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Passion for archive

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Good morning everyone. It's a pleasure to be with you and an honour to be invited to give a keynote at an ASA conference again. The last time was early in September of 2001, when I was just a kid with a crazy dream and the world was only days away from the never-ending upheavals triggered by 9/11. Arguably global dynamics in the interim have been defined by narratives of war, terror, crisis… and hope.

It is good to be back, especially at a conference grappling with what I call real questions. I must congratulate the organisers on the inspiration informing the theming and the framing of this gathering. The Australian archival and related professions have always challenged me; provoked and intrigued me. Of course I am no longer a kid. And I am no longer immersed in the profession. In fact for over a decade now I have been untangling myself from formal archival worlds and spaces. I am no longer a member of a professional association. I haven't read the literature systematically for a long time. I avoid meetings as far as possible, and am always a step removed from the coalface. My connection to the academy is only peripheral. (How disconnected I am is beautifully expressed by a former Australian volunteer at the Nelson Mandela Foundation – in the book she gave me as a farewell gift, her inscription includes this sentence: 'You are both the best theoretical archivist and the worst archivist in practice I have ever had the pleasure of meeting.' You do have to wonder about the wisdom of those who invited me to give the keynote…)

Recently Jarrett Drake spoke eloquently about his own struggle with the archival profession and his decision to 'move on'.[1] His reasons resonated strongly with me. As did his argument that ultimately the archival profession is no different to others – 'professions are the problem'. In truth, I have given up on the archival and related professions in my country. They are too conservative, if not reactionary. They are profoundly resistant to transformation of a society still structured by centuries of colonialism and apartheid. They collaborate both passively and actively in the replication of oppressive relations of power. Between 2014 and 2016 the Nelson Mandela Foundation partnered with the University of Cape Town on a project designed to research and analyse the state of South Africa's national archival system – the project's report was damning, concluding that the:

> national archival system [is] in trouble. After twenty years of democratisation and transformation the system reminds us of nothing so much as the 1980s State Archives Service and its bantustan subsidiaries. The recommendation is not that the system needs 'help'. Rather, we are recommending that it needs to be reviewed fundamentally. The models which informed it – North American and European models in the main – need to be reconsidered.[2]

I still cared enough to have been part of this project. But I had moved on long before.

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Like Jarrett I had no longer been able to resist the imperative to prioritise liberatory work. In my case I entered a realm of research and advocacy in what I call the memory–dialogue nexus. I felt, and still feel, that my chances of making a difference are greater in this realm. I don't want to bore you today by trying to justify this prioritisation or this feeling. (Suffice it to note in parentheses that this realm is relatively free of the weights and inertias of professionalisation. So that it is easier to be nimble, radical and soulful.)

What I do want to talk about today is the endless rediscovering of archive that I've experienced in my research, advocacy and dialogue work. To a point where today, if anything, my passion for archive is greater than it's ever been. As is my sense of its importance to any form of liberatory work. Then I want to talk about hope in contexts where liberatory work seems not to be making much of a difference. To put it crudely, we've had 300 years of democracy and the world is getting worse.[3] South Africa's had 23 years of democracy and white supremacy has still not been eradicated. Finally, in closing I'll come back to the question of profession.

'Whiteness' harnesses enormous power, globally. It is to be seen in patterns of wealth accumulation, in networks of social capital and in the dominance of certain languages (English in particular), certain discourses and certain modes of knowledge construction. Whiteness still dominates South African landscapes. Understanding how this is possible, how it works, in my view, requires engagement with archive – with archive as apparatus of power; with archive as 'architext' in the terminology of Jacques Derrida; as 'omnipotence-other' in the terminology of Hélène Cixous.[4] The trace inside the psychic apparatus of individuals and collectivities; the structure determining what can be said, even what can be seen; the narrative legitimising injustice. It is archive which explains how the National Archives of South Africa is still controlled by whiteness although it is no longer run by white people. The same dynamics of power explain why a black friend spending a night in a police cell in South Africa today would be far more likely to be violated than I. They explain why on a recent airport transit in Zurich I moved through without delay, while my black colleague experienced a long delay. They explain why at the Nelson Mandela Foundation I often find myself being the only white person in a meeting and yet still the language of business is English. They explain why one can drive from the west coast of Sri Lanka to the east coast and not see a single advertising image that doesn't represent whiteness (or, at least, paleness).

