

SPECTRES OF ARCHIVE AND LIBERATION¹

Verne Harris, Nelson Mandela Foundation, South Africa

I want to talk about spectrality in the work of archive — in the content of our work, in the contexts of our work, and in our collaborations. I want to talk about ghosts. Does anyone here believe in ghosts? What about living ancestors — the ones who are gone, but who still speak to us? I will come back to these questions later, but let me say immediately that the experience of feeling haunted is a daily one for me. The archive is full of ghosts. South Africa is full of ghosts.

So here we are at an archives conference in South Africa in 2014. It is almost a year since Nelson Mandela died — his ghost speaks loudly to me. It is fifty years since the apartheid regime sent Mandela and his Rivonia comrades to prison for life. They all speak to me. It is one hundred years since the start of World War One, the war to end all wars. That war was not a distant European war. Battles were fought here in Namibia and East Africa. Thousands of Africans died. And the world changed, for 1914 was also the beginning of a century of unspeakable warfare. I hear the voices of the countless dead, maimed, and lost. They haunt me. They demand that I embrace a responsibility before them. They call me to action. Avery Gordon defines this experience as follows: “Haunting ... always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence ... But haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done.”² Something to be done; action; the work of liberation. So, my address this morning is about the ghosts of archive and the call to the work of liberation.

Of course, all of us in this room are children of the Enlightenment — that great project of the 18th and 19th centuries that extolled reason and sought to vanquish ghosts, angels, gods, and other supernatural aliens. However, even the most dedicated modernists among us, even those of us most influenced by science and technology, I would argue, experience the spectral every day — in the materials that we work with, and in the contexts that we find ourselves in. I want now to share with you a short clip from a movie, Ken McMullen’s 1983 classic *Ghost Dance*.³ The great thinker Jacques Derrida is an actor in the movie, and in the scene that follows he plays himself meeting with a potential graduate student, played by the actress Pascale Ogier. There was no script for this scene, with Derrida improvising in response to a question from Ogier:


Ogier: I'd like to ask you something. Do you believe in ghosts?

Derrida: That's a difficult question. Firstly, you're asking a ghost whether he believes in ghosts. Here, the ghost is me. Since I've been asked to play myself in a film which is more or less improvised, I feel as if I'm letting a ghost speak for me. Curiously, instead of playing myself, without knowing it I let a ghost ventriloquise my words, or play my role. Which is even more amusing. The cinema is the art of ghosts, a battle of phantoms. That's what I think the cinema is about, when it's not boring. It's the art of allowing ghosts to come back. That's what we're doing now. Therefore, if I'm a ghost, but believe that I'm speaking with my own voice, it's precisely because I believe it's my own voice that I allow it to be taken over by another's voice. Not just any other voice,

1 This text is based on the notes used by me for the keynote address at the Annual IASA Conference “Connecting Cultures: Content, Context and Collaboration” in Cape Town on 6 October 2014. I have attempted to reproduce as closely as possible what I said on that occasion, taking into account comments offered from the floor on the day and by readers of the draft text, including Michelle Caswell and Jo-Anne Duggan.

2 Gordon 2008, p.xvi.

3 At this point in the address I screened a clip from the movie. The transcript which follows was generated by me from the YouTube resource - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0nmu3uwqzbl>. Accessed October 21, 2014. Most of the scene unfolds in the French language — here I reproduce the English subtitles from the resource. The only changes I have made are to punctuation.



but that of my own ghosts. So, ghosts do exist. And it's the ghosts who will answer you. Perhaps they already have. All this, it seems to me, has to do with an exchange between the art of the cinema, in its most original, unedited form and an aspect of psychoanalysis. Cinema plus psychoanalysis equals the Science of Ghosts. You know that Freud had to deal all his life with ghosts. [Telephone rings on Derrida's desk.] Now the telephone is the ghost!

[Derrida proceeds to take the call, speaking in English to an unidentified interlocutor. The call ends.]

