THE CULTURED ARCHIVE: AN INTERROGATION OF THE NEXUS BETWEEN ARCHIVE AND CULTURE FROM A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE [1]

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Abstract
Using the South African experience of Apartheid as his reference point, the author dismisses the term "multicultural" as one having no meaningful application. The author then proceeds to problematise the terms "culture" and "archive". The analysis forms the basis for an extended engagement with the question: "what responsibilities do culture and culturing place on those of us who work with archive?"

Introduction

The theme of this gathering, I believe, invites every speaker to consider carefully the connections between the concepts archived in the words “archive” and “culture”. The meanings of both these words, of course, are contested, making any interrogation of “connections” extremely complex. What I propose doing is to problematise - briefly, and more or less superficially - each of these words in turn, and then to address what I think is the key question being posed to those of us who call ourselves archivists by the theme’s juxtaposition of the words. That question is hard to articulate, but here are two preliminary approximations – firstly, what responsibility does “culture” place on us; and secondly, what are we to do with the dynamic, diverse and contested cultural landscape all of us are confronted by?

What I bring to this exercise is indelibly marked by the name “South Africa”. Marked in two senses. On the one hand, it is the space in which I concentrate the enquiry. On the other hand, it is the place which has shaped me. Understandings of, and feelings for, concepts are shaped by experience. Of course, experience is never unmediated. Discourse, ideas, language, all shape how living is turned into experience. In my case, both as a South African and as a practising archivist, experience has been dominated by the drama of South Africa’s journey from Apartheid to democracy. This drama has absorbed the complex elements of personal experience and been a critical factor in drawing me to a point where I make the assertion that the term “multicultural” is unhelpful, even meaningless. At one level this is *my* culture speaking – I am cultured in specific ways, and what I say expresses those specificities.

Problematising “culture”[2]

In South Africa the notion of “multiculturalism” has a history rooted in the Apartheid state’s response to political and other challenges in the late 1970s and 1980s. As the imperative to co-opt subordinate groups and classes in new ways grew in that period, “multiculturalism” became an ideological tool to explain and to manage a shift from a model of exclusion to one of incorporation. As the Minister of Constitutional Development said in 1987: “South Africa is multicultural, and the constitution must reflect this” (Boonzaier and Sharp 1988:17). So, for example, during the 1980s what were called “coloured” and “Indian” South Africans were allowed to vote for

representatives in their “own” houses of Parliament. Black townships were given their “own” local authorities. And people across the racial spectrum were allowed to participate together in “multicultural” sporting and “cultural” events. In other words, the Apartheid state gave “multiculturalism” a meaning – namely, the nation is made up of many peoples; they must be kept separate and unequal; but they can come together under controlled conditions which do not threaten white supremacy.

For me, then, the concept has a tainted history and unfortunate connotations. However, it has not disappeared from public discourse in post-apartheid South Africa. My objections to it relate not only to its origins and its manipulation by a regime now consigned to the dustbin of history. The concept remains founded on a whole range of assumptions which are deeply problematic. Four seem central to me. Firstly, that culture is the expression of a people, a homogeneous and organically developing collectivity. Secondly, that one can inhabit a single culture. Thirdly, that there can be a pristine, “natural” culture resistant to influences either in time or over time. And fourthly, that anything identified as part of such a “natural” culture should not be criticised.

“Culture” is an imprecise term used to describe dimensions of human experience ranging from religious beliefs and social rituals to the clothes we wear and the music we listen to. In every society there are numerous intersecting and overlapping “cultures” – beyond those commonly identified with specific languages, ethnicities or religions, there are, for example, corporate cultures, urban cultures, gang cultures, drug cultures, smoking cultures, youth cultures, and so on. And in a rapidly globalising world none of us can escape influences reaching across regional and national divides. All of us, to a greater or lesser degree, feel the impact of global mainstream dynamics and values jostling with those of local cultures. More than ever before, we feel the pull of diverse and often competing cultures. Our cultural identities are patchworks rather than seamless cloths.

