishers
DORDRECHT / BOSTON / LONDON

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Inventory

(1) A finding aid listing and describing in varying degrees of detail the contents of one or more record/archive groups, fonds, classes or series, usually including a brief history of the organisation and functions of the originating agency/ies, institutions or organisations and, if appropriate, indexes. In US usage, the normal unit of entry is the series. According to the degree of descriptive detail, an inventory (1) may be referred to as an analytical inventory (calendar), descriptive inventory or list, preliminary inventory, repertory or summary inventory.
(2) A document containing a list of things, e.g. furniture and fittings, often, as in the case of the property of deceased persons, with an indication of value.

Peter Walne, ed., *Dictionary of Archival Terminology*, ICA Handbooks Series vol. 7 (Munich, New York, London, Paris: K. G. Saur, 1988).

Prefaces along with forewords, introductions, preludes, preliminaries, preambles, prologues, and prolegomena, have always been written, it seems, in view of their own self-effacement. Upon reaching the end of the pre- (which presents and precedes, or rather forestalls, the presentative production, and, in order to put before the reader's eyes what is not yet visible, is obliged to speak, predict, and predicate), the route which has been covered must cancel itself out. But this subtraction leaves a mark of erasure, a remainder which is added to the subsequent text and which cannot be completely summed up within it. Such an operation thus appears contradictory, and the same is true of the interest one takes in it.

Extract from Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 9.

Introduction

Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris & Graeme Reid

(Re)figure

We begin our ending – for this is our editorial summation – with a lexical interlude. The word 'figure' enfolds multiple meanings – as a verb: to appear, be mentioned, represent, be a symbol of, imagine, pattern, calculate, understand, determine, consider – all remultiplied by the word's hospitality to prefixes. Almost as complex – to assert what this book attempts to demonstrate – is the word 'archive' (the noun), which plays (is played) as idea, as institution, accumulation of physical or virtual objects, profession, process, service. Conjoining these words 'figure' and 'archive' is to open up a cornucopia of meaning.

The Project

The archive – all archive – every archive – is figured. Acceptance of this in South Africa has shaped fundamentally the argument – and the processes built upon it – that the country's archives require transformation, or refiguring. 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. For the archive is also always already being refigured: the technologies of creation, preservation and use, for instance, are changing all the time; physically the archive is being added to and subtracted from, and is in dynamic relation with its physical environment; organisational dynamics are ever shifting; and the archive is porous to societal processes and discourses – although at certain junctures, like the one South Africa finds itself in now, formal conduits need to be put in place. So that beyond any call for refiguring, or intention to refigure, *Refiguring the Archive* acknowledges and seeks to engage the (re)figuring that is happening, in South Africa particularly, and wherever there is archive.

The book was conceptualised as an extension of a project with the same title hosted in 1998 by the University of the Witwatersrand's Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences in conjunction

with four archival institutions: the National Archives, the University's Historical Papers, the Gay and Lesbian Archives and the South African History Archive. Its centrepiece was a series of thirteen seminars, which attracted twenty-two speakers, nine of them from outside South Africa (four from the United States, three from other African countries and two from Europe). The speakers and seminar discussants were drawn from a wide range of academic disciplines and professions.

A medley of interrelated events were constellated around the seminar series. The project launch was celebrated with the simultaneous opening of *Holdings: Refiguring the Archive*, an exhibition, curated by Jane Taylor, of work by contemporary South African artists who explore the activities of documentation as processes of interpretation. Each of the participating institutions offered a workshop linking the intellectual explorations of the seminar series to a particular area of archival practice. Most of the workshop presenters were South African practitioners or academics, but there was representation from Botswana, Zimbabwe and the United States. The Moving into Dance Company performed *Tranceformations*, choreographed in 1991 by Sylvia Glasser and inspired by San rock art and trance dancing. Before the performance Glasser spoke about the conceptualisation of the dance, its use of archive and its constitution as archive. The Gay and Lesbian Archives offered a free stage performance of the musical *After Nines!* based on interviews about gay and lesbian township life, as well as a slide show on the Lesbian Herstory Archive (New York) presented by Maxine Wolfe. The National Archives hosted a guided tour of the National Archives Repository in Pretoria. And the films *Doodkry is Min* (director Jamie Uys) and *Die Skerpioen onder die Klip: Afrikaans van Kolonialisme tot Demokrasie* (director Zackie Achmat) were screened at the Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences.[1] Uys' film is a classic propaganda piece on Afrikaner nationalism which Achmat self-consciously echoes in both style and composition and which draws radically different conclusions from his rereading of the archive of the Afrikaans language, demonstrating its heterogeneous origins. The events constituted a kaleidoscope of spaces, forms, media and voices, designed to stretch as far as possible both an interrogation and a process of (re)figuring.