Derrida: Well, that was the phantom voice of someone I don't know. He could have told me any old story. Someone who arrived from the USA and says he knows a friend of mine. Well, what Kafka says about correspondence — about letters, about epistolary communication — also applies to telephonic communication. And I believe that modern developments in technology and telecommunication instead of diminishing the realm of ghosts, as does any scientific or technical thought, leaving behind the age of ghosts as part of the feudal age with its somewhat primitive technology, as a certain perinatal age, whereas I believe that ghosts are part of the future and that the modern technology of images like cinematography and telecommunication enhances the power of ghosts and their ability to haunt us. In fact, it's because I wished to tempt the ghosts out that I agreed to appear in a film. It could perhaps offer both us and them the chance to evoke the ghosts: the ghost of Marx, the ghost of Freud, the ghost of Kafka, that American's ghost, even yours! I only met you this morning, but to me you're already permeated by all sorts of phantom figures. Whether I believe in ghosts or not, I say "Long live the ghosts!" And you, do you believe in ghosts?

Ogier: Yes, certainly. Yes, absolutely. Now I do, absolutely.

In watching this scene from *Ghost Dance* you have, literally, been watching two ghosts. Pascale Ogier died of a drug overdose in 1984 at the age of 25. Derrida died of cancer in 2004 at the age of 74. And yet — I am sure you would agree with me — they speak to each other *as if* the encounter happened today. They speak to us *as if* we were observers of their conversation *now*. Their presence and their immediacy, I would argue, are created by the medium. The archive is all about the livingdead. It is infused by the presence of what is absent, and the absence of what is present. So, a ghostly presence on the screen. And yet, in the logic of Derrida's thesis, at the same time the clip is a record of two ghosts conversing at a particular moment three decades ago. Ghosts before they died. And viewed now, in 2014, by an audience of ghosts. For we are, at once, material and spectral. And our engagement with the archival trace — which is daily experience not only for archivists — offers us a mirror. What is present speaks loudly of absences, and what is absent presents itself insistently. The experience of being haunted.

The movements of haunting in archive are multiple, the voices always myriad. Elsewhere (Harris 2011) I have explored this in relation to a specific archive, the Nelson Mandela prison files. There I attempted to demonstrate that listening to the ghosts of archive is not only an interesting intellectual exercise but rather, at once, an ethical imperative and a robust basis for practical archival work. Here I want merely to name what seem to me to be the primary spectral movements in archive. Four of them. Firstly, the movement generated by spectral authors. Whether the writer of a letter (a Kafka or a Mandela) or the director of a movie (a McMullen), the authors in archive are always, in principle, absent. They have left an exterior trace which can speak for them when they are unable to speak for themselves; which will speak for them when they are dead. (Of course, archive never speaks for itself, but you get my point.) And I am sure many of you have had that uncanny experience of

reading something you wrote many years ago — a diary entry from your teenage years, or an email to a long lost friend — and thinking “oh my god, who was I when I wrote this!?” Who is this stranger, this ghost?

A second primary movement is generated by spectral content. Notwithstanding the fantasy of a comprehensive, complete archive, always archive is an assemblage of fragments. For in the structure of archiving, no matter how dense the process in a particular case might be, no matter how great the commitment to completeness, there are dynamics of both inclusion and exclusion. There are always exclusions. And what has been excluded, together with what has been lost, will whisper around the fragments. Ghostly voices. Thirdly, spectral context. Archivists use their medley of descriptive instruments and underlying professional competencies to provide the users of archives with access to a rich array of context. Expertise in contextualisation, arguably, is the core archival competency. But, of course, there is no end to context. The layers are innumerable at any moment, and they shift over time. Always will be heard the whispers of contexts undocumented, unknown, or yet to be generated. Ghostly voices. And fourthly, spectral place of consignment. Where is the place, and it could be a virtual place, where the record, the fragment, the archive was born and lived outside of archival purview? We fantasize about ‘original order’, rightly, but need to fantasize also about original location. For the fragments under our purview comprise matter out of place. And the whispers of dislocation can be heard. Ghostly voices of other places, of lineages, of origins.

Are not our information technologies all about ‘matter out of place’? On the one hand they create a semblance — or a simulation — of presence, of immediacy, of touch, which is so powerful, so compelling, that their delineation of absence ironically defines what they are. On the other hand, arguably, they are defined most fundamentally by the concept of matter without place.⁴ The virtual. For those of us who grew up in the 1970s, this is a spectral space. Are you not haunted by the days of letters, post offices, faxes, bank queues, deposit slips, even WordPerfect 5.1? Haunted not only by the world you lived in, but also by the ‘you’ that you were in that world?