And it has always been so, even before the turbocharged dynamics of globalisation. Culture has never been static. It has always been evolving, in response to tensions within collectivities and to shifting realities in the worlds “external” to them. It is commonly believed that in Africa colonialism marked the inception of change. And yet scholars have demonstrated the cultural dynamism of pre-colonial Africa.

If we are to use the term multiculturalism at all, then, it must be in the sense that *every* society is more or less multicultural. Indeed, every one of us, as an individual, is multicultural. Which renders the term as an adjective describing certain societies meaningless.

Critique of culture is a healthy and necessary dimension in any society. The clash of youth cultures with those of adult worlds is essential to a well-adjusted transition to adulthood. Resistance to the dominant white Afrikaner cultures was an important part of the struggles against apartheid. Equally, questioning of resilient pre-colonial rituals and practices is a crucial element in the endeavours of collectivities to articulate with changing realities. Take the *kgotla* as an example. This is an ancient decision-making forum still practised by Tswana-speaking collectivities in South Africa. Without buying into simplistic notions that pre-colonial African societies were

undemocratic, I would argue that the marginalisation of women and youth in this forum must be confronted. What place should such a forum enjoy in the context of a democratising South Africa? How can it be encouraged to become permeable to more broadly participative processes?

Resistance to such critical questioning is common in my country. The protestation "but this is my culture" is often thrown out as a weapon in the hurly-burly of public debate. Here are a few examples. In 2002 a number of voices were heard protesting at the intense media scrutiny of reported rapes of very young girls: "It is not in our culture to discuss these things in public." A similar argument to the one offered in response to media coverage of prominent South Africans who apparently died of AIDS-related diseases. The latter links into South African versions of dissident views on HIV/AIDS which suggest that "Western" solutions to the crisis should be resisted and that indigenous knowledges should be utilized instead. Criticism of black leaders in any sphere of life is frequently responded to with suggestions that such criticism is un-African. Outrage at the needless deaths of young men going through initiation ceremonies runs the risk of labelling as cultural insensitivity. (In certain collectivities and cultures, at puberty males must go through an initiation into adulthood which includes circumcision. Use of "traditional" instruments and methods often leads to infection, and damage or death for initiates.) A final example - at a conference in South Africa in 2002 an archivist speaking of her research into gay and lesbian practice by traditional healers was told that such practice was not part of African culture.

I am *not* advocating dismissal of cultural differences. On the contrary, I am calling for a richer and more complex understanding of such differences through a respectful challenging of the four central assumptions informing notions of multiculturalism. I have argued that culture works within and across collectivities at many levels; that none of us can inhabit a single culture; that culture is dynamic and always a fusing of diverse elements; and that contestation of the ground we call cultural is desirable.

Problematising "archive"

Writing in 1996, Jacques Derrida said: "Nothing is less reliable, nothing is less clear today than the word 'archive' …" (1996:90). I think that the word "culture" is probably as unreliable as "archive", but his point is taken. Eight years later the meaning of "archive" is probably even more fiercely contested.

In my reading of international English-language archival discourses, three major streams can be discerned. [3] Each is characterised by numerous sub-currents, and each is more or less permeable to the others. I know of not a single archival thinker, or "school of thought", which I could position comfortably within a single stream. But each is characterised by a particular conceptualisation of what we archivists call "the record".

The first [4] resists higher level theorising and is most comfortable with methodologies and practices. Here "the record" is not something to be problematised – what it means, what it signifies, and what its values are, are self-

explanatory. Archivists are workers with the record. This stream draws its intellectual energies primarily from forms of Western positivism. Muller, Feith and Fruin were founding fathers, and remain influential. In Apartheid South Africa, when state archivists dominated the professional discourses, this stream was dominant.

The second stream embraces broader and higher layers of theorising, and is more comfortable with disclosing its assumptions and presuppositions. Here “the record” is something to be defined against rationally determined frames and measures. Archivists are keepers of the record. I see this stream flowing out of the Enlightenment, its core energies those of a vigorous modernism. In my reading its most powerful sub-current is the continuum thinking being elaborated in Australia and elsewhere, and its most significant early influence on the work of Sir Hilary Jenkinson.