The collaboration of the four participating institutions was designed to bring into a single frame of reference the concerns of archival practitioners, historical researchers who work with a particular concept of archive and who use archives, as well as public and community interests around archives. It was, further, an attempt to look

1 The literal translation of the former title is 'To die is nothing'. 'As tough as they come' is closer to the intended meaning. As an expression in Afrikaans, the title is used with reference to something/someone that cannot be killed, but also, more figuratively, to something/someone that is extremely tenacious and cannot be subdued or contained. The latter title can be translated as 'The scorpion under the stone: Afrikaans from colonialism to democracy'.

beyond the idea of archives as physical records, so as 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. To investigate this idea of archive is to bring to bear on 'archive' an interrogation similar to that which concepts like 'canon' or 'orientalism' have undergone. Attempts to refigure the archive chime with other postcolonial interventions such as the Subaltern Studies project, and more specifically the 1999 publication *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, edited by Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates.[2] The difference lies in the particular claims of the archive to constitute the record, to provide evidence and to act as source.[3]

An inquiry around archive(s) also demands an attempt to understand the conditions and circumstances of preservation of material as, and the exclusion of material from, the record, as well as attention to the relations of power underpinning such inclusions and exclusions. In the effort to open the discussion around the refiguring of the archive we were mindful of Michel Foucault's engagement with archive: his view that archive is not simply institution, but rather the law of what can be said, the system of statements, or rules of practice, that give shape to what can and cannot be said.[4] In our project, Foucault's influence was strongest in the proposition – articulated neatly in this book by Stoler – that archives are often both documents of exclusion and monuments to particular configurations of power.

Historians and other scholars are increasingly concerned to understand how knowledge is produced and, more specifically, how knowledge of the past is produced. Where previously historians 'mined' the archives for 'nuggets of fact' in a manner conscious of problems of bias in the record, today scholars pay greater attention to the particular processes by which the record was produced and subsequently shaped, both before its entry into the archive, and increasingly as part of the archival record. This approach draws attention to the way in which the record is altered over time, as well as to the gaps and omissions in, and excisions from, the record. In South Africa historians have been cautious about relying exclusively on public and more specifically government records, because of their colonial and later apartheid biases. That the record is biased is widely recognised by researchers, but a great deal of work remains to develop our understanding of the circumstances of the creation of the archival record in general, and of specific collections in particular.

2 Basic Books, New York.

3 The recently published *Harvard Guide to African-American History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), edited by L. Litwack and D. Clark Hine, is one of the few publications in this area which looks beyond alternative histories to examine the sources on which they are based.

4 See *Archaeology of Knowledge and Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1972), pp. 79-134.

In an effort to overcome some of the biases in the official record, researchers have undertaken extensive oral interviewing amongst those whose voices find scant place in government files. Often these interviews remain in the hands of the researcher, and all too rarely are they placed in public repositories. The circumstances of the production of specific oral archives require close attention, subject as they are to many of the same processes of modification, selection and exclusion as the documentary record. (Important differences mark off oral records from written ones: some of these have been identified, even rarefied.) In other respects the full possibilities and limitations of the oral record remain the subject of investigation. The project suggested an approach to archives that is wary of the claim that one or another corrective intervention can 'fill the gaps' in an archive. The very idea of a discernible 'gap' was problematised, with the archive being stressed as sliver rather than as incomplete whole.

The oral record is not the only alternative to public documentary archives. Literature, landscape, dance, art and a host of other forms offer archival possibilities capable of releasing different kinds of information about the past, shaped by different record-keeping processes. In short, many established ideas about the nature and location of the archive are under challenge.

The project further created an 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. The legal mandate of the National Archives defines powerful imperatives to work co-operatively and to find ways of extending services to all South Africans. Given a still-resilient apartheid legacy, the institution faces numerous systemic barriers in seeking to fulfil this mandate. Participation in the project by the staff of the National Archives offered a way forward to that institution. The project also provided a unique opportunity to inject ideas, influences, perspectives and values into South African archival discourse which until then had found no currency. The post-apartheid transformation of South African archives failed to trouble the positivist assumptions of the apartheid era. In the series, then, for the first time, formal space was being created for a post-positivist critique of the archive in South Africa, and therefore for the emergence of a truly radical archival discourse. The organisers were keenly aware of the influence of deconstruction, in particular the writings of Jacques Derrida, on the proponents of a postcustodial approach to archives in other parts of the world. And, as has been suggested above,

academic users of archives in South Africa have been exposed to some of the same influences. It was felt, then, that the time was ripe to create space, formally, for deconstructive perspectives on archive within South African critical discourse; and to link these concerns to the pressing political need in South Africa to draw on an archive outside the archival inheritance of colonialism and, later, apartheid.

The project sought to bring together the realms of theory and practice. Key areas within the archival profession in need of overhaul, such as methodology and practical procedures, were highlighted. It raised important questions around what archivists do and how they perceive themselves. It also provided a valuable forum for examining the contextual milieu, both socio-political and theoretical, within which archivists craft their policies and conduct their day-to-day business. Attention was paid to past and existing notions of access to, and the destruction of, documents in South Africa. This is a particularly pertinent discussion given the apartheid past and quest of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) to locate documents and other evidence relating to gross human rights violations during the apartheid era. (In the Commission's attempts to reconstruct the past it became clear that many documents had been systematically and deliberately destroyed without intervention from the Archives Commission or the Director of Archives.) Paradoxically, access to the archive of the TRC itself raises important questions around restriction of access to information, the sanitising of documents and the role therein of government. The participation in the project of a wide range of archivists and academics allowed for vigorous debate on these topics.

