

ARCHIVES AND JUSTICE: A SOUTH AFRICAN PERSPECTIVE. Harris, Verne with a foreword by Terry Cook. *Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2007, 476 pp. \$56.00 (SAA Member price \$40.00) ISBN 10: 1931666180; ISBN 13: 978-1931666183.*

Verne Harris is an angry man. He is often angry about the right issues, but angry he is: about governments, access policies, archival literature, and the general state of the archival profession.

A South African archivist and writer of novels and newspaper columns, Harris started working in archives in 1985 and rose to become deputy director of the national archives. He left the national archives in the spring of 2001 to become director of the South African History Archive, a non-governmental organization promoting freedom of information similar to the National Security Archive in the United States. In June 2004, he joined the Nelson Mandela Foundation as a project manager for the Nelson Mandela Centre of Memory.

Both the cover photo and the title of the book are misleading. The cover photo is of Harris and Nelson Mandela, leading one to assume that some discussion of Mandela's archival legacy or at least something about Mandela and archives would be included. No such luck. The title, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* suggests that the essays will be about how records and archives help promote human rights, examples of justice turning on documents, and (in the broadest sense) about just treatment of individuals that involves an archival issue. Not so. As Harris describes it, "justice" in the title "expresses my belief that the context of power in which recordmakers find themselves, and their unavoidable participation (their complicity) in the exercise of power, makes the call of justice the most important call of all." In the essay, "The Archive Is Politics," Harris asserts that

the call of justice—which comes from outside of "the record," outside of any archival or recordmaking theory—is a calling more important than any archival calling. Those who believe they can keep these callings separate, who believe they can separate the "professional" from other spaces, who believe they can remain professionally impartial, fool themselves and condemn themselves to the role of pawn. And the role of pawn, even in a democracy, is closed to the call of justice and, in the end, is profoundly reactionary.

Harris concludes, "I don't believe that justice, ultimately, can be knowable." This is "justice" in the most abstract sense.

The book is a collection of essays and newspaper articles Harris had published since 1994, divided into five sections. Terry Cook of Canada provides a helpful foreword. Harris, a lovely writer, briefly introduces the five parts. He says the essays in the first three sections are an “attempt” to make the argument that “the call of justice [is] the most important call of all,” and the last three sections (section three falling in both categories) are “an attempt to heed the call in specific contexts.” The difference between the two types of essays, he says, is “between speaking of power and speaking to power. For me, any attempt to heed the call of justice is fundamentally about hospitality.” In the essay “Jacques Derrida Unplugged,” Harris explains, “Ethics, to put it bluntly, is hospitality.” The call of justice, he writes, “demands a relation of hospitality to the other.”

Harris coins and redefines a number of archival terms. The term “record,” he writes in the essay “A World Whose Horizon Can Only be Justice,” “is a construction of realities expressing dominant relations of power . . . [privileging] certain voices and cultures, while marginalizing or excluding others.” He elaborates on this in “Law, Evidence, and Electronic Records,” writing, “Whatever else it is, or might be, ‘the record’ is always already the bearer of mystery. And, in its opening to the future, the (limitless) bringer of mystery.” If archivists do not “adopt, cherish and tend this mystery,” they risk “becoming archons, hostile to contestation and comfortable in the exercise of power.” He calls archive “the shared narratives of a collectivity,” while recordmaking is “that huge and messy realm in which what are conventionally called records creators, records managers, archivists, users, and so on, negotiate, contest and narrate the meanings and significances of what are called ‘records’” (both of these definitions from “The Record, the Archives, and Electronic Technologies in South Africa”). He argues in “A World Whose Horizon Can Only be Justice” that “the work of recordmaking is justice and resistance to injustice,” and that “justice is the relation to ‘the other.’” (Clearly there can be unjust relationships to others, but not in Harris’ formulation.) Reading these essays is a bit like reading Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*: you have to buy into the definitions the author employs if you are to make sense of the text.

Harris describes the essays in Section 1, “Discourses,” as “particular discourses around archives.” The five essays are principally homage to Jacques Derrida. Harris is clearly a Derrida acolyte (Terry Cook describes Harris as having a “love affair with Jacques Derrida”), and if the reader has not had a previous introduction to Derrida’s thought, this section will be hard going. In the first essay, “Claiming Less, Delivering More,” Harris

says that reality is “unknowable” and “the event, the process, the original, in its *uniqueness*, is irrecoverable, unfindable.” He quotes Derrida as saying, “The possibility of the archiving trace, this simple *possibility*, can only divide the uniqueness.” Harris argues—and I agree—that the primary archival challenge is “the provision of a richer contextualization of what is preserved.” However, he goes on to argue that archivists “need to foster the contestation of social memory, seeing ourselves, conducting ourselves, not as referees but as contestants.” A contestant typically takes one side or one point of view; Harris does not explain how an archivist taking a position will provide a richer context.