I could go on. You get the point I'm making. It is a point about far more than colour of course. Cixous and Derrida have referred to what they call phallologocentrism – that apparatus of power at the intersection of patriarchy, positivism and white supremacy which was the engine of Western modernism and which still exercises a hegemonic reach globally.[5] It is this apparatus, I would argue, which creates the inequities which are the concern of the conference organisers; and it is this apparatus which resists what the organisers have called 'supporting true diversity'. I find the line of enquiry suggested on the conference website very helpful: 'We need to ask how we can go beyond mere consultation and engagement, and question whether supporting true diversity involves relinquishing authority, custodianship and control.' But I would argue that we need also to move beyond 'diversity'. Spaces which are diverse but in which deeply rooted structures and patterns of power remain untouched are not liberatory spaces. In the language of Derrida, we need to move beyond a hospitality in which those who were kept out in the past – the strangers, the 'others' – are invited in as guests by the host. Come in, says the host, feel at home, use my resources, enjoy the diversity

of my space. Meaningful transformation will only happen when hospitality involves a fundamental inversion of the host–guest relationship. In Derridean hospitality the guests must become the hosts. The space becomes *their* space. The resources become *their* resources.

These are not simple processes, not easy ones. They are necessarily conflictual, painful. To be successful they must be negotiated. They must involve what the Nelson Mandela Foundation calls dialogue. The word 'dialogue' has no widely accepted and stable definition. Its meaning can be, and is, fiercely contested – for instance, among certain university student formations in South Africa today it is identified as at best a meaningless talkshop space and at worst a liberal instrument of oppression. Jarrett Drake (with Michelle Caswell and Doria Johnson) has warned of how dialogue can be used 'as an instrument of democratic denial and an impediment to justice'.[6] By 'dialogue' the Foundation means the convening of spaces safe enough for meaningful and effective negotiation of sustainable solutions to critical social problems. Let me name two examples from recent Foundation work. Over the last two years South African university campuses have become sites of intense contestation, with student formations demanding the decolonisation of tertiary education, university administrations implementing security clampdowns, and an unfolding drama involving high levels of violent conflict. Between October 2016 and March 2017 the Foundation co-convened what was called the National Education Crisis Forum (NECF), a dialogue process designed to enable the 'stakeholders' to negotiate a way forward. The second example relates to land reform. In 1994 the state embarked on a program designed to transfer 30% of white-owned land to black South Africans by 2014. Progress has been slow (it is estimated that only between 7 and 9% has been transferred to date) and levels of anger are growing in the countryside. In 2016 the Foundation (together with another NGO Earthrise Trust) initiated a process of engagement with organised agriculture (that is, white farmers) aimed at exploring ways for agricultural elites to proactively embrace processes of transformation rather than wait for state intervention.

The dialogue work I have done over the last two decades has not drawn me away from archive. If anything it has forced me to dig deeper in it, and with it. This is because dialogue that is transformational hinges on archive. Now this is an assertion requiring a paper of its own, so I'm going to use shorthand to make just three points in support of it:

- Firstly, before a dialogue intervention, engagement with archive is critical to determine antecedents, understand contexts, ensure that all the voices that need to be in the room are in the room, and to understand what it will take to create a space that is safe enough. (When Nelson Mandela gave his Foundation its dialogue mandate he indicated that a room full of people who agree with one another is a space for a chat not a dialogue. The challenge is to create a space into which people who do not even want to see one another will enter and listen. And feel safe enough to say the unsayable.)
- Second point. To be transformational, dialogue must engage with archive *in the room*. There never will be full symmetry, reciprocity and safety. Postcolonial, feminist and deconstructionist thinkers insist on an unavoidable hierarchy and danger in any and all 'dialogue' spaces. Convenors must be adept at surfacing and engaging the play of power, and must be willing to get their hands dirty. They must enable an unavoidably messy hospitality. For these reasons precisely Derrida prefers the word 'negotiation' to 'dialogue'.[7] Similarly, theorists of 'deep process' dialogue, such as David Bohm, insist on the need to surface and engage the presuppositions and perspectives participants

bring into dialogue processes.[8] Convenors must be seasoned at reading archive so as to open everyone in the room to at least the possibility of its disruption. If no one leaves the room having shifted perspective or presupposition nothing has been accomplished.

- Third point. No dialogue that is transformational is a one-off. It is not an event. It is a process. It is a journey rather than a marker. So that memory is indispensable. So that the trace, the archival trace, is a resource for what is to follow. So that failure is not necessarily an ending. The NECF mentioned above hosted a national convention in 2017 which was disbanded within a couple of hours after the opening, as violence broke out on the floor. In my view much was learned from the process – precisely from the failure – and everything now hinges on what the convenors and participants do with the learnings.