The archive is not, of course, simply the concern of researchers and government. It is part of the everyday activity of identity formation and maintenance by ordinary people. Community archives like the South African History Archive (SAHA) and the Gay and Lesbian Archives (GALA) brought to the project the concerns of marginal archives and the possibilities of their engagement with the archival mainstream. They also raised questions about the inclusion in the archive of documents and objects not usually placed in archival custody, such as the SAHA collection of political banners, posters and lapel badges, or GALA's assemblage of personal memorabilia, significant artefacts, art works and dresses. Marginal archives often preserve materials excluded from the mainstream repositories but are themselves no less constructed than mainstream archives, and are likewise the product of processes of both preservation and exclusion. Collections compiled in opposition to a particular hegemonic dis-

course are equally shaped by the kind of material collected, and the way it is arranged and described, as well as by what is excluded from an alternative recording of history.

Traces of marginal lives are by no means absent from mainstream archives. For example, the records of South African police surveillance of gay 'bottle parties' in the 1960s provide valuable information about gay social networks, police surveillance strategies, and the extent and nature of moral panics in white suburbia. What is required here is a sensitive and informed rereading of existing archival material. While the records were initially compiled for a very particular police function, the material may also be read creatively, against the grain.

There is no easy remedy, no obvious redress to past exclusion from mainstream archives. What was left out cannot simply be put back in. There are many projects designed to include previously absent or muted voices within existing mainstream institutions (such as state-sponsored oral history programmes[5] or by establishing independent community archives).[6] Both types of project have limitations and flaws. Some material has simply been lost or destroyed, and will never be recovered. Other mnemonic devices, such as features in the landscape, elude the archive and can resist being captured even by oral testimony.

Aside from the constructedness of the archive, whether mainstream or alternative, the cultural and social mores of the time also shape collections in profound albeit less visible ways. For example, a gay and lesbian archive is predicated on a particular concept of individual and collective identity. Will this sense of a common identity based on sexual orientation endure indefinitely? It seems unlikely. If this is the case, how will a gay and lesbian archive be viewed and read in a hundred years from now?

There are limits to constructedness, as the geneticists have demonstrated through DNA testing. The myth of origin of Lemba people in South Africa may have been understood as precisely that – an elaboration on oral tradition that linked this community to a Jewish ancestry. Yet scientific investigation into the archive of DNA has established a veracity for this claim. The authority vested in scientific evidence suggests that some archives do in fact exist outside of human agency – some things happen and are preserved beyond the self-conscious construction of the archive.

It would be premature (and, given that we were all involved in the project, presumptuous) to assess the project's impact. But interim comments are possible. By most measures, the debates and discussions were vigorous and invigorating, and on occasion their substance was

5 The National Archives launched a National Oral History Programme in 1999, specifically to fulfil its legislated mandate to document voices excluded from formal repositories in the past.

6 In South Africa the late 1980s and 1990s saw a flowering of such archives.

reported in the local press. There were many special moments. One of them was Henry Louis Gates, Achille Mbembe and Bheki Peterson sharing a platform at the project launch. Another was Jacques Derrida weaving a tapestry with archives, power, remembering, forgetting and knowing, before a huge audience spilling over into an adiacent venue. As 'an event', and according to measures common in the 'archival world', the project made a significant impact. But its 'real' test is the degree to which it is successful in weaving an awareness of (re)figuring into both archival discourse and practice, and into historical reconstruction and imagining. The signs at this stage are good. Archivists who participated are discussing ideas and making connections that have been absent from their discourse until now. Academics and students are responding to the invitation to make an archival turn. At a more tangible level, the energies generated by the project have been channelled by the University of the Witwatersrand into a new postgraduate archives course, Reading the Trace: Memory and Archives, designed to meet the needs of both archivists and historical researchers. Developers of archival and related courses at Technikon South Africa, the University of South Africa, the University of the Transkei and the University of Natal participated in the project. The 1998 issue of the South African Archives Journal was wholly dedicated to the proceedings of the project's workshop series.