One of Harris and Derrida’s central arguments is that the archives are never “closed”; the “archive” is, says Harris in his essay “A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive,” “a trilectic, an open-ended process of remembering, forgetting, and imagining.” “The archive’s seductiveness for me,” he writes, “lay in its dance of remembering, forgetting, and imaging, a dance that ultimately can only be danced in blindness, and the dancing of which unravels the archontic strappings designed to bind archives and archivists into the work of subjugation.” “Archonic,” we learn later in the essay “Law, Evidence, and Electronic Records,” is a description of the work of an official authorized to uphold the law (the word derives from the Greek magistrate “archon”). Harris argues that the archon must be challenged by the “anarchontic”: “there is extreme danger in a reason that gives no space to mystery, in the archon unchallenged by the anarchontic, in a globalizing allowed to destroy the local, the indigenous . . . in the mystery that gives no space to reason, in the anarchontic without archontic rein, in the local excluding the global.”

Section 2, “Narratives,” contains five essays on the “domains of archival work”: two on archival appraisal, two on electronic records, and one on archival description. In “Postmodernism and Archival Appraisal: Seven Theses,” Harris argues in a section called “Exergue” that “although history as process—the event—is ultimately irrecoverable, and even if it were recoverable it would not define past ‘reality,’ reconstructing the past—history as construction, interpretation—is valid, important, and sometimes useful.” He defines appraisal in three ways: as “the activity whereby archivists identify societal processes they think are worth remembering and the records that will foster such remembering”; “the telling of a story using record systems and the sites of records creation as the primary raw materials”; and “a fever characterized by obsessive remembering and forgetting.” Harris says that “only the feverish, or those too stupid to realize what they’re letting themselves in for” would want to be appraisers.

Harris lacerates the popular Australian “record-keeping paradigm” or the “records continuum model.” In “Law, Evidence, and Electronic Records” he complains, “The paradigm does not problematize its epistemological and ontological assumptions about ‘the record.’” In “Concerned with the Writings of Others,” he says that “the worst case of misidentification” is to call the continuum model a “postmodern” philosophy: “It is a co-opting—or colonizing—move designed to have us believe that what is a wild tiger is only a domestic cat.” He claims that the Australians have “imperial aspirations for the continuum model” and concludes that “a truly ‘postmodern’ analysis would want to rip the continuum model to shreds.”

In the essay “Stories and Names,” Harris shows that he understands that standards for description, such as the *International Standard for Archival Description General (ISAD(G))*, are necessary for communication among archivists and between archivists and users. He notes, rightly, that description is power, but then he goes on to claim that with standardization “the dangerous processes of valorization and silencing are unavoidable.” He urges a “liberatory standard” of description that would provide a variety of ways into the records. “Holes,” he writes, “would be created to allow the power to pour out.”

The third section, “Politics and Ethics,” the fourth section “Pasts and Secrets,” and the fifth section with his newspaper columns, titled here “Actualities,” are the most interesting when they deal with the issues of records during a period of transition. He sharply criticizes the government of South Africa and the national archives for allowing records to be destroyed during the transition from apartheid to current regime. He notes that “protracted negotiated settlements give the oppressive regime time to destroy records and provide the space for more or less secret deals that stimulate sensitivity to later disclosures. Which in turn stimulate concern about the ‘danger’ of giving state archives their heads.” It is, he says, “no accident that oppressors are the best recordmakers” and that those “who extol the value of recordmaking to good governance, to accountability, to transparency, and so on, are probably undermining rather than promoting their cause” (in “The Record, the Archive, and Electronic Technologies in South Africa”). The national archives loaned Harris to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and in a number of essays he comments lucidly on this experience.

The essays in the second half of the book are eclectic, particularly the newspaper columns. Harris reprints a dialogue he had in 2000 with Sello Hatang, another archivist from the national archives, on what is distinc-

tively African about an archives or archives conference. Other articles look at the South Africa's freedom of information act, its former nuclear weapons program, state security clearances, Iraq, Ireland, and the United States, among other topics.

