

**POSTMODERNISING HISTORY AND THE ARCHIVES:
SOME CHALLENGES FOR RECORDING THE PAST**

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Abstract

Social history has been an important force in intellectually discrediting the apartheid state. Postmodernist approaches are, however, challenging this hegemonic discourse as society re-orientates itself to democratic institutions and greater participation in politics and economics. This article discusses the effects of postmodernist impulses in recent South African historiography and attempts to show links between historical and archival practice as they seek new frames of reference. As history turns towards process and representation in terms of post-coloniality, it is confronted by public memory and commemoration, which undermine the academy's control of the discipline. Increasingly, therefore, history and the archives become sites of political and intellectual struggle as part of society's larger 'heritage'. The focus is on how historians and archivists interpret the challenges of postmodernist theory for their respective professions.

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This article started life as a talk on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of distance education at the University of South Africa in 1996.¹ My brief was simply to ‘‘romance’’ the university’s archives which are an important part of the library’s holdings. The paper now has pretensions which make me feel like an imposter because I am neither an archivist nor a postmodernist, although I think it is time to go beyond political economy. I am increasingly agnostic about the dense empiricism of some social history, so it is tempting to play devil’s advocate by suggesting that good history can be written without going to the archives at all.

This apostasy has much to do with my research interests in intellectual history and comparative historiography, and with my view that the ‘‘collective memory’’ of our society does not reside in the archives, unless one reads ‘‘archives’’ in the broadest possible sense.² On the other hand, I certainly wouldn’t go as far as Leslie Writz, a historian of public history at the University of the Western Cape, who has suggested that archives should go down with the modernist, positivist, empiricist tradition of Enlightenment historical practice.³

I have to confess that I often find archives bewildering and confusing places, especially official repositories of the state. I usually cannot find what I’m looking for. The fault is probably my own, since most historians have a ‘‘nose’’ for documents and usually find sources on all kinds of scintillating topics. I suspect that they may also have ulterior motives for visiting the archives—away from hectoring students, or as one colleague confessed: ‘‘to get away from the drudgery of domesticity’’.⁴ I tend to identify with the negative experiences of historians in archives which were shared on the NUAfrica electronic network in 1996. Clifton Crais, who wrote a book on the colonial order in the eastern Cape during the nineteenth century, and Rob Turrell, editor of the *Southern African Review of Books*, are particularly scathing in their comments. They accuse state archivists of not caring about the wholesale destruction or disappearance of documents and of being incompetent in everything but genealogical research.⁵

At the same time as archivists are the object of such criticisms, historians are in a quandary about the social and intellectual currency of their craft in the wake of Curriculum 2005, which has downscaled the importance of history in South African schools. The post-colonial condition and postmodernist ideas have added other anxieties about the place of history in the humanities and social sciences after apartheid. This naturally has implications for rethinking archives as the chrysalis of history. It is important for historians and archivists to take stock of some of the new theoretical positions, especially since our work is increasingly construed as a methodological continuum in some recent literature. Historians also need to be more engaged in the restructuring of archives and involved in political and institutional processes which have a direct bearing on public history, which is a growing field of research.⁶

My title, ‘‘Postmodernising the Archives’’, is partly tongue-in-cheek because if I were to offer a thorough going postmodernist critique I’d be arguing for an end to

archives, following the ‘‘end of history’’. Instead, I shall try to link postmodernist views about the writing of history to the preservation of historical material and re-emphasise the role of record-keeping—written, oral, visual and artefactual—for historians and archivists, as well as the growing numbers of other brokers of history, from literary theorists and museologists to policy makers and lawyers, and from urban geographers to educationists and theologians. And don’t let us forget the history makers in politics, whose version of South African history is powerfully shown in the creation of a new ‘‘archives’’ of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, for example.