The project should be seen as part of wider processes of refiguring in archival discourse internationally. The later 1990s saw numerous voices in a number of countries articulating some of the concerns, perspectives and issues brought into focus by the project. Some of these voices were given space by the project organisers. By the end of the decade fundamental theoretical debates had become common in institutional forums and publications. To quote a few examples. In 1998 and 1999 the British journal *History of the Human Sciences* devoted two issues to exploring 'the archive' from a range of disciplinary perspectives. Through the 2000/1 academic year the University of Michigan's Center for International Studies hosted a programme entitled 'Archives, Documentation and the Institutions of Social Memory', which attracted scholars from many countries and hinged around seminar and lecture series. In planning for several years before 2000/1, this programme's organisers established a dialogue with the organisers of the *Refiguring the Archive* project from 1998. Also in 2000, the Dutch-based international journal *Archival Science* was launched, dedicated to tapping and disseminating fresh energies in international archival discourse. And in 2000 the South African Society of Archivists convened

a national conference with the theme 'Renaissance and Archives', with the intention of providing a forum for engaging such energies in the particular circumstances of South Africa at the turn of the century.

The Book

The decision to produce a book based on the project's seminar series is motivated primarily by three considerations (other than the pleasure of it, and the recognition that it is important for all kinds of reasons). Firstly, so many of the seminar contributors confessed (in some instances, demonstrated) that they were using the space afforded by the series for exploratory work. The book offers an opportunity for recording development, assimilation, refinement, extension and debate. (Eleven of the essays in this book are re-workings of papers from the seminar series.) Secondly, we wanted to reach a wider audience for the work. 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. Thirdly, we wanted to extend the scope of the project by going beyond merely presenting a compilation of thematically linked essays. 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.

The essays in the book are collected around three themes. The contributions on the first theme (Mbembe, Peterson, Derrida, Van Zyl and V. Harris) deal with new thinking around the archive, extending its boundaries and theorising its exclusions, thereby setting the scene for the two sections which follow.

The following theme includes essays by Stoler, Hayes, V. Harris and B. Harris that offer a view of the making of the archive(s). They look at certain archives as products of state machinery and as technologies that bolstered the production of those states themselves. They draw our attention to the processes of recording and remembering, of omission and forgetting, as well as to the relations of power involved in all of these processes. The essays position us to ask what insights might be gained from attending not only to archival content, but also to the particular and sometimes peculiar form of specific archives, through what Stoler terms a reading along the archival grain.

They draw our attention to archives as one of the foundations of epistemology and suggest that archives are crucial elements in epistemological challenge and experimentation. Through these essays archives emerge not simply as sources, but as sites of contested knowledges. The essays experiment with ethnographies and histories of archives. What constitutes an archive, what form it takes, and what systems of classification signal at specific times, the essays suggest, are the very substance of the politics of the times. As Derrida puts it, there is no political power without control of the archive.

The third theme revolves around the extension of the boundaries of what might fall within the compass of 'archive'. Here essays on gay and lesbian materials (Reid), DNA (Soodyall, Morar and Jenkins), oral texts (Hamilton and Mpe), art (Taylor), literature (Nuttall and Roberts), place and materiality (Hall) and electronic records (Bearman) are offered as part of an effort to widen and shift the meaning of the term archive.

This book extends the project's explorations in a number of directions. It suggests that it may now be fruitful to consider the archives as but one facet of a range of institutions including libraries, museums, local records and special collections all designed to create a particular vision of society. The institutional (and conceptual) range, of course, is expanded dramatically by the electronic technologies that underpin an archive at once actual and global. Clearly the materiality of archives, for so long simply assumed in archival discourse, is troubled by this reality. In his essay, Hall argues that the traditional significances accorded to materiality endure. Bearman, by contrast, offers a vision in which these significances find little place. These two essays go some way towards grappling with the implications of the shift from archives as purportedly stable repositories of original material – places where the body historically has gone physically to engage with the material trace – to electronic archives, unconstrained by space and place, and eschewing the claim to be original.

This book accords considerable space to public archives, some of them located at the heart of political power, others marginal and challenging of that power, even where they are not labeled 'archives'. But certain elements in the exhibition curated by Jane Taylor, *Holdings: Refiguring the Archive* – such as the highly charged family photographs collected and exhibited by Santu Mofokeng – draw our attention to archives which, until they surface as works on exhibition, remain in private custody, sometimes in domestic or intimate settings. The works are sometimes such archives made manifest; at other times, as

Taylor puts it, they imagine the private domestic archives of subjective life. The essay by Taylor on *Holdings* also articulates a latent theme of the rest of the book, the archive as a conception of what is valuable, and of how such value should be transmitted across time.