So, failure is not necessarily an ending. On the other hand, so much of the work I do or engage with in the dialogue and advocacy space involves successes which feel like failures, and failures which seem not to offer any redemptive dimension. I don't want to suggest that South African experience is exceptional in this regard. It isn't. But it gives me my only daily lived experience. Which today feels a lot harsher than it did 23 years ago at the dawn of South Africa's democratic era.

After centuries of colonialism, slavery, segregation and apartheid, what was needed post-1994 was a massive and radical transformation of state and society. A transformation defined by restitution, reparation and redistribution. My country has not done well with this work. Indeed, a new neoliberal dominance driven by rapacious elites has seen added layers of extraction and exclusion, corruption and oppression. It's not my intention to tell you the story of South Africa's recent history. I want to highlight only the importance of archive to the social justice work being done in South Africa today. Four examples:

- After the 1994 democratic national election, the country embarked on a land restitution process for persons forcibly removed from their land in the period after 1913. As a first step the National Archives and other state agencies conducted a countrywide audit – locate, secure and catalogue – of public records having potential value to the process. Recognition of indigenous ways of archiving – for instance, by according admissibility to hearsay evidence – was built into the process. Today, activists do what they can to find and secure Claims Court files which have 'gone missing'.
- At the conclusion of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2003 a missing persons program was established in the Department of Justice. The basis of its work was a list of approximately a thousand people who had lost their lives to the apartheid regime and whose remains had not been returned to their families. This work has drawn deeply on archival resources, and to date has secured the return of remains for approximately a hundred families.
- Investigation of the corrupt relationships between Gupta family-owned companies and politicians and officials has been assisted enormously by what is called 'the Gupta leaks' – an insider released into the public domain thousands of compromising emails. Archival evidence.
- French economist Thomas Piketty (who delivered the 2015 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture) has used extensive archival research to demonstrate that lessons from the shocks to our global systems of 1914–45 led to a great reduction in inequality in the period 1950–80. This was the heyday of the welfare state. But since 1980 we have gone

> backwards, to levels of inequality last seen in the eighteenth century. And the patterns of capital accumulation – the oligarchs, the family dynasties – are beginning to show remarkable similarity to those which obtained 300 years ago. Piketty's work is being used in South Africa today to understand the patterns of inequality which obtain in the country and to identify strategies for combatting them.

The work of archive is justice. And justice is unimaginable without archive. Some, of course, argue that twenty-first-century global realities make justice unimaginable. Social justice activism is stretched (and worn out) by structures of power almost impossible to pin down, seemingly uncontrollable systems and patterns of wealth accumulation, unspeakable scales and forms of precariousness, and, of course, environmental crisis.

Many of my friends, my colleagues and comrades, confess to a loss of hope. Not just in South Africa – American friends, Balkan friends, Kenyan, South American. Democracy is failing us. It's quite possible, in my view, that democracy has become the most sophisticated apparatus of oppression ever devised by human beings.

And yet it is also possible for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, writing in 2012, to speak of 'this era of the mantra of hope'.[9] I think she's right. Hope can be understood as a style of response to perceived crisis. It is precisely when people have grounds to lose hope, or are losing hope, or when any expectation that the future will be better than the present is evaporating, or when people no longer have confidence that 'their project' will prevail,[10] it is precisely then, that we see mantras of hope gaining currency. It is no accident that the seminal work on hope, Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope,* was written in the conditions of the Holocaust between 1938 and 1947 by a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany. Nor that Paulo Freire's 1992 *Pedagogy of Hope* came in the wake of the collapse of socialist utopias, the Cold War victory of capitalism and the undeniable ascendancy of neoliberalism. Rebecca Solnit's 2004 *Hope in the Dark* in my reading is very much a response to terrible, terrifying and terror-filled post 9/11 realities. And in South Africa, earlier this year Mamphela Ramphele published her book *Dreams, Betrayal and Hope*, explicitly a response to the betrayals of post-apartheid dreams and tramplings on hope by erstwhile freedom fighters and their fellow travellers.