Secondly, I shall examine the new meanings of ‘‘record’’ and ‘‘archive’’ in terms of recent historiographical trends, and attempt to relate archives to some of the latest methodological and epistemological shifts in the history profession, which Paul Maylam outlined in his presidential address to the South African Historical Society in Grahamstown in 1995. He vividly described the buffeting of postmodern change that historians, and for that matter archivists, face.⁷ Some historians are calling it ‘‘history in crisis’’⁸ but Collin Bundy, the new Vice Chancellor of the University of the Witwatersrand, sees certain continuities with social history, which itself has looked at culture, ethnicity, language and gender in the 1980s, and generated micro-studies rather than grand narratives.⁹ He is part of a lobby for a revitalised Marxism within cultural studies in contemporary Africa, where brute material circumstances require a social history grounded in discussions of inequality, conflict and class.¹⁰ He agrees with Albert Grundlingh who, in his inaugural lecture, argued that ‘‘since conditions in South Africa do not match those abroad, post-modernism has had less intellectual purchase’’.¹¹

Crais, on the other hand, sees postmodernism as a way of challenging the Marxist hegemony of South African historiography by deconstructing the ‘‘formal categories of race, class and gender’’ associated with radical and liberal meta-narratives, and by insisting on the ‘‘centrality of culture’’ in historical analysis.¹² In his work on the Cape frontier, he used the postmodernist critique of power, discourse and representation to assess the ways in which European images of Africans ultimately led to racial capitalism.¹³

Norman Etherington, a well-known historian of South Africa based in Australia, has reservations about the appropriateness of postmodernist critiques, but concedes that they may free South African history of its captivity to rigid paradigms—African nationalist, liberal and radical—which have ruled for more than 30 years. He lists three main benefits: first, it is important for historians to uncover the historical processes by which certain images of the ‘‘other’’ are constructed; secondly, the postmodernist approach encourages historians to examine visual material as representative depictions of particular discourses; and finally, that the apartheid system could itself be regarded as a product of modernity and is therefore open to a rigorous postmodernist critique.

On the debit side, Etherington notes that a cavalier use of overarching terms, such as ‘‘racism’’, ‘‘colonialism’’ and ‘‘patriarchy’’ can lead to another set of finite discourses, the opposite of postmodernism’s deconstruction of meta-narratives.¹⁴ Maylam fears that postmodernism could also lead to a constant recycling of knowledge and ideas which saps historical writing of its empirical originality.¹⁵

In a blistering attack on postmodernism, American historian, Gertrude Himmelfarb, unwittingly promotes the postmodernist cause. She argues, for example, that postmodernism appeals to both the creative and political imaginations, and she invokes Derrida's work to show that deconstruction represents a way of dismantling "the logic by which a particular system of thought, and behind that a whole system of political structures and social institutions, maintains its force". She cites Peter Stearns, editor of the *Journal of Social History*, who regards postmodernism as particularly congenial to post-Marxist forms of radicalism, such as anti-racism, anti-sexism and environmentalism. Given the troubles of socialism and liberalism, postmodernists are keen to find new intellectual bases for radicalism.

What disturbs Himmelfarb is that postmodernism repudiates both the values and rhetoric of Enlightenment positivism. She sees it as more than simply a rejection of the "discipline" of knowledge and rationality; for her it is a denial of the "discipline" of society. She is most concerned that the political potential of postmodernism has been enthusiastically welcomed by feminist historians, who find Marxian social history unresponsive to their concerns.¹⁶

Jean Scott, a leading feminist historian in the USA, has done more than most to confirm Himmelfarb's fears. She has argued that a more radical feminist history requires a more radical epistemology. Postmodernism is the answer because it revalorises the status of all knowledge, it links knowledge to power, and it theorises these in terms of the operations of difference. She finds in the post-structuralism of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida a powerful analytical perspective for feminism.¹⁷

Feminism has been at the forefront of melding social history, especially of the political-economy variety, with critical theory. As Gabrielle Spiegel explains:

"Because it has always been important to feminists to retain a sense of women's distinctive historical experience, yet at the same time to deconstruct the conventional implications of sexual difference by demonstrating how gender is itself a socially and culturally constructed category of experience, feminist historiography has produced some of the most sophisticated studies combining both perspectives in recent years. . . . They have shown that a historiographical practice located in the middle ground can be at once innovative, coherent and telling, enriching our understanding of the intricate dance of discourse and experience in past times."¹⁸

Certainly, a flexible appreciation of the ways postmodernism can help to redefine the nature of historical investigation and enhance historiographical practice represents a sensible appropriation of its tenets, without embracing any of its extreme or polarised positions. This accords more or less with Dominick LaCapra's desire to "elaborate a critical and self-critical historiography that remains open to the risks Derrida explores, but also insists upon certain constraints in a manner that engages the disciplinary conventions of professional historians."¹⁹