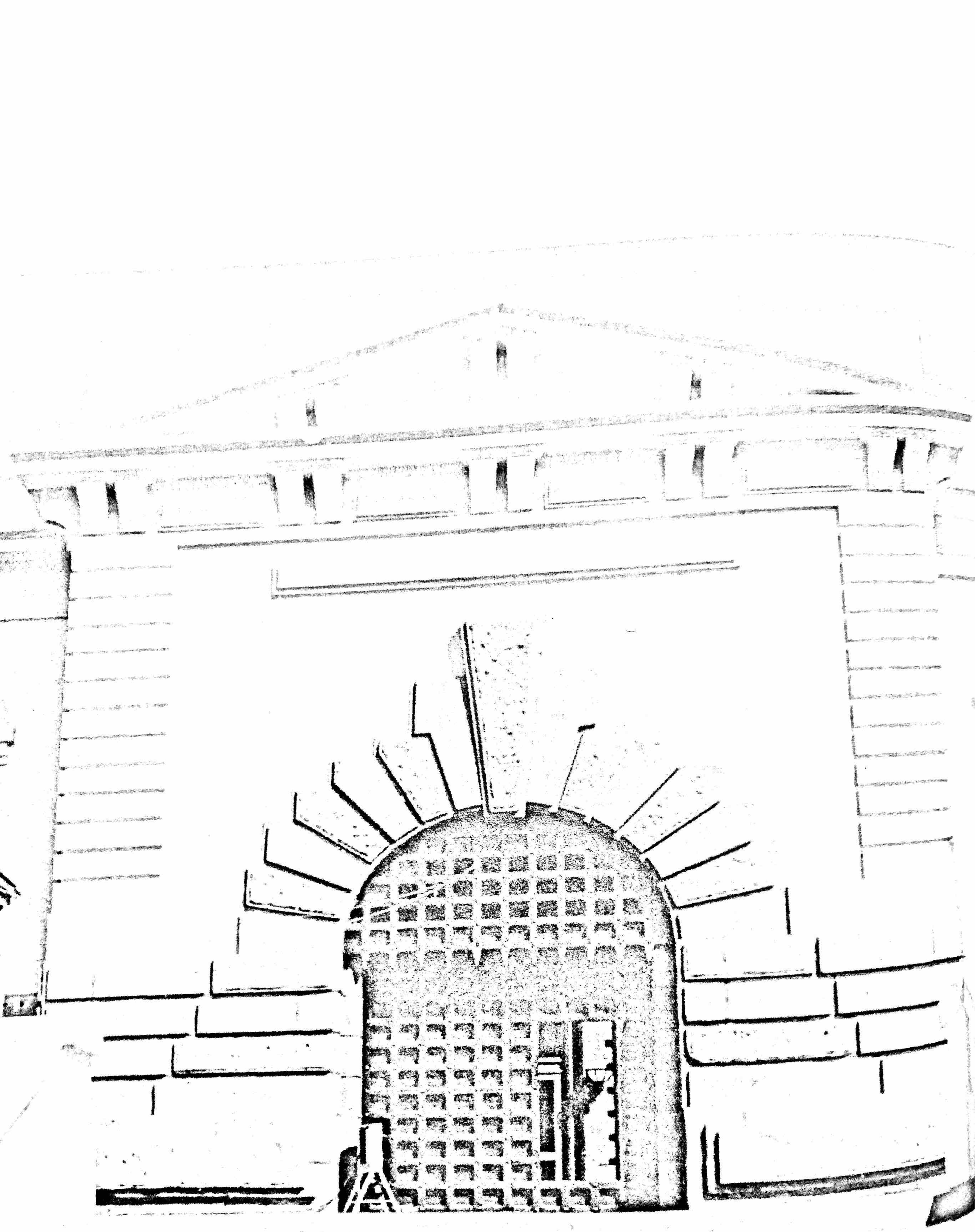
The essays in the book look most closely at how archives are made: at which traces survive and under what circumstances, as well as what is excised or excluded. They look closely at the activities of those who generate the record, and those who subsequently shape it. They draw attention to the processes of the establishment and maintenance of the repository and its policies and protocols. The essays reflect rather less on those who use the archives: on their strategies for approaching archives; on the way in which archives are made to yield their treasures through intimate acquaintance and 'readings against the grain' which can reveal precisely what the controllers of the record sought to obscure; on the fault lines of the archives which reveal their processes of construction. The essays merely touch on how a steeping in the record can enable the researcher to discern the hidden logics of the record; on the way in which researchers themselves also construct the archives; and on how their reading, interpretation and citation of materials shape the archives. They only hint at the deep attractions of the archives and the enduring passions that researchers develop with the contents of buff folders. They begin the work of looking at archives which emanate from different intellectual fields, but they barely touch on how archives are taken up in these fields.

Alternative visions require alternative archives. The third section of the book begins to point out some such alternatives. The book embraces the dynamics of refiguring and of such alternative vision. It ventures into the undefining of archives. Nevertheless, its editors and the contributors share a profound respect for the value of archive(s). Jacques Derrida, a contributor to this book, and arguably the most radical interrogator of archive in the last decade of the twentieth century, devotes the first section of his *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1996) to an extended lexicon of the word 'archive'. His etymological analysis demonstrates that every archival deconstruction must both respect and work with the stuff of tradition. No refiguring can sever the rootedness of archival concepts in the Greek words *arkhe* and *arkheion*. Equally, no refiguring can discard the necessity of an agreement between archivists and society – an archival contract. The nature of that contract is usually assumed, and not made explicit. 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.