In these essays and columns Harris's comments on his employer, or former employer, are scathing. For example, in 2000, while the deputy director of the National Archives, he wrote an essay titled "They should have destroyed more," in which he commented that "only a small proportion of government offices were effectively reached" by the government records management program (where Harris worked from 1988 to 1994) and that the State Archives Service, as it was then called, had no pre-1990 professional liaison with the security services: "It is not clear as to whether this abrogation of responsibility was the result of orders from higher authority or was simply the result of the service's leadership being intimidated by the security establishment's powerful position." In "Contesting Remembering and Forgetting," also from 2000, he writes that he gave a paper on the archives of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at a conference in Cape Town in which he criticized both the TRC (for example, he said information on "certain TRC decisionmaking process" and TRC "internal tensions and disputes" was "jealously kept out of the public domain") and the National Archives (he charged it, for example, with "inadequate professional processing" of sound and video recording and said that "access under the archival management of the National Archives has proved problematic, with many researchers reporting access refusals and long delays in access decisions"). He says that he spoke in "my capacity as an individual" but the "response of my employer was immediate and disturbing," including a reprimand, a "muzzle in terms of my public statements," and a threat of "misconduct proceedings." Surely any deputy director knows that he or she cannot separate his or her own views from those of the entity that he or she heads. When I worked in the U.S. government archives, any professional giving a paper at a conference was required to submit the draft before giving the speech, and I was occasionally asked to change language. The choice a professional has is to leave if he or she finds the controls onerous, and Harris eventually did that. Thereafter Harris wrote newspaper columns pillorying the National Archives (for example, a September 22, 2003, column said "the National Archives has responded to a series of apartheid-era archival challenges with a sickening combination of incompetence and political paralysis"). These columns are so harsh (although without the responses made by the National Archives they are not easy to understand) that they do no credit to Harris.

Oral histories and the recording of oral events is another recurrent theme of Harris's, but he seems unable to settle on a position. He notes that oral tradition is central to a history of Africa, but he writes, "The recording of narrative, the archiving of orality, can so easily destroy the fluidity, destroy the contextual links, alienate the speaker from the word. And the attempt to give voice to the voiceless ironically becomes a reinforcement of voicelessness" ("Claiming Less, Delivering More"). Harris also argues that in postapartheid South Africa, "mainstream archives" have attempted to capture oral knowledge "by rushing out to capture stories with video cameras and tape recorders." Harris does not like this. He says these recordings are "not an expression of hospitality." Instead he urges archives "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" ("A World Whose Horizon Can Only Be Justice"). But he proposes no alternative method. Does he believe it is better not to record oral events, thereby empowering the speakers?

Although Harris expresses admiration for a few archivists, notably Terry Cook "pre-eminently among the giants of current archival discourses," he clearly does not respect most of the practicing professionals or archival organizations. "Pre-1996 archival literature has to be one of the dullest bodies of written work imaginable," Harris wrote in 2005 in the essay "Jacques Derrida Unplugged" (why 1996 he does not say). He says that Hugh Taylor and Terry Cook are exceptions to the dull literature tradition, but then says that Taylor "conflates *deconstruction* and *postmodernism*—a move of considerable naivety." He identifies three types of archival writing: works by positivists who "resist higher level theorizing" and are "more comfortable with methodologies and practices" (here he includes the Dutch archivists Muller, Feith, and Fruin and Michael Cook), a second stream influenced by the Enlightenment, notably the British tradition following Hilary Jenkinson, and finally the stream of postmodernist/poststructuralist/deconstructionist, in which Taylor, Terry Cook, and Harris reside. Harris's description of the first two includes at least a whiff of superiority.

Likewise, although Harris is regularly invited to give papers at professional meetings, he seems to disdain the organized profession. He recalls reading Derrida during an ICA meeting, commenting "the book's energies threw into grubby relief the passionless proceedings of the meeting" (in "A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive"). He complains that the Eastern and Southern Africa Branch of the ICA has "not questioned, less contested, what are essentially Western foundations" of archival practice. Although

Harris was a whistleblower when South African government records were being destroyed outside approved guidelines, he also questions codes of ethics for archivists. He claims in the essay “A World Whose Horizon Can Only Be Justice” that “professional colleagues have used codes of conduct both to support and to condemn” archivists who became “embroiled in clashes with power and authority.” He says the problem with codes of ethics is that they “eschew political contexts, thus reducing themselves to lucky packets rather than clear guides for action.”

What, finally, is the advice to the archivist who might be the reader of this collection of essays? If you want to spend an afternoon with a unique voice in archives, you should read this book. If you are looking for information that will help you do the work of a practicing archivist, this is not for you. Utilitarian it is not, and Harris would sneer at writing such a work. Opinionated, provocative, and finely written it most certainly is.

*Trudy Huskamp Peterson  
Consulting Archivist*