All these works, and others I haven't cited,[11] make a case for hope. All of them name grounds for hope and promote its utility as a resource in continuing struggles for justice. Freire, for instance, depicts hope as 'an ontological need';[12] he is hopeful, he says, 'not out of mere stubbornness, but out of an existential, concrete imperative'. Without hope there is no engine of struggle.[13]

As for me, I don't find hope helpful. Nor its companion, optimism. I'd even go as far as agreeing with American scholar Lauren Berlant, who speaks of 'the cruelty of normative optimism'.[14] And I certainly agree with Terry Eagleton in his assessment of optimism as, fundamentally, an expression of conservatism – if you're privileged in a desperate world, and content with it, then you're likely to want and expect more of the same.[15] I live and work in a space beyond hope. I name this space one of 'faith'. I have faith that working for what is good matters, irrespective of what the future will bring. I have faith that striving to get it right is meaningful even if the prospects of success are minimal.[16] This is the faith of French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy: 'faith is not belief … Faith is trust, and trust in the strongest sense, which is to say, a trust that cannot ultimately be explained or justified.'[17]

(I'm drawing to a close now.) I don't know where my faith comes from. But it is sustained by the many inspiring stories one encounters in the archive. (I don't study history in order

to learn lessons from the past. There is overwhelming evidence that human beings don't learn from the past. I study it in order to be inspired, to be given courage.) My faith also draws sustenance from camaraderie in struggle – the faith of comrades feeds my faith. The faith, for instance, of Jarrett Drake, Michelle Caswell and Doria Johnson, whose work in the United States they describe as follows:

> using our skills as archivists, public historians, and academics to end the state-sponsored murder and mass incarceration of Black people and the continued genocide and displacement of Indigenous peoples, to dismantle systems of white supremacy, to actively resist the oppression of the most vulnerable amongst us, and to re-envision forms of justice that repair and restore rather than violate and harm individuals and communities.[18]

My faith draws sustenance from the courage of young people such as the students in South Africa who have changed the university transformation agenda fundamentally through their struggles. I am inspired by a younger generation of archival thinkers and practitioners – Jarrett and Michelle are exemplary here – who are teaching me new ways of seeing. Some are in the profession. Some are outside it. Some are called to work that is in the profession. Others are called to work that is outside.

We need both.

And we need organisers of professional gatherings with the courage to address questions like those which are the subject of this one.

Thank you for listening. I wish you all a rewarding conference.

Endnotes

1. Jarrett M Drake, 'I'm Leaving the Archival Profession: It's Better This Way', 2017, available at <https://medium.com/on-archivy/im-leaving-the-archival-profession-it-s-better-this-way-ed631c6d72fe>, accessed 30 September 2017.
2. The Archival Platform, 'State of the Archives: An Analysis of South Africa's National Archival System', 2014, available at <http://www.archivalplatform.org/images/resources/State_of_the_Archive_FOR_WEB.pdf>, accessed 30 September 2017.
3. Here I'm echoing the title of a book by James Hillman and Michael Ventura, *We've Had a Hundred Years of Psychotherapy and the World's Getting Worse*, Harper, San Francisco, 1993.
4. See Verne Harris, 'Insistering Derrida: Cixous, Deconstruction and the Work of Archive', *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2017.
5. ibid.
6. Verne Harris, 'Reflections from the 2016 Mandela Dialogues', 2017, available at <https://www.nelsonmandela.org/news/entry/reflections-from-the-2016-mandela-dialogues>, accessed 30 September 2017.
7. Jacques Derrida, *Negotiations*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2002.
8. David Bohm, *On Dialogue*, Routledge, New York, 1996.
9. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2012, p. 1.
10. Terry Eagleton, *Hope Without Optimism*, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, 2015, p. 41.
11. Eagleton; Michael Snediker, *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2009.
12. Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope*, Bloomsbury, London, 2016, p. 2.
13. ibid., p. 89.
14. Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, Duke University Press, Durham, NC, 2011, p. 19.
15. Eagleton, p. 4.

16. This definition of faith is very close to Vaclev Havel's definition of hope. See Rebecca Solnit, *Hope in the Dark: Untold Histories, Wild Possibilities*, Canongate, Edinburgh, 2016, p. 11.
17. Eagleton, p. 80.
18. Harris.

Notes on contributor

Director of Archive and Dialogue at the Nelson Mandela Foundation, Verne Harris was Mandela's archivist from 2004 to 2013. He is an honorary research fellow with the University of Cape Town, participated in a range of structures which transformed South Africa's apartheid archival landscape, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and is a former Deputy Director of the National Archives. Widely published, he is probably best known for leading the editorial team on the best-seller *Nelson Mandela: Conversations with Myself.* He is the recipient of an honorary doctorate from the University of Cordoba in Argentina (2014), archival publication awards from Australia, Canada and South Africa, and both his novels were short-listed for South Africa's M-Net Book Prize. He has served on the Boards of *Archival Science*, the Ahmed Kathrada Foundation, the Freedom of Expression Institute and the South African History Archive.