Clearly, however, new realities are placing strain on the archival contract and are modifying the concept of preservation: archivists interrogating the epistemological foundations of their practice; the difficulty of identifying and preserving records in electronic environments; the growing imperative for media conversion even in paper-based environments; the preservation of ever smaller proportions of increasingly voluminous records accumulations; contestation around legitimate limits to freedom of information; the difficulty of documenting ever more complex organisational and record-keeping processes; and so on. At the same time, new realities offer archivists opportunities to build on the contract: for instance, by exploiting technology to document collections (including archival interventions in collecting) more fully and to make them available more widely. Obviously, seeing this opportunity and utilising it requires appropriate expertise and resources. In countries like South Africa, positioned within global peripheries, this constitutes a serious challenge in itself. However, we remain convinced that in all global positionings, across professional landscapes and genres, archivists should aim to engage new realities with a passionate commitment to fulfilling the archival contract.

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. What South Africa needs and does, of course, has wider resonances. For the archive is increasingly not a national patrimony, but today circulates, as Hall notes, 'in global systems of loan, exchanges and markets'. Likewise, global initiatives concerning the archive, like Gates' project mentioned earlier, affect the local situation. For much of the nineteenth century the treasures of the archive were forcibly relocated to imperial centres. At the turn of the millennium they continue along similar paths from poorer centres to richer metropoles as wealthy institutions snap up private collections, purchase microfilms and 'facilitate' digital availability. Based in Western centres, those institutions thus aggregate to themselves the power to define and delimit the archive. This book represents a challenge to the assumptions that underpin their activities, suggesting that a refigured archive might escape the kinds of boundaries they enforce, and find expression in new sites and in new forms.



Entrance to the former Roeland Street gaol, Cape Town; now the Cape Archives Repository.

The Power of the Archive and its Limits

Achille Mbembe

The term 'archives' first refers to a building, a symbol of a public institution, which is one of the organs of a constituted state. However, by 'archives' is also understood a collection of documents – normally written documents – kept in this building. There cannot therefore be a definition of 'archives' that does not encompass both the building itself and the documents stored there.

From document to archive

The status and the power of the archive derive from this entanglement of building and documents. The archive has neither status nor power without an architectural dimension, which encompasses the physical space of the site of the building, its motifs and columns, the arrangement of the rooms, the organisation of the 'files', the labyrinth of corridors, and that degree of discipline, half-light and austerity that gives the place something of the nature of a temple and a cemetery: a religious space because a set of rituals is constantly taking place there, rituals that we shall see below are of a quasi-magical nature, and a cemetery in the sense that fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred there, their shadows and footprints inscribed on paper and preserved like so many relics. And so we arrive at the inescapable materiality of the archive as well as at its resulting role, as this essay will endeavour to show, as an instituting imaginary.

In terms of the rituals involved, we might look at how an archive is produced, that is, at the process which culminates in a 'secular' text, with a previously different function, ending its career in the archives – or rather, becoming an archive. We often forget that not all documents are destined to be archives. In any given cultural system, only some documents fulfil the criteria of 'archivability'. Except for private documents (church documents, documents from private institutions, families, companies . . .), the majority of documents deemed archivable are related to the general work of the state. Once they are received, they have to be coded and classified. They are then distributed according to chronological, thematic or geographical criteria. Whatever criteria are used at the time of coding,

classification and distribution, these procedures are simply a matter of creating order. Documents are thus immediately placed in a system that facilitates identification and interpretation. More seriously, the documents are then placed under a seal of secrecy – for a period of time, which varies according to the nature of the documents and local legislation. The process that results in a document becoming 'archivable' reveals that there are only products which have been deliberately stripped of what would make them simply 'secular' documents; thus there are no archives as such.

Archives are the product of a process which converts a certain number of documents into items judged to be worthy of preserving and keeping in a public place, where they can be consulted according to well-established procedures and regulations. As a result, they become part of a special system, well illustrated by the withdrawal into secrecy or 'closing' that marks the first years of their life. For several years, these fragments of lives and pieces of time are concealed in the half-light, set back from the visible world. A ban of principle is imposed upon them. This ban renders the content of these documents even more mysterious. At the same time a process of despoilment and dispossession is at work: above all, the archived document is one that has to a large extent ceased to belong to its author, in order to become the property of society at large, if only because from the moment it is archived, anyone can claim to access the content. Over and above the ritual of making secret, it seems clear that the archive is primarily the product of a judgement, the result of the exercise of a specific power and authority, which involves placing certain documents in an archive at the same time as others are discarded. The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status to others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status.

The status of the debris

What status are we actually talking about? First of all, it is a material status. The material nature of the archive – at least before digitalisation – means that it is inscribed in the universe of the senses: a tactile universe because the document can be touched, a visual universe because it can be seen, a cognitive universe because it can be read and decoded. Consequently, because of its being there, the archive becomes

something that does away with doubt, exerting a debilitating power over such doubt. It then acquires the status of proof. It is proof that a life truly existed, that something actually happened, an account of which can be put together. The final destination of the archive is therefore always situated outside its own materiality, in the story that it makes possible.

