

VERNE HARRIS, Ghosts of Archive: Deconstructive Intersectionality and Praxis

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Ghosts of Archive: Deconstructive Intersectionality and Praxis.

Verne Harris. London: Routledge, 2020. 166 pp. 9780429343827

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Phrases such as *deconstructive intersectionality*, *archival banditry*, and *spectral chains* do a lot of theoretical heavy lifting in Verne Harris's *Ghosts of Archive: Deconstructive Intersectionality and Praxis* – and yet, it is his use of the word *derange* that stands out among his critiques of hegemonic archival discourse (p. 107). *Derange* comes from the French *déranger* (to disturb or trouble), from its literal root *dé-ranger* (to disorganize). Implicit in Harris's work is the theme of derangement, which is apt for a study of archival power, considering the evocative etymological overlap between the French root of “disorganization” and the English connotations of instability and insanity. Through his introduction, seven chapters, and epilogue, Harris evokes and responds to the *derangement* of archives and records – their instability, their disorganization, their disappearance, their irrational spectrality – under the global system of “imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. 135). Haunted by the spectre of Marx, by ghostly victims and survivors of dictatorial regimes around the world, and by theoretical discourses of spectrality, he builds a hauntology of archives, which proposes that spectrality is both the fundamental characteristic of contemporary archives and a potential tool of liberation from hegemonic archival power.

Harris uses his life and career in South Africa as a case study through which to chart the evolution of archival and broader political movements in the world: from the Marxist resistance against apartheid in the 1970s and 80s, to the neoliberal human rights discourse of the 1990s and 2000s, to the “stuckness” of intersectional reflection and self-care rhetoric in the 2010s (p. 78). Arguing that

historical materialism leaves little room for subjective or affective conditions of oppression and resistance, while “transitional justice” in the late 1990s and early 2000s under the auspices of human rights discourse made it difficult to “think clearly” or “at all,” Harris proposes “deconstructive intersectionality” as a third mode of archival activism (p. 3). Deconstruction, he argues, offers a way to escape the stuckness and confusion – the derangement, perhaps – that characterize contemporary archival discourse. He defines deconstruction as one of several “accounts of archive” characterized by “unstable” or contextual meaning, always shifting through its reinterpretation, “haunted by the readers to come” and “the meanings and significances yet to emerge” (p. 29). It is also a deconstruction of “binary opposites,” which acts to “expose their provenances and deployments” and to “use them strategically” (p. 56). A deconstructive approach to intersectionality, “where the wretched are recognised and listened to across multiple vectors of oppression and vulnerability,” is, for Harris, the only possible theoretical tool for understanding the haunted present (pp. 119–20). As Harris argues, the ghosts of oppression linger everywhere: in intergenerational poverty in the imperialist core; in mass exploitation in the neo-colonies; in the obscuring of material territories and peoples by “virtual” technologies; in the disparate access to healthcare and economic stability during the COVID-19 pandemic; in the global reckoning, once again, with anti-Black and anti-Indigenous police brutality; and elsewhere (p. 63).

Harris elaborates his deconstructive praxis through a critical reading of David Rieff’s (2016) *In Praise of Forgetting*. While Harris broadly disagrees with Rieff’s framing of remembering and forgetting as opposites, he uses Rieff’s distinction between *remembering* and *remembrancing* to describe two types of collective archival memory. He expands the definition of remembrancing beyond Rieff’s focus on kitsch to include any collective memory without historiography or critical thought; remembrancing therefore becomes any “destructive hegemonic apparatus” born out of uncritical archival practice (p. 88). Using a deconstructive approach to demonstrate how each side of a binary “bifurcates endlessly,” Harris argues for an understanding of remembering and forgetting not as opposites but, rather, as two parallel processes that endlessly bifurcate into each other, creating space for affect, subjectivity, and ghosts (p. 56).

To build this praxis, Harris draws from anticolonial Marxists, especially Fanon, and critical theorists in the humanities and archival studies, such as Avery Gordon, Ann Cvetkovich, Michelle Caswell, Marika Cifor, and Anne Gilliland.