II

Some are swooning and others are rejoicing at the fragmentation that seems to have fractured our totalising projects in the wake of postmodernism, post-structuralism

and post-colonialism. There is, however, a paradox here: at a time when archives and public history are being harnessed for nation-building and are trying to centralise control in the National Archives of South Africa Act of 1996 (itself a totalising project), for instance, history is rejecting synthesis and meta-narrative. It is also ironic that at the moment when the canon of South African history is about to take a black-majority line, historians and others, who are mainly white, throw out master narratives.

Laura Chrisman has put it another way: at the moment when the "new" South Africa is released from its isolation to re-establish its cultural, economic and intellectual links with Africa and the rest of the world, why should we reinforce a "colonial axis of theoretical authority"? There is something perverse about rejecting historicism and the discipline of history when transnationality offers us the chance to flee the "insularities and parochialisms of the text" when 'the world' is available for scrutiny.²⁰

On the other hand, as I have indicated elsewhere, by exploring new byways and narrow streets, and following international historiographical trends along fragmented paths, the South African intellectual community is perhaps becoming more "normal" after the distortions and dislocations of apartheid.²¹

What I have also observed is a divide, which could be generational as well as ideological, between social historians, whose class analysis of the 1970s and 1980s yielded such enormous analytical insights, and postmodernists who are interrogating the construction of class, race, capitalism, development, and so on, which they argue are not self-evident categories that can be deployed unproblematically to make sense of the empirical world. Ran Greenstein's review article in a recent issue of the *Journal of Southern African Studies* is very useful in explaining this parting of the ways.²²

Empiricism is, however, still an orthodoxy in the historical profession, so postmodernist studies have a lot of subverting to do. Remember the satirical column "Maki Saki" in the *Southern African Review of Books*, which roundly attacked those engaged in post-colonial discourse theory as "our new wave of dotty campus evangelisers" who keep "our minds on 'intestines', 'textuality', 'signifiers', and 'mediations', during a period when many institutions are worried by the practical challenges of change on the African continent". The assault on theory construes "postness" as a form of intellectual superiority that "provides its adherents with the remarkable capacity to be simultaneously in the vanguard (since discourse is the real site of politics) and safely on the sidelines (since no messy and hazardous involvement with political activity is required)".²³

Cultural historians have tried to reverse this negative image of arcane and politically aloof theorists by re-defining their craft away from the post-structuralist "linguistic turn" of Derridean lineage to a "historical turn", which opens the discussion to more voices from hermeneutics, critical theory, cultural studies, anthropology and archaeology. They also invite a wider debate about issues beyond the academy and professionalism, including "multi-culturalism, the politics of identity and the production of history as collective public memory through social and cultural practices outside of historiography".²⁴ This shows the maturing of cultural history through its chequered theoretical career, from Roland Barthes and Jacques

Lacan to Walter Benjamin and Hayden White, from Michel Foucault to Edward Said and Kwame Appiah. The range implicit in this genealogy rejects exclusion and therefore gives historical research and writing a much wider intellectual reach and greater representivity. The "historical turn" has also meant that anthropologists and sociologists have turned to history in a way unprecedented before the 1980s.

History has also become the meeting ground for African Studies. Cultural historians, like other Africanists in the social sciences, have come to realise the importance of fieldwork which helps to locate their writing in Africa.²⁵ Janet Ewald, writing about her research of the Togali kingdom of the Republic of Sudan, points out that her fieldwork enabled her to put the Togali highlands, a region which has been at the periphery in earlier published works, at the centre of her analysis:

"Following the tracks that the Togali people themselves left depicts them as historical actors who struggled . . . to find a safe place in the face of dangers presented by life on the violent frontiers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries."²⁶

What are the implications for archives of this tension between "post-positivist" and empirical approaches to history? How do the reverberations of deconstruction, intertextuality and post-colonial theory affect archival practice? In a sense, archives have until recently been neglected among institutions associated with public history.²⁷ Museums, probably because of their visual and artefactual holdings, have been in the spotlight. Post-coloniality has focused our gaze on these spectacles of empire which place Europe at the centre of the world. Kwame Appiah has described post-coloniality as