Its status is also an imaginary one. The imaginary is characterised by two properties already mentioned above: the architectural nature and the religious nature of the archive. No archive can be the depository of the entire history of a society, of all that has happened in that society. Through archived documents, we are presented with pieces of time to be assembled, fragments of life to be placed in order, one after the other, in an attempt to formulate a story that acquires its coherence through the ability to craft links between the beginning and the end. A montage of fragments thus creates an illusion of totality and continuity. In this way, just like the architectural process, the time woven together by the archive is the product of a composition. This time has a political dimension resulting from the alchemy of the archive: it is supposed to belong to everyone. The community of time, the feeling according to which we would all be heirs to a time over which we might exercise the rights of collective ownership: this is the imaginary that the archive seeks to disseminate.

This time of co-ownership, however, rests on a fundamental event: death. Death to the extent that the archived document *par excellence* is, generally, a document whose author is dead and which, obviously, has been closed for the required period before it can be accessed. The test represented by this closure, this extension of the period of time and the resulting distance from the immediate present, adds to the archive content of the document. Other than in exceptional cases, it is only at the end of this period of closure that the archived document is as if woken from sleep and returned to life. It can, from then on, be 'consulted'. The term 'consulted' shows clearly that we are no longer talking about just any document, but of this particular document, which has the power, because of a legal designation, to enlighten those who are engaged in an 'inquiry' into time inherited in co-ownership.

On a more basic level, the archive imposes a qualitative difference between co-ownership of dead time (the past) and living time, that is, the immediate present. That part of its status falling under the order of the imaginary arises from the fact that it is rooted in death as an architectural event. A death has to occur to give rise to a time charac-

terised by not belonging to a private individual, precisely because this time, from that moment on, founds or institutes something. The power of the archive as an 'instituting imaginary' largely originates in this trade with death. There are three dimensions to this trade. The first involves the struggle against the fragments of life being dispersed. In fact, death is one of the most radical attempts to destroy life and to abolish all debt in relation to it. The act of dying, inasmuch as it entails the dislocation of the physical body, never attacks totally, nor equally successfully, all the properties of the deceased (in either the figurative or the literal sense). There will always remain traces of the deceased, elements that testify that a life did exist, that deeds were enacted, and struggles engaged in or evaded. Archives are born from a desire to reassemble these traces rather than destroy them. The function of the archive is to thwart the dispersion of these traces and the possibility, always there, that left to themselves, they might eventually acquire a life of their own. Fundamentally, the dead should be formally prohibited from stirring up disorder in the present.

The best way to ensure that the dead do not stir up disorder is not only to bury them, but also to bury their 'remains', the 'debris'. Archives form a part of these remains and this debris, and that is why they fulfil a religious role in modern societies. But – always remembering the relationship between the document and the architectural design in which it is stored – they also constitute a type of sepulchre where these remains are laid to rest. In this act of burial, and in relation to sepulture, is found the second dimension of the trade between the archive and death. Archiving is a kind of interment, laying something in a coffin, if not to rest, then at least to consign elements of that life which could not be destroyed purely and simply. These elements, removed from time and from life, are assigned to a place and a sepulchre that is perfectly recognisable because it is consecrated: the archives. Assigning them to this place makes it possible to establish an unquestionable authority over them and to tame the violence and cruelty of which the 'remains' are capable, especially when these are abandoned to their own devices.

The archive as a talisman

Up to now, we have treated archives on the basis of their power as a relic, and their capacity to function as an *instituting imaginary*. We have deliberately left aside two aspects: the subjective experience of the archive by individuals, and the relationship between the archive

and the state. As far as the first is concerned, it is enough to state that however we define archives, they have no meaning outside the subjective experience of those individuals who, at a given moment, come to use them. It is this subjective experience that places limits on the supposed power of the archives, revealing their uselessness and their residual and superfluous nature. Several factors are involved in this subjective experience of the archives: who owns them; on whose authority they depend; the political context in which they are visited; the conditions under which they are accessed; the distance between what is sought and what is found; the manner in which they are decoded and how what is found there is presented and made public.

The relationship between the archive and the state is just as complex. It rests on a paradox. On the one hand, there is no state without archives – without its archives. On the other hand, the very existence of the archive constitutes a constant threat to the state. The reason is simple. More than on its ability to recall, the power of the state rests on its ability to consume time, that is, to abolish the archive and anaesthetise the past. The act that creates the state is an act of 'chronophagy'. It is a radical act because consuming the past makes it possible to be free from all debt. The constitutive violence of the state rests, in the end, on the possibility, which can never be dismissed, of refusing to recognise (or to settle) one or another debt. This violence is defined in contrast to the very essence of the archive since the denial of the archive is equivalent to, *stricto sensu*, a denial of debt.

This is why, in certain cases, some states have thought that they could do without archives. They have therefore attempted, either to reduce them to silence, or, in an even more radical manner, to destroy them. By doing this, they thought they could defer the archive's ability to serve as proof of a suspect fragment of life or piece of time. More interested in the present and the future than in the past, they thought that they could shut down the past for once and for all so that they could write as if everything was starting anew. Because, in the end, such methods affect the materiality of the archive more than its dimension as an instituting imaginary, they have, on occasion, run into trouble.

