

Footprints of Ghosts and Bandits

ARANZ 2015 Conference Keynote

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It's a pleasure for me to be in New Zealand again, and an honour to deliver a keynote address on the same platform as Anne Gilliland. When I visited New Zealand for the first time in 2001 I was just a kid with a dream. As you can see, I'm no longer a kid, but I still have a dream, which I'd like to share with you today. The year 2001 was a significant one – the twentieth anniversary of the Springbok rugby tour of New Zealand in 1981 (which changed the political landscape of the country irrevocably); and the year of what came to be called 9-11, which arguably changed the global political landscape irrevocably.

Most of my work in the last several years has been in the field of what could be called spectrality, the realm of the ghostly. No doubt this has a lot to do with the powerful call of ghosts in my country – the ghosts of those who are dead, the damaged ones still living who are haunted by their selves before they experienced violation, and the ghosts of those not yet born. But it also attests to my growing appreciation of the ghostly quality of archive.

The invitation to this conference felt like a further opening into the spectral. Footprints. The trace. Archive. The trace of someone or something not present. Footprints always haunted by that irrecoverable moment at which foot touched substrate. Always haunted, equally, by the possibility of the prints' erasure. Presence and absence unfolding out of one another.

A scenario, arguably, hyper-inscribed by the realities of digital recordmaking. The spectrality of clouds. I deliberately don't want to spend much time with this question. Many others far better qualified are addressing it at this conference. But let me start with a brief reflection on digital recordmaking footprints in South Africa. And I believe it serves as a strongly representative case for the many countries which straddle the divides between the worlds of 'developed', 'developing' and 'under-developed'. If you are researching the 1990s in my country – that era of the release from prison of Nelson Mandela, of negotiations over four years during which 15 000 people died in political violence,

of transition from apartheid to democracy, of truth, reconciliation and transformation – you can easily be overwhelmed by the scope and volume of the paper record. But you will be haunted by the absence of the digital record. Not a digital record that never existed so much as one which has now evaporated, for digital recordmaking was widespread in the 90s. The National Archives, for example: has a tiny accumulation of more or less arbitrary digital record sets probably unreadable in the absence of systematic conversion practice; has digitised no paper-based records from that period; and delivers no records online. Underlying this digital manifestation is a reality with a strong patterning – for the 90s the digital recordmaking footprint of the state, of civil society, of small business and of what we call ‘the personal’ is extremely faint; in contrast, that of big business, mainstream media, elite academic institutions and international agencies is relatively strong. I need not spell out the implications for the voicing of this past.

And very little has changed in the last twenty years. I have no doubt that future research of twenty-teens South Africa will discover a very similar topography. Inflected, of course, by the archives of increasingly sophisticated recordmaking individuals, elite institutions across all sectors, and those of the Internet and associated social media. Now I don’t want to dismiss the latter as a domain of elites, although they are that by and large. But think about how digital divides play out in the archiving of ‘the personal’. Think about what is present and what is absent on the Net, whose voices are heard and whose are not, whose voices are more mediated and whose are less mediated. Think about the dimensions of power which determine the structuring of search engines. Think about what gets archived on Facebook, that fecund space for posturing and self-promotion. Or YouTube, awash in the trivial, the tasteless and the sensational. What footprints are we leaving? (There is good stuff up on the Net. Web-based technologies can be liberatory. And the Net can be a terrain for struggle – struggles for justice. But what archival footprint are we leaving?)

And what footprints in space and time are our ‘virtual’ recordmaking and its attendant information technologies leaving in human communities and in the natural environment? Think about the coltan and other mining which services them. Think about the conditions in which the miners work, and the myriad of exploited workers in the factories which churn out the devices we rely on. Think about the ocean floors disturbed and the mountains cut through for the laying of cables. The landfills in which hardware is dumped when it has become

obsolete. The transformed patterns of work, workplace configuration and organisational development. The redundant vocations and services. The closed businesses and retrenched employees. I am describing haunted places and people. I am naming the 'material' ghosts of the 'virtual'.