"a relatively small Western-style, Western-trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through an Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa."²⁸

Post-colonialism, like postmodernism, is therefore linked to an intellectual elite, removed from popular culture and memory by its theorising and still bound by the constructions of coloniality and modernity. But what post-colonial theory has underscored is that language is integral to social "reality", at least in a constitutive way. It has alerted us to the encodedness of language, especially European languages such as English, which are rooted in the colonial process.²⁹ Post-colonial histories have derived a great deal from Subaltern Studies which were part of the "empire writes back" tradition in India.³⁰

Museums both created and reflected the prevailing imperial beliefs of the nineteenth century, and curators in an age of positivism had none of the uncertainties of our own times. They had confidence in their classification and organisation of collections, which they regarded as scientifically arranged and presented, and therefore authentic and objective. Annie Coombes has shown how the image of Africa was constructed by British museum exhibitions and concentrates on the process of curation in the production of various imperial histories of Africa. She

concludes her book by suggesting how the concept of "hybridity" in museum practice could contribute to the construction of a post-colonial British identity.³¹

The critique of museums in South Africa along these lines has also been prominent in the work of cultural historians since the early 1990s. The Wits History Workshop organised a conference on "Myths, Monuments, Museums: New Premises" in 1992, which looked at the role of monuments and museums in the making of popular historical images.³² Historians and museologists are thus beginning to debate the nature of public memory and the links between the present and the past. In a fine essay on public history and the study of memory, David Glassberg argues that

"the first-hand knowledge of how knowledge is created, institutionalized, disseminated, and understood [by the public], can help revitalize the entire historical profession as it redefines itself both professionally and intellectually in the years ahead".

He looks at public history as political culture, as popular culture, and as a consciousness of place. He exhorts historians to learn from the new scholarship on memory, which shows that the organisation of tradition has its own history, and that the history-making processes we have inherited help to place our contemporary methodologies in perspective and "offer new ways for historians to ground their scholarly and professional identities beyond the customary historiography course".³³

Public historians routinely practice in multiple communities of discourse about the past, immersed in a world in which the boundaries between knower and the known, and between subjectivity and objectivity, have collapsed. In presenting history to the public, they also discover that the public is presenting history back to them as well. Michael Frish has called this the "shared authority" of the public history enterprise. He sees oral and public history as having the capacity to redistribute intellectual authority, "so that this might be shared more broadly in historical research and communication rather than continuing to serve as an instrument of power and hierarchy".³⁴

In South Africa the shared authority of public and oral history has been taken up by Carolyn Hamilton, whose work has been profoundly influenced by David Cohen's *The Combining of History*, which looks at historical practices that lie outside the discourse of academic historians, yet within the social worlds that they study.³⁵ Examining the representations of Shaka, Hamilton goes beyond the political nature of the production of history to look at how the texts on Shaka, written at different times, have influenced each other and in the process set the limits on re-creations of the Zulu leader. She thus knits together the notions of history as politics and history as text. The thrust of her thesis, which explores popular and academic representations—oral, written and visual, archival and museological—is to define the constraints on imagining and manipulating in the production of history.³⁶

Another major contribution to the public history debate in South African historiography is Leslie Witz's thesis on the 1952 Jan van Riebeeck tercentenary festival. He is concerned with competing public versions of Van Riebeeck's central historical role in the myth of the settler nation. The variety of commemorations clashed with protests and boycotts to produce different, and opposed, pasts and symbols. The thesis also explores the political role of public history and the dialogical nature of its production.³⁷

Other renderings of public history come from the Cape where the Mayibuye Centre's museum of apartheid on Robben Island is likely to generate much popular and academic discussion about the history of the liberation struggle in modern South Africa. And Nigel Worden's study of the Waterfront development shows the interaction between professional historians, commercial capital, popular memory and public histories.³⁸