The power of the archive for all that has not been abolished. On the contrary, it has, rather, been displaced. Material destruction has only succeeded in inscribing the memory of the archive and its contents in a double register. On the one hand, in fantasy, inasmuch as destroying or prohibiting the archive has only provided it with additional content. In this case that content is all the more unreal

because it has been removed from sight and interred once and for all in the sphere of that which shall remain unknown, therefore allowing space for all manner of imaginary thoughts. On the other hand, the destroyed archive haunts the state in the form of a spectre, an object that has no objective substance, but which, because it is touched by death, is transformed into a demon, the receptacle of all utopian ideals and of all anger, the authority of a future judgement.

In contrast, other states have sought to 'civilise' the ways in which the archive might be consumed, not by attempting to destroy its material substance but through the bias of commemoration. In this framework, the ultimate objective of commemoration is less to remember than to forget. For a memory to exist, there first has to be the temptation to repeat an original act. Commemoration, in contrast, is part of the ritual of forgetting: one bids farewell to the desire or the willingness to repeat something. 'Learning' to forget is all the easier if, on the one hand, whatever is to be forgotten passes into folklore (when it is handed over to the people at large), and if, on the other hand, it becomes part of the universe of commodification. Thus we pass from its consumption by a Leviathan seeking to liberate itself of all debt (that is, to acquire the right to exercise absolute violence) to its consumption by the masses – mass consumption.

By democratising the act of chronophagy and returning to an order where the consumption of the archive becomes a communal tool of the state and of society, two possibilities arise which repression alone does not allow. On the one hand, the urge that would have meant a desire to repeat, in a different time and with other actors, the original act is attenuated. In those cases where such an act involved murder, an assassin or a massacre, it is not difficult to see the benefit a society might gain from such a severance. On the other hand, by making such a severance a part of the universe of merchandise thanks to mass consumption, the archive is removed from the sphere of 'remains' and 'debris' and transformed into a talisman. A pagan cult then results, at the heart of which can be found numerous other institutions and artefacts (for example, museums).

The transformation of the archive into a talisman, however, is also accompanied by removing any subversive factors in the memory. In giving those who carry it (in this case those who consume it) a feeling of being protected or of being co-owner of a time or co-actor in an event, even if in the past, the talisman softens the anger, shame, guilt, or resentment which the archive tends, if not to incite, then at least to maintain, because of its function of recall. Thus the desire for

revenge is removed just as the duty of repentance, justice and reparation is withdrawn. The commodification of memory obliterates the distinction between the victim and the executioner, and consequently enables the state to realise what it has always dreamed of: the abolition of debt and the possibility of starting afresh.

Conclusion

Examining archives is to be interested in that which life has left behind, to be interested in debt. However, it is also to be preoccupied with debris. In this sense, both the historian and the archivist inhabit a sepulchre. They maintain an intimate relationship with a world alive only by virtue of an initial event that is represented by the act of dying. This being the case, writing history merely involves manipulating archives. Following tracks, putting back together scraps and debris, and reassembling remains, is to be implicated in a ritual which results in the resuscitation of life, in bringing the dead back to life by reintegrating them in the cycle of time, in such a way that they find, in a text, in an artefact or in a monument, a place to inhabit, from where they may continue to express themselves.

Dealing with dying also evokes the possibility of the spectre. The archive could not have a relationship with death without including the other remnant of death – the spectre. To a very large extent, the historian is engaged in a battle against this world of spectres. The latter find, through written texts, a path to an existence among mortals – but an existence that no longer unfolds according to the same modality as in their lifetime. It may be that historiography, and the very possibility of a political community (*polis*), are only conceivable on condition that the spectre, which has been brought back to life in this way, should remain silent, should accept that from now on he may only speak through another, or be represented by some sign, or some object which, not belonging to any one in particular, now belongs to all.

This being the case, the historian is not content with bringing death back to life. S/he restores it to life precisely in order better to silence it by transforming it from autonomous words into a prop on which s/he can lean in order to speak and write beyond an originary text. It is by the bias of this act of dispossession – this leaving out of the author – that the historian establishes his/her authority, and a society establishes a specific domain: the domain of things which, because shared, belong exclusively to no one (the public domain).

And this is why the historian and the archivist have long been so useful to the state, notably in contexts where the latter was set up as an appointed guardian of that domain of things that belong exclusively to no one. In fact, both the historian and the archivist occupy a strategic position in the production of an instituting imaginary. One might ask what their role from now on may be, especially in contexts where the process of democratising a chronophagic act – that is, the abolition of the archive – is at an advanced stage.

The curious thing is the long-held belief that the state rested on something other than on this desire to abolish the archive, to free itself of debris. What could be more noble? But perhaps it is a condition for the existence of all societies: the need permanently to destroy the 'debris' – the taming, by violence if necessary, of the demon that they carry.

(Translated from the French by Judith Inggs)