His greatest theoretical ancestors, though, are undoubtedly Jacques Derrida and his “imbricat[ed]” “insister” Hélène Cixous, to whom Harris devotes an entire chapter (p. 98). The style of this sixth chapter, “Cixous Insist(er)ing,” itself practices the “poet’s fecund flurry” and the “cacophony of ghosts” that Harris identifies in Cixous’ autofiction (p. 110). This chapter explicates the theoretical underpinnings of Harris’s engagement with ghosts. He reads records as manifestations of ghostly presence, from Derrida’s ghost in Cixous’ manuscripts to Cixous’ ghost in Derrida’s voice. The ambiguity over whether this chapter is a self-indulgent detour into French theory or a necessary poetic “flurry” is perhaps purposeful. Reading Cixous’ (2013) *Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang* (wherein Cixous discovers an old manuscript written in a hand she no longer recognizes as her own, annotated by the deceased Jacques Derrida, and considers whether to donate this manuscript haunted by her unfamiliar past self and her friend J.D. to the Bibliothèque nationale de France), Harris evokes an alienation, a dissociation, and a blurring of the line between fiction and nonfiction. Arguably, this dissociation is yet another derangement, one which he implicitly claims is characteristic of contemporary archives. As the lines between super and natural, then and now, and other and self blur through haunting, the lines between archival practice, philosophy, literary analysis, and autofiction are elided by Harris’s own prose.

Through his historical, philosophical analysis of the archive as spectral, his theoretical and literary engagement with Derrida and Cixous’ hauntology, and his political proposal for deconstructive intersectionality as the response to our haunted contemporary world, Harris comes finally to the same question posed by Avery Gordon in 1997, by Frantz Fanon in 1961, and by Vladimir Lenin in 1901: What is to be done?

Ghosts of Archive undoubtedly succeeds in arguing that spectral strategies are indispensable when easy answers are non-existent, and it puts forward a high-level praxis defined by listening to ghosts and deconstructing binaries upheld by archival power. Harris’s epilogue proposes a list of principles for liberatory memory work practice (p. 118). Responding to the tendency in critical academic monographs to end with minimally outlined strategies or unfounded hope, Harris calls instead for an explicit engagement with justice-oriented and feminist economics as the antidote to the prescriptive teleology of historical materialism, the toothless discursivity of identity politics, and the neoliberal rhetoric of human rights.

On a practical level, Harris refers to his experiences of literal and figurative archival “banditry” (stealing physical records out of hegemonic archives, appropriating archival concepts and practices for liberatory aims) as examples of day-to-day spectral praxis, but he acknowledges a broader incommensurability between work in archival institutions and an archival praxis of justice. Harris ends *Ghosts of Archive* by wondering if he will get to retirement “without being fired” (p. 144). Yet he shies away from recognizing that this incommensurability reveals a broader conflict between the capitalist archival superstructure (studiously avoiding the term *superstructure*, perhaps in an effort to distance himself, theoretically, from his historical materialist roots) and a representative people’s justice.

Early in *Ghosts of Archive*, Harris cautiously suggests that there is a need to think “beyond democracy” toward “human ancestral knowledges” and “the ghosts of non-human species,” emphasizing the incompatibility of neoliberal democratic discourses and genuinely liberatory practice (pp. 13, 14). Yet his refusal to use the word *dialectic* (instead preferring *binary*), and his claim that historical materialism is both prescriptive and binaristic, puts him at odds with socialist liberation movements in the Global South that confront this incommensurability. It is hard to disagree with Harris’s claim that mainstream politics today involves only “remnants of the Left,” which was so powerful in the 1970s and 80s, but his lack of engagement with the ideo-political praxis of these contemporary “remnants” is a notable absence in an otherwise comprehensive work (p. 138).

Harris offers an urgent intervention in archival discourse, which responds incisively to the ongoing and “tired” debate between neutrality and justice; the role of archives in the contemporary political and economic crisis that has been exacerbated, but not created, by COVID-19; and the tension between postmodernism and historical materialism (p. 115). Through *Ghosts of Archive*, Harris makes it easier for a new generation of archivists to “think clearly” (p. 3). His history of archival practice provides concrete examples of the application of his principles of liberatory memory work, but his greatest theoretical contribution is the application of hauntology – itself developed through the archival turn in the humanities – back to archival theory. He identifies the insistent presence of ghosts, both literal and figurative, as the key to transformative and justice-oriented archival practice, a powerful conclusion that pushes archival theory beyond derangement toward a revolutionary, decolonizing ethic.