These public histories and the historical and political rhetoric around the transformation of the Africana Museum in Johannesburg into MuseumAfrica have filtered through into the debates about archives in South Africa.³⁹ The institutional structures of museums and archives have drawn them into the centre of the post-colonial debate. Colonial museums and archives are cultural artefacts, built on structures that have created and valorised imperial knowledges and erased or modified indigenous knowledges. This means that colonial documents are layered with received accounts of earlier events and the cultural semantics of various political moments. As Ann Stoler points out, "what constitutes the archive itself, what form it takes, what system of classification . . . are themselves internal to, and the very substance of, colonialism's cultural politics". For this reason, archives are much more than sites of conservation; they are contested sites of power because by their rules of organisation they create the "realities" they describe.⁴⁰

By bringing postmodernist and post-colonial theory to bear on archives, therefore, we are concerned with process and production rather than with content. The context becomes more important than the text. We dare not forget that documents have been removed from their original locations to the space of the archive, which itself has another context (spatial dimensions are extremely important in postmodernist studies). By this argument, the archives are ultimately postmodern because they are themselves a text, since their holdings have been transferred from their original moorings. Of course, postmodernist theory is never this straightforward. If I were to follow Johannes Fabian's reasoning about the production of ethnographic knowledge, I'd have to concede that creations of text and context are of the same kind since both are constructed. Contexts therefore need to be seen as texts requiring analysis.⁴¹

More importantly for my discussion, however, archivists need to help historians unravel the complex grid of archival technologies and interventions which may complicate the story of coloniser versus colonised and metropole versus colony, so that such binaries can be replaced by more nuanced and multi-layered expositions.

Reading the archives in South Africa after the National Archives of South Africa Act of 1996, we need to interpret the connection between post-apartheid historical preservation and the wider domain of "heritage" and public memory. The White Paper on Arts, Culture and Heritage (1996) set out a programme to redress the inequities of the past by recording, conserving and inventoring the "living heritage" associated with song, dance, story-telling and oral history. Carolyn Hamilton has offered guidelines about how such archiving should be done. In her view, this should not simply entail the recording of oral history to augment the written sources, so that Africans are included in the project of "living heritage". Nor should it take place under the old apartheid institutional frameworks, even if they are run by black personnel. Instead, what is required is a redefinition of archival work:

"The collection of written documents, and increasingly oral recordings in archives, and their separation from objects, considered the preserve of the museums, requires reassessment, as does the separation from both archives and museums, of monuments, western histories' 'mnemonics' *par excellence*."⁴²

III

David Hollinger, an influential historian of post-coloniality in the USA, wrote a controversial and innovative article about multiculturalism and ethnicity entitled, "How wide the circle of the 'we'?", which looked at the implications of a more inclusive history of North America.⁴³ In it he proposed a widening of the definition of the "archival record" in order to write new narratives of the indigenous American past. The growing historiography of Native American Indians in Canada and the USA has gone some way towards achieving this by "reading beyond words" to consider landscape, environment, religion and culture.⁴⁴ In South Africa, the majority has been written out of history; as Colin Bundy has put it: official South African history has been "to education what the black hole is to matter: a kind of anti-knowledge".⁴⁵

What faces historians and archivists now is how substantially to change this chemistry (or physics?) and involve black professionals in creating a past which adequately represents our national make-up. This is a point which Verne Harris takes up in a recent paper on "Redefining Archives in South Africa".⁴⁶

Studies on oral history have shown how profoundly hidden histories can be reconstructed through a stretched definition of "archive", beyond written documents to the vast untapped and unexcavated riches of memory in both the oral and archaeological record; in fact, by embracing the whole range of material culture. At present we are experiencing something of a "romancing" of this more encompassing record in sophisticated studies by Belinda Bozzoli, Isabel Hofmeyr, Charles van Onselen and Peter Delius, among others, who have pushed our historical thinking beyond literacy and documentary artefacts.⁴⁷

I particularly recommend Carmel Schrire's *Digging Through Darkness* to anyone who still believes that archaeologists have hearts of stone; it is a "biography" in which bones are fleshed out in a personal story of how an archaeologist goes to work. Hers is not a conventional academic analysis of colonial encounters, but rather a history of colonialism and racism, and a critique of self-confident rationality. The study offers a personal dialogue with social science itself in which the researcher also becomes the object of research.⁴⁸ Such self-reflection is beginning to find its way into the recent writings of historians and archivists.

Once the archives have been reinvented in terms of the imperatives of socio-political change in South Africa and the romanticised "rainbow" heritage has been given its brief cosmic showing, what sort of histories can we expect?