But let me move away now from the specificities of the digital. All archive is haunted. All footprints are miraged by spectral presences and absences. For me there seem to be five primary spectral movements in archive. Firstly, that generated by spectral authors. Whether the writer of a journal entry or a tweet, the director of a documentary movie or an agent in a Wikileaks download, 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. When they are ghosts.

A second primary movement is generated by spectral mediations. Of course, archive never speaks for itself. Always it is mediated by readers and apparatuses. So that at any moment in time archive awaits an indeterminable number of mediations to come. Ghosts.

A third 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.

Fourthly, 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 fifthly, 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? Archivists fantasize about 'original order', rightly, but need to fantasize also about original location. For the fragments in their custody comprise matter out of place. And the whispers of dislocation can be heard. Ghostly voices of other places, of lineages, of origins.

The movements of haunting in archive are multiple, the ghosted voices always myriad. Of course, we can close our ears to these voices. Find ways of keeping the spectres out. For, let's be frank, listening to ghosts can drive one mad. However, it can also vouchsafe stimulating intellectual endeavour. More importantly, such listening, in my view, is at once an ethical imperative and a robust basis for archival praxis. I will return to this assertion when I begin to come to a conclusion.

But for the next few minutes I want to pursue another line of enquiry on spectrality and archive, namely, the weight of oppressive pasts borne by so many societies and related global challenges confronting all of us. Archivists and other recordmakers might want to insulate themselves from the impact of societal and environmental turbulence, conflict, and global structures of power and economy. We might want to busy ourselves only with professional work and its many challenges. But we cannot afford to. The call of justice sounds in our ears like it does for all human beings. Global realities shape what we do as professionals indelibly. And those realities threaten both the footprints we care for and the human project which gives those prints meaning and significance. We are haunted by potential erasures on an unimaginable scale, whether we listen to the ghosts or not.

So, the weight of oppressive pasts. Transitional justice has become a discipline, a profession, arguably also an industry, in response to the number of countries around the world recovering from periods of oppression or violent conflict. And it's growing all the time. What has this to do with archivists and other recordmakers? Well, reckoning with traumatic pasts involves memory work. From truth recovery interventions to survivor support programmes, from prosecutions of human rights violations to reparations for 'victims', from memorialisation projects to the recovery of the remains of those who have died. And memory work relies on the expertise and resources of recordmakers. In a terrain that is profoundly haunted. By the ghosts of those who are dead, by the damaged ones still living who are haunted by their selves before they experienced violation, and by the ghosts of those not yet born. For the work is not about the past. It is about the future that must be made. It is about finding healing for traumatised societies and individuals, and ensuring a future for following generations that is not crippled by unfinished business. It is about remaking society so that it opens to a liberatory future.

Obviously there is a lot to say about this work. Time allows me only to pull out one thread. A thread which has emerged from the Nelson

Mandela Foundation's international dialogue programme on memory work in the contexts of oppression and violent conflict. Over the last four years this programme has taken us to South America, Africa, Europe and Asia, and it has taught us that one of the most difficult aspects of the work is the creation of spaces safe enough for former enemies to enter and to listen to one another's stories. Spaces also safe enough for people to listen to the enemies within - that part of self, or we, my family, my organisation, my people, which is shameful or disavowed. These spaces, I would argue, are archival spaces. In them repressed stories are surfaced. New stories are told and heard. Traces are made. What Anne Gilliland and Michelle Caswell might call latent records are engaged, with utmost delicacy, so that they might shed their latency. And those who walk through these spaces leave the most fragile of footprints, vulnerable in the first instance to the tears they evoke.

Let me share just three examples of what I'm talking about. The stories of three participants in the Nelson Mandela Foundation's dialogue work:

Mariana is from Argentina. Her parents were underground activists during the dictatorship in her country. At the age of nine months she and her mother were 'disappeared' by security forces. Her father escaped and remained out of sight for a decade. Mariana's mother was murdered. Mariana was recovered by her grandparents after three months. She speaks of the pain and confusion of growing up without parents, of discovering their fates, of constructing stories to explain their absence.