So, here you are in South Africa twenty years after apartheid ended formally. So much of what we South Africans do in our public discourse is about referencing that apartheid past. Arguably we identify ourselves against that past. Certainly both the state and our elites evoke a present in terms of an absence of that apartheid past. But is it absent? Is not the imprint of apartheid now, in the present, not very apparent? For those of you who have had a chance to explore Cape Town, is it not evident that the city is still structured by apartheid-era separations and hierarchies? Are we not haunted by that past and other longer oppressive pasts? How is it possible that today South Africa is more unequal than it was in 1994? In fact, by some measures it is the most unequal society on earth. How is it possible that in 2014 we have seen thousands of community protests, many of them becoming violent? How is it possible that in 2012 police shot and killed 35 striking miners in Marikana? That day I heard the ghosts of those shot by the police at Sharpeville over fifty years ago.

What about archives here in South Africa? I do not have time to talk about archive in the broadest sense, so I will focus on the new post-apartheid national archival system. Our public archives system. By the end of Nelson Mandela’s presidency, most of the system’s building blocks had been put in place and it was beginning to take shape around five key objectives:

4 Although place is unavoidable, even in the realm of the virtual. For, as Michelle Caswell pointed out in her reading of this text, ‘the virtual’ is always, in the end, a series of ones and zeros that must be programmed using hardware that exists in space and travels through cables that exist in space, using infrastructure that exists in space, and are decoded (and experienced) using more hardware in space by a human in space. We could take it further; and explore harsh realities like where the coltan is mined that is needed for the computing, where the computers are assembled, and where the landfills are located in which hardware is dumped when we have moved on to new versions of ‘things’. Haunted spaces. Arguably Caswell is naming ‘material’ ghosts of ‘the virtual’.

- Turning archives into an accessible public resource in support of the exercise of rights.
- Using archives in support of post-apartheid programmes of redress and reparation, such as the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, land restitution, and special pensions.
- Taking archives to the people through imaginative and participative public programming.
- Active documenting of the voices and the experiences of those either excluded from or marginalised in the colonial and apartheid archives.
- Transforming public archives into auditors of government record-keeping in support of efficient, accountable, and transparent administration.

Much good work was done systematically through the 1990s, but the hopes of that period have not been realised. Today the national archival system is in trouble. This despite the work of many courageous and dedicated professionals. The vision of the 1990s has evaporated. Chronic underfunding and lack of resources is ubiquitous. The political will required to change things is largely absent. The system, simply put, is not delivering. These conclusions have been reached by the Archival Platform (a joint University of Cape Town-Nelson Mandela Foundation project) on the basis of a detailed analysis undertaken over two years (2012-2014).⁵ (Archival Platform 2014) As I speak the Platform's report is being finalized for submission to the Minister of Arts and Culture during November 2014. According to the Report (pp.3-4) the system in 2014 fares poorly when measured against the key objectives of the 1990s:

- As has been noted repeatedly by the Auditor-General in recent years, the state of government record-keeping is embarrassing. And public archives are not equipped, resourced, nor positioned to do the records auditing and records management support they are required to by their mandates. Poor record-keeping undermines service-delivery, cripples accountability, and creates environments in which corruption thrives.
- Generally public archives have been unable to transform themselves into active documenters of society, nor to fulfil their mandated role of co-ordinating and setting standards across sectors. Oral history projects are common, but are both random and undertaken in modes that are profoundly problematic in relation to voice and to power. The huge potential of digitisation in support of preservation and public access has not been harnessed.
- Apartheid-era patterns of archival use and accessibility have proved resilient. Archives remain the domain of elites. Public archives do very little outreach, and only a fraction of their holdings are accessible online.
- Swathes of documentary memory are being lost, especially in electronic environments. While 21st century recordkeeping is primarily electronic, public archives remain geared to paper-based realities. Numerous cases have been reported of records 'disappearing'. And public archives continue to authorise the destruction of the vast majority (estimated at over 90%) of public records through appraisal processes without independent monitoring in the public interest.
- Ironically public access to archives has become more restricted in the era of a constitutionally protected freedom of information. The 1990s vision of 'open democracy', which saw archives opened in ways that had been impossible under apartheid, has been lost. The Promotion of Access to Information Act is routinely used by archives for gatekeeping. And the impending Protection of State Information Act has already fostered new cultures of secrecy within public archives and revived that old apartheid oppressive tool — the classified record.