Historians are not very good at predictions, so let me rather mention some of the trends which are already emerging. I have already discussed the embryonic public historiography which is likely to grow once a chair in public history is established at the University of the Western Cape in 1998. Archivists have obviously also taken

note of personal struggle histories that have been published since 1990, some biographical, but mostly autobiographical.⁴⁹ These have drawn on memories of involvement in the political liberation movements. As the staff composition of history departments and archives changes to reflect our new democracy, more and more research and teaching of the anti-apartheid struggle is likely to focus attention on archival holdings relating to this opposition.

Nancy Sahli, writing in the *American Archivist* in 1994, also reflects on the "hierarchical, heterosexual, familial, patriarchal relationship patterns" that characterise the culture of the archives.⁵⁰ She asks how these influence the ways in which historical records are selected and arranged. She goes on to explore the close connection between archives and dominant cultures, which is instructive for both archivists and historians. And since she speaks from an American context, the issues of globalisation are also central to her analysis as she tackles head-on the problems of the information wash and how this alters the identity of the archivist.

Another discernible trend in the historiography is the intellectual history around state commissions, science and racism, reflected in the work of Saul Dubow, Adam Ashforth, Shula Marks and Aletta Norval, among others.⁵¹ Dubow begins his book on *Scientific Racism in Modern South Africa* with a lament about the neglect of intellectual history, which echoes the feelings of Paul Rich in 1993.⁵² The terrain of intellectual struggles around race is fertile ground for looking at Social Darwinism, evolution, eugenics, intelligence-testing and the making of nationalisms. Dubow's central approach is to examine these issues in terms of the institutionalisation and professionalisation of knowledge, and he draws on a wide international literature to uncover a "distinctive experience" of scientific racism in the south as opposed to the European north. Ultimately, he shows how the periphery transformed and reinterpreted issues, thus becoming the centre in debates about early evolution after the discovery of the Taung skull in 1924. This history and others like it are heavily based on archival material, but reflect a different reading of it.⁵³

"Cyberhistory" is something I don't have the knowledge to write about, but presumably this is an important future information resource which a hi-tech archive, possibly sponsored by big business, should think about tracking.⁵⁴ The implications of the information age for archives are enormous as electronic texts become the stuff of archival texts, become the stuff of histories.⁵⁵ Terry Cook argues that "paper minds", formed by an outmoded Jenkinsonian archival practice, have to be changed through "an understanding of the postmodernist theories of process-based contextuality" to "entwine the provenancial basis" of "post-custodial" archiving.⁵⁶ Undoubtedly, the information "superhighway" will greatly enhance access to historical records, many of which will be in computer-readable form for the contemporary period. But, as Michael Moss persuasively shows, "it is difficult to believe that the global archive accessed down the superhighway represents anything more than a quantitative rather than a qualitative change in the [archival] approaches to the past."⁵⁷ Postmodernist theory unlocks qualitative change because it is concerned with "post-custodial" issues rather than with the accumulation of records.

At a conference on the "Production of History in a Changing South Africa" at the University of the Western Cape in July 1996, I was struck by how much the writing of history is a dilemma because academic disciplines have fragmented in the turmoil

of how we are to understand what constitutes "our" society, if indeed any such thing exists. The evidence is clear that earlier and more self-confident definitions ignored not only minority and sectional interests, but also the interests of the majority. A Russian historian of southern Africa asked the pertinent question: "Where are the struggle histories of South Africa?"⁵⁸ His robust critique of the standard texts on the African National Congress and Pan Africanist Congress emphasises the need for much more systematic research of resistance politics in the apartheid era.

It is an indictment that there are only about 14 black history PhDs in South Africa and that the profession is still predominantly male and white, and in its forties.⁵⁹ This raises the question of power relations in the production of historical knowledge. The institutional and conceptual control of history naturally shapes the kind of history that is researched, published and written. In the larger intellectual arena, the publicised clashes between William Makgoba and Charles van Onselen at the University of the Witwatersrand, and between Barney Pityana and Dennis Davis in the human rights field, are emblematic of the contest over who controls the production of knowledge.