The third stream flows strongly and widely in spaces defined by respect for narrative, comfort with multiple shifting meanings, acknowledgement of contingencies in knowledge construction, and an intense awareness of the dimensions of power. Here “the record” is something always in the process of being made. Archivists are narrators of the record. (In their finding aids, their appraisals and their exhibitions, archivists tell stories with and about the record.) This stream is commonly labelled “postmodernist”, but it clearly draws on a range of energies variously labelled “postmodernist”, “poststructuralist” and “deconstructionist”. Of all the streams, it is the one most open to “the other”, the voices and the knowledges marginalized by a Western-dominated global mainstream.

My own thinking is best positioned within this third stream, although I am influenced by and draw energies from the other two. Let me now disclose to you how my understanding of “archive” is shaped by certain fundamental assumptions about “the record”.

My first assumption is that the record never speaks for itself. It speaks through many intermediaries – the people who created it, the functionaries who managed it, the archivists who selected it for preservation and make it available for use, and the researchers who use it in constructing accounts of the past. Far from enjoying an exteriority in relation to the record, all these intermediaries participate in the complex processes through which the record feeds into social memory. The view that the record lies inert from its creation until researchers use it is patently not supportable. While researchers release energies – and generate new energies – through usage, the record is always already a space in which energies dance. And these energies are best understood not as the “natural” or “organic” ones favoured by Muller, Feith and Fruin – records are constructed, interpreted and mediated by numerous human interventions. They are, in short, cultured. They express culture, not nature. My second assumption leads from the first. Far from being an innocent by-product of activity, a reflection of reality, the record is a construction of realities expressing dominant relations of power. It privileges certain voices and cultures, while marginalizing or excluding others. This was very clear to us in South Africa during the apartheid era. It did not take a genius to see how the state archival system faithfully reproduced oppressive relations of power. And for the oppositional archives, the archives of resistance to oppression, it was easy to justify a counter

archive privileging anti-apartheid voices and cultures. But we make a mistake – and many of us in South Africa are making this mistake – when we think that the dynamics of privileging, marginalizing and excluding occur only in extreme conditions. Ten years after liberation in South Africa, these dynamics can still be discerned in the record – the state archival system is now privileging the new metanarratives of post-apartheid liberation, democratisation, reconciliation and African Renaissance; archives like my own, the South African History Archive, are privileging the stories of continuing struggles for justice. This is because the record is always already a construction of realities. And because archives construct realities with constructions of realities. And because the cultures of the state archival system are different from the cultures of continuing struggle.

My third assumption is that the meanings and significances of a record are located in the circumstances of its creation and subsequent use. In other words, context rather than text is the determining factor and we archivists should be *the* experts in context. However, even if we believe this, we are faced with daunting problems. Context is always infinite, and ever expanding. So that, in the words of Derrida (1993:9): "No context is absolutely saturable or saturating. No context can determine meaning to the point of exhaustiveness."

Furthermore, the boundary between "text" and "context" is permeable. Think, for instance, of an attempt to locate the meaning of a word in a dictionary. The dictionary will offer a definition in the form of a text, one which will contain a number of other words whose meanings will have to be located. In reading the texts offered for each of these words, an even bigger assembly of words requiring definition will be discovered. And so the search will continue *ad infinitum*, often perhaps returning to the first text (now both text and context) consulted. Another instance is provided by hypertext. Let us say that a particular document is read in which a hundred words are gateways to related texts. All are context to the text. Most of the related texts will have a number of gateways. Pass through them only to find more. And when one returns to the first text, exhausted by the endless journey or by a chance passing through of a particular gateway (the text now context to its own context), it is possible that in the interim it might have been updated and look significantly different.

One final example to trouble the hard boundary between "text" and "context", and the excessive clarity informing these concepts. On my left arm I have a tattoo – marking, text, archive, mnemonic – of a symbol representing a significant experience in my life. For me, and those close to me, it is a record. The context absent from my arm is borne by the memory I disclose to a few. But is the connection I can establish between text and context adequate in terms of recordness? How can I convince anyone that the context I relate is reliable and authentic? (For the account I have given over the years has certainly changed, and I can no longer remember with absolute clarity the first account I gave.) Is the tattoo not now also context to the oral archive I have generated around the tattoo's conception? Would a photograph of the tattoo with a properly authenticated archival description carry more evidential weight than the (virtual) "record" I now bear?