The Archival Platform's analysis reveals a national archival system that looks like something from the past. After twenty years of democratisation and transformation the system reminds me of nothing so much as the 1980s State Archives Service and its bantustan subsidiaries. We are haunted by this presence of what we want to be absent. We are haunted by our 1990s

5 In what follows I draw from an early draft of the Archival Platform's analysis. (Archival Platform 2014) More specifically, I reproduce a draft of a section of the analysis' executive summary, a section which I generated the first draft of. A ghost of the published version, now given a form of materiality.

dream of a truly post-apartheid system. We are haunted by the ghosts of those who sacrificed so much for our liberation.

But let me draw to a close, with Nelson Mandela. In naming him I practice what he taught us — the naming of ghosts, the ancestors, the ones who are present though absent and who demand action from us. In so many of his speeches, but also during informal conversations, he would name the ghosts — Walter and Albertina Sisulu, OR Tambo, Chris Hani, Ruth First, Robert Sobukwe, Steve Biko, Chief Luthuli, Anton Lembede, John Dube ... So what is the ghost of Madiba saying to us? Here, in South Africa, archivists, in 2014? What is he saying to the world? A world riven by multiple conflicts, by poverty on frightening scales, by deep structural inequality. For such inequality is not just a South African reality. As French economist Thomas Piketty has demonstrated (Piketty 2014), the shocks to our global systems of 1914–1945 led to a great turnaround in inequality in the period 1950–1980. But since 1980 we have gone backwards, to levels of inequality last seen in the eighteenth century. What is the ghost of Mandela saying to us in these contexts?

Well, this is what he said to us exactly twenty years ago:

“The truth is that we are not yet free; we have merely achieved the freedom to be free, the right not to be oppressed. We have not taken the final step of our journey, but the first step on a longer and even more difficult road ... The true test of our devotion to freedom is just beginning.”⁶

And this is what he said to us ten years ago:

“Most importantly, we want [the Centre of Memory] to dedicate itself to the recovery of memories and stories suppressed by power. That is the call of justice. The call which must be the project’s most important shaping influence.”⁷

The call of justice. A call which is, precisely, a call of ‘the other’. The call, the demand, by the strangers, the ghosts, to be invited in. To be heard. To be reckoned with. To be enabled to reckon with us. I end with a quote from Jacques Derrida:

“No justice ... seems possible or thinkable without the principle of some *responsibility* ... before the ghosts of those who are not yet born or who are already dead, be they victims of war, political or other kinds of violence, nationalist, racist, colonialist, sexist, ... victims of the oppressions of capitalist imperialism or any of the forms of totalitarianism.”⁸

As Derrida said in the movie *Ghost Dance*: long live the ghosts! A luta continua. I thank you.

6 Mandela 1994, p.617.

7 Nelson Mandela Foundation 2005, p.98.

8 Derrida 1994, p.xix.



References

- Archival Platform (2014) *State of the archives: An analysis of South Africa's national archival system, 2014* Cape Town, University of Cape Town.
- Derrida, Jacques (1994) *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. London, Routledge.
- Gordon, Avery (2008) *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.
- Harris, Verne (2011) "Ethics and the archive: 'an incessant movement of recontextualization'", in Cook, Terry (ed.) *Controlling the past: documenting society and institutions* Chicago, Society of American Archivists, pp.345-362.
- Mandela, Nelson (1994) *Long walk to freedom* Randburg, Macdonald Purnell.
- Nelson Mandela Foundation (2005) *A prisoner in the garden: opening Nelson Mandela's prison archive*. Johannesburg, Penguin.
- Piketty, Thomas (2014) *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge, Harvard University Press.