Mbongiseni is from South Africa. He grew up in the midst of civil war. As a teenager he was forced to join a mob burning down the house of a neighbour suspected of being a supporter of the 'other' side. He speaks of the burden he carries, the work of reconciliation with the neighbour's family that still awaits him.

Adnan is from Bosnia. At the outbreak of war in his country he was called up to serve in the military. He fought for years in defence of Sarajevo. He speaks of the years it has taken to come to terms with the experience. The pain of answering his teenage daughter's questions about his war experiences.

Creating space for the most delicate of footprints. Adnan told his story in a Bosnia straining to prevent the next war; a Bosnia in which all footprints are still at risk.

Let me share one more anecdote from my visit to Sarajevo in June 2015 to illustrate this. On a particular day at a conference I was

attending, during breaks I got chatting with a young memory activist who shared with me the story of how he was involved in the protest action in Bosnia's parliament in 2014. This action led to the building being set on fire. Later in the day I was catching up with an older Bosnian participant I have got to know over several years. He has spent twenty years documenting war crimes and other violations, searching for the remains of the dead, memorialising, and returning the remains to families. He runs a documentation centre which is right across the road from the parliament. In the course of the conversation he also recalled the protest action of 2014. Paraphrasing him: I sourced guns and armed all my archivists and researchers; we were prepared to die to protect our archive.

This might all feel far removed from professional life in New Zealand. But it is closer than one might think. The struggles of a country like Bosnia can only be understood in the context of a global economic system, global relations of power, and global environmental realities. A world riven by multiple conflicts is the product of international systems which are predicated on the impoverishment of large swathes of humanity, deep structural inequality, and environmental degradation. As French economist Thomas Piketty has demonstrated, 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. And the patterns of capital accumulation are beginning to show remarkable similarity to those which obtained three hundred years ago. The challenge is compounded by climate change precipitated by these rapacious systems. Recent work by scientist Stephen Emmott and social commentator Naomi Klein show conclusively that humanity faces a crisis that will come to a head in the next decade and a half. Only solidarity, political will and sustained intervention can effect the behavioural change which we need to save the human project and give hope to the billions of human beings who are just surviving. All of us should be haunted by the voices of these billions. The ghosts of our dominant global systems. (In recent weeks our television screens have been filled by images of tens of thousands of migrants knocking at the doors of Europe's privilege and wealth. Ghosts demanding to be allowed in. Fanon's wretched of the earth. They're not going away. Their numbers will grow, their voices become more insistent.) And all of us should be haunted by the earth and its fragile ecosystems, suffering at the hands of humankind, doing now what it has to do, reluctantly, to eject us from a natural order which we are abusing.

Especially haunted should be those of us who are part of a global elite, the primary beneficiary of the systems which seem intent on changing the earth irrevocably and even ending the human project.

This involves all of us friends. And it will affect all of us ultimately. Whether we are recordmakers nurturing archival footprints in New Zealand, or in Bosnia, or in Africa, care for the prints calls us to address the challenges which are threatening the very footprinting which makes our work possible. What to do?

Let me conclude by attempting to address this impossible question. For archivists and other recordmakers the fundamental challenge is to imagine their work not as just another profession but as a calling to make and re-make the world for justice. If we were to believe that the work of archive is justice, then it would be impossible for a 1930s German recordmaker to simply oil the wheels of the Nazi bureaucracy, for a 1980s South African archivist to simply improve efficiencies in the apartheid archival system, for a 2000s Goldman Sachs information manager in New York to simply support optimal capital extraction, or for a 20-teens New Zealand archivist to simply enhance professional systems.

We must, we must pay attention to the ghosts. At the most basic level, in our workplace, stretched by the demands of daily professional work in the archive, perhaps tasked with the arrangement and description of a particular bureaucratic records accumulation, we have to learn to listen to the spectres miraging that accumulation – whether they be of authors, of mediators, content, context, or place of origin. We have to learn to listen to the spectres of our positioning in profession, in institution, in nation, in history, and in the world. Up to this point I have avoided quoting Jacques Derrida, but his ghost is insistent, so now as I draw to a close let me offer one sounding of his voice. In 1994, that fateful year in my country's history, as we emerged from centuries of colonialism and apartheid to embrace democracy, he said:

"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 ..."¹

He missed here, I think, the responsibility we carry before the ghosts of the living who are damaged. And he also missed the responsibility every human being carries before the ghosts of self. We all struggle with the voices of selves we find difficult to be hospitable to. Mariana. Mbongiseni. Adnan. If justice is the relation to 'the other', then justice

in principle begins with attention to, and responsibility before, the others inside.