I am *not* suggesting that the concept of "the record" as a connection of "text" and

"context" should be discarded. Nor that the terms "text" and "context" are without coherent (or distinguishable) meanings. I *am* suggesting that these terms and the concepts they bear are complex and troubled; that the semantic boundaries between them are shifting and porous. And that in using them we should remember these realities.

My fourth, and final, assumption is that the record - a record, every record – is always in the process of being made. Its stories are never ending. The stories of what are conventionally called records creators, records managers, archivists, users and so on are (shifting, intermingling) parts of bigger stories understandable only in the ever-changing broader contexts of society. Records, in short, open into (and out of) the future. And archivists are members of a big family of recordmakers – those who culture the record; those who culture the archive.

Culturing the archive

In conclusion, I return to the key question being posed us by the conference theme. In my introduction I offered you two approximations of what I believe that question to be. Now I offer you a third in light of my attempt to unfold the complexities and uncertainties archived in the words "culture" and "archive". This one incorporates the other two: what responsibilities do culture and culturing place on those of us who work with archive?

Of course there are many responsibilities. A whole book could be written on the topic. And how one reads them is determined to a large extent by one's own contexts, by one's own culturing. The four I outline now are simply those which have pressed most strongly on me through twenty years of working as an archivist in South Africa.

The first is the responsibility to understand. This is a call to understand the extent to which both the archivist and the archive are cultured. State archivists in Apartheid South Africa who declared themselves to be merely impartial custodians, and thus not implicated in the state's mobilisation of the archive as a tool of oppression, epitomise a refusal to understand. State archivists in the South Africa of today who declare themselves to be merely impartial custodians, and thus not implicated in the state's mobilisation of the archive as a tool of consensus-building, epitomise the same refusal. My paper up to this point could be characterised as an attempt to promote such understanding.

Secondly, there is the responsibility to disclose. This is a call to make plain to users the culturing of both the archive and the archivist. Let me illustrate what this might mean in practice by taking the archival function of appraisal as an example. Here the call to disclose asserts that not only must appraisal seek to lay bare as far as possible the layers of intervention and interpretation borne by the records being appraised; it must go beyond that by laying bare as far as possible the layering of the appraisal process itself. This would mean, for instance, the appraiser demonstrating critical self-awareness, disclosing assumptions, maybe even attaching a biographical sketch! It would mean avoiding institutional discourse and adopting one appropriate to the users of records. It would mean ensuring that users have ready access to all relevant appraisal documentation, and that intellectual

connections between such documentation and archival records receive priority attention. (For instance, finding aids should contain references to all the appraisals that have secured the preservation of the records they describe.) It would mean regarding documentation of records not preserved as of equal significance to documentation of records consigned to the archive. In a sense what I am describing is the difference between democracy and oppression. Oppressors claim that their story is the truth and they hide evidence of the story's telling. "This is not a story, an interpretation; it's the truth." Democrats allow space for other, sometimes competing, stories, and expose their own story's telling.

Thirdly, there is the responsibility to be hospitable, specifically to be hospitable to "the other" – the other ways of knowing and of doing, the ways outside a society's mainstream. For me this responsibility works at two levels. In the first instance it works at the level of what constitutes the archive. In my part of the world there are indigenous knowledges which understand archive primarily in terms of the storyteller – the storyteller, configured in relation to performance and to community (past and present). This understanding (and we can call it an expression of culture) challenges the dominant Western notion of the archive as the stable carrier of evidence. It challenges privilegings of writing over orality. It posits the archive as characterised by its fluidity; and the archivist as the tender of ever shifting meanings and significances. Now, in post-Apartheid South Africa mainstream archives have responded to this call of the other by rushing out to capture stories with video cameras and tape recorders. That, in my view, is not an expression of hospitality. The call, instead, is to respect the other, and to engage it with a willingness to have one's own ways of knowing and doing changed in the process.

