

## **Book: Ghosts of Archive: Deconstructive Intersectionality and Praxis by Verne Harris**

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*"All societies are haunted. All societies struggle to find liberatory ways of responding to their ghosts."* (p.1). This quote, from the first page of Harris' book, sets out the central theme from the outset. Harris asserts that *"archive is fundamentally - that is, structurally - spectral...For me, the call of justice is the most important human imperative. It is a call which sounds spectrally. And the work of archive is, in a word, justice."* (p.1) Verne Harris has had a long career in archives, both as practitioner and academic, and in this book he considers the ghosts of archives through his own experience, with a lens strongly influenced by the concepts of deconstruction - specifically, the writing of Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous - and Harris' interest in Marxist, feminist and records continuum theory.

Harris has worked throughout his archival career in organisations set up within social justice, liberatory frames: The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Nelson Mandela Archives. This has given him insights into the dichotomy of *"...archive as at once an instrument of oppressive power and a potential weapon of liberatory struggle."* (p.1). At the same time, the memory of his reaction to finding his own archive of time as a South African military conscript gave him a personal understanding of the hauntedness of archives and the imperative for forgetting.

Haunting, ghosts, spectres all permeate the text, which at first as a metaphor seemed to me a bit strange, for example when he argues that *"deconstruction is best understood as a 'hauntology'"* (p.38), but as Harris provides real-world examples his meaning becomes more clear. This 'hauntology' can be akin to the echoing-on of records as they continue to play their roles over years, *"always in a process of becoming"* (McKemmish 1994). Harris also uses the examples of the value of the *"haunting"* by the mothers of the disappeared in Chile, or the supporters of the incarcerated in South Africa, so the authorities are forced to acknowledge their existence. In the same way, archival texts, or even the awareness of absence of such texts, leave a trace or ghosts that can haunt the future:

*"In other words, when I leave a trace, it will speak for me when I am not present to speak for myself. It will speak for me when I am dead, so that the leaving of a trace and the process of archiving, whether I realise it or not, are haunted by the ghost that I will one day become and by the ghosts of those who will read the trace in the future and make sense of it in different ways. In ways that are unpredictable."* (p.38)

The dichotomy of presences and absences is essential to the argument of haunting – the contexts not recorded or reflected, the original places of creation of the records, the mechanisms by which they were made, unknowable future uses and users. Harris observes *"The archive, I am suggesting, in its structure, is spectral – always to be heard is the whispering of a presence that feels like an absence, of an absence that feels present. The whisperings of apparatuses, of creators, of readers, contents, contexts, uses and places."* (p.63)

From theory, Harris moves on to practice, and his question is one of significance: *"...how does one contribute meaningfully to the dismantling of an apparatus of oppressive power when one is implicated in it?"* (p.122) This remains a question for the writer and the reader, though ensuring spectral voices can be heard is a vital part of the answer, while at the same time he suggests forgetting may be as important as remembering, for healing. (p.91) He contrasts the kitsch of remembrancing with action and justice prompted by memories of the past. Rather than raising statues to heroes of the past, we can honour them through justice in the present: *"by making a liberatory world for the wretched of the present and for the generation to come."* (p.91) He argues that meaningful change, however, is not granted by elites but must come from *"below"*, and through action.

The last part of the book was written near the beginning of the pandemic, and this has influenced Harris's thinking, as he muses on what the *"ghosts of the future"* (p.142) will think of what we have done, in relation to environmental disasters, to climate change, to white supremacy and to surveillance capitalism. He wonders if, as with other periods of significant upheaval (ice-ages, for example) the pandemic will create an environment for social change. However, as he observes, optimism and hope are not useful in these circumstances. Rather, he calls for faith, which he says is *"an act of will, a positioning, a determination to be and to do, a daily discipline"* (p.142). The camaraderie of others working to the same ends is an essential support. Harris' description of his faith is one that all those struggling for social justice might take to heart: *"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. And I have faith that responding to the call of justice matters, even when justice seems always and only to be coming, never here."* (p.142)

Harris' writing in this book is very dense, at times: dense and perhaps deliberately, as a stylistic feature, repetitive. When speaking of the concrete, with examples from his life, it becomes clear and powerful, but there are chapters of philosophical analysis that can become quite difficult to follow without close attention. I set the book aside for quite some time until I had sufficient head-space to read it carefully. After finishing it, I went back to the first chapter, and this brought the entire argument of the book together for me much more clearly than it had on first reading. This is an interesting and thought-provoking book.

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## Endnotes

McKemmish, S. (1994). Are Records Ever Actual? In S. McKemmish & M. Piggott (Eds.) *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (pp. 187-203). Clayton: Ancora Press in association with Australian Archives