This also raises questions about African agency in South African history. And I'm not saying that whites can't write about blacks. After all, sophisticated texts, such as Bill Beinart's *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, have incorporated indigenous voices into their analyses, not only as forces opposed to colonialism and capitalism, but also as actors who go through their own social, political and cultural processes.⁶⁰ These histories also portray Africans as enterprising and independent social agents, whose lives can't simply be reduced to reactions to the initiatives of others.

But, as has been argued elsewhere, there is a difference between a focus on Africans and an African focus. Africanist perspectives represent a choice, made by a historian, whereas an Afrocentric approach is a strategy of investigation that is inextricably linked to identity politics. One sees this clearly in a comparison between Beinart's history and Alfred Moleah's *South Africa*, which is seldom recommended in courses on modern South Africa offered by our universities.⁶¹ Ran Greenstein points out that South African academics are more familiar with the work of Foucault and Derrida than with the writings of Cornel West, Stuart Hall, Valentin Mudimbe or Kwame Appiah. "To fight Eurocentrism by drawing exclusively on European-originated theory" is, he argues, a contradiction in terms.⁶²

As historians and archivists, we need to locate ourselves in Africa. Perhaps we need to take more notice of journals such as the *African Journal of Library, Archives and Information Science* than of the *American Archivist*.

In conclusion, we need to reflect critically on our historiographical conventions, analytical approaches, rules of evidence, sources and how we arrange and collect them, in order to recover the wider record of South Africa's past. Bringing the majority into knowledge production is a first priority, but we also need to rethink the relationship between existing institutions, such as archives and universities, and society as a whole. Terry Cook aptly pinpoints the shift in discourse that is necessary in archival practice, "from a dialogue with the state to one with society".⁶³ The postmodernist critique of history and archival practice could be liberating because it directs our focus to language, culture and ideas in order to develop more complex models of curation, appraisal and representation, and to take seriously subjects which

were neglected before. Richard Evans, who stoutly defends the integrity of (social) history, concedes that postmodernist theory "provides a new dimension of understanding that moves beyond the limitations of social history. . . . The achievement of cultural history in the postmodern mode is not merely additive; it has helped reorient our understanding of many areas of political and social history. . . ." ⁶⁴

The archives are not imprisoned by theoretical positions, but their richness is likely to be enhanced if they are receptive to new debates. After all, social history has added enormously to our repertoire of historical writing and to the range of archival holdings. Postmodernism has the potential to do the same.

ENDNOTES

1. Greg Cuthbertson, "Romancing the Record: Archives and New Narratives of South Africa's Past", *Progressio* 19, 1 (1997), pp. 155-163.
2. A point made very emphatically in Verne Harris, "Redefining Archives in South Africa: Public Archives and Society in Transition, 1990-1996", paper presented at "The Future of the Past: The Production of History in a Changing South Africa" conference, University of the Western Cape, Bellville, 10-12 July 1996, p. 1. The paper was later published as an article in *Archivaria* 42 (1996).
3. A comment he made while chairing a session on archives at "The Future of the Past" conference.
4. Personal communication with Sue Krige, Department of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, June 1996. She teaches some innovative courses on museums and archives to "method of history" students.
5. NUAfrica: Program of African Studies Mailing List Network, "State of the Archives": 17 June 1996 and 22 June 1996; e-mail messages from Clifton Crais; 13 June 1996; e-mail message from Rob Turnbull; 18 June 1996; e-mail message from John Lambert.
6. See Andre Odendaal, "'Dealing with the Past: Making Deals with the Past': Public History in South Africa in the 1990s", paper presented at "The Future of the Past Conference", p. 10.
7. Paul Maylam, "Tensions within the Practice of History", *South African Historical Journal* 33 (1995), pp. 3-12.
8. Odendaal, "'Dealing with the Past'", pp. 10-16; Gary Minkley, Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz, "'Thresholds, Gateways and Spectacles: Journeying through South African Hidden Pasts and Histories in the Last Decade of the Twentieth Century'", paper presented at "The Future of the Past" conference, pp. 1-6; and Ciraj Rassool's closing remarks at this conference in which he kept emphasising that South African history is in crisis.
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Abstract

This article looks at a comprehensive project of a comprehensive history, to be four such as museums and Archives (GALA) of the most exciting project, which are communities. The Metropolitan Com to the collection