But this responsibility works at another level as well. As I have already argued, records express power relations. The voices and experiences of the weak, the underprivileged, the disadvantaged, the marginalized, will either be in the margins of "the record", or simply absent. In every society the dominant cultures will dominate the record. Should archivists seek to document this reality in their work, or should they work against it by actively documenting the marginalized and the absent? The answer to this question, I would argue, ultimately resides outside archival theory. It has to do with choices in political, ethical and epistemological realms. It has to do with choices in the exercise of power. We could say a lot about this.

But let me make just a few points. If we try to document the marginalized, will we misrepresent, will we negatively bias the interpretation of the archive, and will our own biases do more damage than good? Can the mainstream ever accurately represent the marginal? How can we invite in what is always beyond our limits of understanding? How can we avoid the danger of speaking *for* these voices? How can we avoid reinforcing marginalisation by naming "the marginalized"? How can we invite in what we wish to resist – the voices and the cultures, for instance, of white supremacists, or of hard drug dealers, paedophiles, rapists, pimps, and so on, and on and on? In the memorable words of Spivak (1993: 61):

> Let us, then, for the moment at least, arrest the understandable need to fix and diagnose the identity of the most deserving marginal. Let us also suspend the mood of self-congratulation as saviours of marginality.

It is imperative that we not romanticise "otherness". We need to fear it even as we

respect it. We need to understand that it is as much "inside" as it is "outside". We need to engage it, without blueprint, without solution, without ready answers.

Fourthly, and lastly, there is the responsibility to be active. This is a call to engage the politics of the archive. In my country there is a long tradition of archivists being involved in struggles for justice. Under apartheid, as I have already argued, it was easy to see that the establishment's archive had to be challenged, its privilegings, marginalisings and exclusions countered. Today the dominant discourse in South African archives suggests that the time for activism is past. Activism was necessary in extreme conditions, so the argument runs, but now, with the coming of democracy, archivists can resume traditional mantles and focus on service delivery. South African society has been "normalised", and archives should follow suit – that is, offer a professional and impartial service outside the buffetings of "politics". But this is to misunderstand democracy, and to misunderstand the archive. Society is always an assemblage of competing interests and perspectives. As the British intellectual Richard Hoggart has reminded us: "A well-running democracy will constantly quarrel with itself, publicly, about the right things and in the right way." (cited in Merrett 2001: 64).

The time for activism, in other words, is never past. When we give up on activism, we give up on democracy. And, to repeat myself, every archive has its privilegings, marginalisings and exclusions. In post-apartheid South Africa this reality is not as monolithic and as crude as that which obtained in the past. But it is there, and it needs to be contested. For example, in 1996 my archive set up the Gay and Lesbian Archives in response to the mainstream's insensitivity to gay and lesbian experiences. In 2002 we initiated a freedom of information programme to contest the establishment's reluctance to embrace our constitution's enshrining of this freedom. At present we are involved in the establishment of an AIDS archive to counter the state archival system's willingness to collaborate with the marginalisation of what is a national crisis. These are examples of interventions by an archive which is explicitly activist in its orientation and committed to the ideal of archives for justice.

Conclusion

The responsibilities I have outlined are at once professional and moral. Ultimately they constitute a call to justice, a call of justice, and set a standard impossible to attain. The challenge to all of us who call ourselves archivists is to heed this call with passion and a belief in the impossible.

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Endnotes

1. This paper was first presented as the keynote address at the conference "Archives in Multicultural Societies", Oslo, April 2004. I thank Gudmund Valderhaug and Ethel Kriger for their comments on an early draft.
2. In this section of the paper I draw heavily from my and Adrian Cunningham's introduction to the "Archives and Indigenous Peoples" special issue of *Comma* (2003.1).
3. Here I use arguments from my review article "Concerned with the Writings of Others: Archival Canons, Discourses and Voices", to be published in the *Journal of the Society of Archivists*.
4. An arbitrary selection, although its historical roots arguably are the longest.