We must pay attention to the ghosts. This is not easy work. It requires courage and imagination. It demands the closest reading of archive, with the grain and against the grain. And it is, most often, resisted by structures and systems of power – for attending to the ghosts is readily seen by these structures and systems to be subversive. Arguably it is subversive. It questions everything. It tends to disturb dominant narratives. It diverts energy, time and resources from what is seen to be core business. And it allows what is regarded as personal into the ‘professional’. Dangerous space. So that this work unavoidably will involve, to some degree, what I am calling archive banditry. A determination to shape our professional work in a relation of hospitality to the voices which press in upon us from outside (and therefore from deep inside) the structures and systems which we benefit from. *Los bandidos de la memoria*. Memory bandits. Not the ones which convention tells us are lawless. Rather, the ones who honour justice as a law for practice which trumps the laws which politics pass to protect their interests. The ones who honour footprints rather than the biggest and strongest feet in their jurisdiction. The ones who will not be bought, or simply go away. The ones who believe in a human project that is about liberation rather than depredation, isolation and oblivion.

Let me name such a bandit. Florence Hartmann. She worked in the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia between 2000 and 2006. She had access to the Tribunal’s evidence related to the Srebrenica genocide of 1995, when Serb forces overwhelmed the UN ‘safe area’ there, separated males from females, and then murdered over 8 000 men and boys in killing fields outside the town. This happened right near the end of the war in Bosnia. The twentieth anniversary of this atrocity was marked in Srebrenica just two months ago. (Anne Gilliland was there.) Hartmann has published a book detailing the full extent of UN and Western complicity in this tragedy. A story suppressed until now. A truth needing to be revealed, especially for the survivors and their community still seeking understanding of why the genocide happened. A footprint needing to be traced outside the cloisters of spaces closed by powerful global actors. An imaginary archive (as defined by Anne Gilliland in her keynote address) needing to be actualized. Hartmann heard the ghosts of the dead, the living, and the yet to be born. And she felt a fundamental responsibility before them. An archival responsibility. She felt the pull of justice more strongly than she did her undertakings to

confidentiality, her professional obligations to rules and regulations, and her fear of the sanctions which could be imposed on her. She listened to the ghosts within and without. She was haunted into action.

We need more Florence Hartmanns. We need more banditry. I don't want to romanticise it. The shadows of banditry must be acknowledged. Like the reality that it can be used for both good and ill. Like its openness to the elevation of personal agendas above institutional mandates. Like the risk of speaking for the ghost rather than listening to it. And, of course, as with all narrativisation, even the bandit's storytelling can slip into metanarrative. Equally, the counter-archiving of banditry, because it is archiving, cannot avoid its own privilegings, elisions and silencings. What Derrida calls the archontic, the exercise of a fundamental archival power, is always at play. Ultimately you can't take the archon out of the bandit.

But we need more banditry. We need the honouring of footprints, both actual and latent, rather than the biggest and strongest feet. We need passion as much as professionalism. We need professionals with a keen awareness of the global realities which threaten both the footprints they care for and the human project which gives those prints meaning and significance. We, all of us, should be haunted. And we should be listening to the ghosts in a relation of responsibility.

No one can prescribe what we must do with our listening. But the listening is prescriptive before the call of justice. For justice, if it means anything, is the relation to 'the other', our relation to 'the other'. What to 'do' with the other? What to do? For it is, fundamentally, a call to action. But what to do? I don't have a blueprint. I don't believe anyone can have a blueprint. As a 14-year-old once wrote on my kitchen wall: "We work in the dark, we do what we can, we give what we have."

I thank you.

Endnotes

1. Derrida, J. 1994. *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. London: Routledge. p.xix.