

National System, Public Interest

A conference on archive in South Africa | Nelson Mandela Foundation | 23 - 24th April 2007

Co-convened by the National Archives, the Nelson Mandela Foundation and the University of the Witwatersrand

Contexts |

South Africa's post-apartheid national archival system was inaugurated in law when the National Archives of South Africa Act came into operation in January 1997. The Act was an expression of a transformation discourse in archives which had emerged in the late 1980s and gathered momentum in the early 1990s. This discourse focused its energies around two primary imperatives: the building of a new national archival system for South Africa; and the imagining of a post-apartheid archive in South Africa.

How has the archival landscape changed in South Africa since 1997? At the tenth anniversary of the Act's implementation, how well is it working? How has transformation discourse engaged changing realities? What are the key challenges facing those of us who work with archive?

This conference proposes a review which opens to the future, and which follows the two strands in transformation discourse identified above – building and imagining. Part 1 of the conference focuses on the constituting of a national archival system. Part 2 focuses on the interplay of “national interest” and “public interest” in the constituting of archive.

The conference will open with an address by the Minister of Arts and Culture, Dr. Pallo Jordan.



April 23 | Part 1: The Archive and a National System

Session 1 |

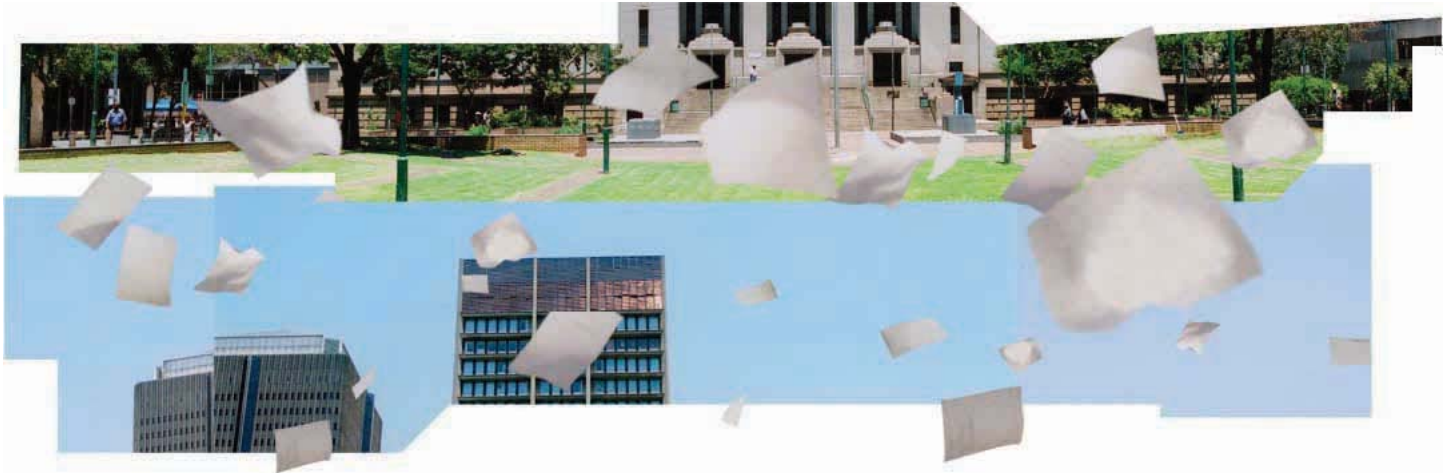
Under apartheid, the archive was skewed in favour of those in power. It expressed the narratives of a small elite. And it was the domain of this elite rather than a public resource. The post-1994 transformation endeavour has sought to redress these imbalances in line with new national interests. Certain key imperatives have informed the endeavour: the need to document society actively, with a special emphasis on creating space for voices previously excluded; the need to make the processes of constituting the archive both transparent and accountable; the need to open the archive according to the principles of “freedom of information”; the need to overcome systemic barriers to accessing the archive; and the need to develop new publics for archives.

Papers in Session 1 will explore these processes of opening the archive. The papers will assess their impact, identify problem areas, and seek ways of understanding their continuing role in constituting a post-apartheid archive.

Session 2 |

Transformation discourse firmly rejected the apartheid model for public archives – answerable only to the state, their operations largely opaque, and disconnected from both “private” archives and related memory institutions. In their structure and in their modes of operation, public archives under apartheid faithfully expressed the system’s values and imperatives. Post-1994 transformation endeavour has sought to build a new network of institutions and structures at both national and provincial level, again, in line with national interests. The endeavour has been predicated on: the need for accountability and transparency; the need for public participation; the need for public archives to audit state record-keeping; the need for inter-institutional co-operation; and the need for the fostering of synergies between the intersecting “archival”, “museum”, “library” and “heritage” terrains.

Papers in Session 2 will assess these new instruments of delivery. How successful have they been? What has worked and what hasn’t? What are the key challenges?



April 24 | Part 2: The Archive and the Public Interest

Session 3 |

Historically the archive was, typically, regarded as an inert preservatory repository. This view is no longer seen as tenable. Much current enquiry has focused on the ways in which the archive functions as a technology of rule, shaped by and lending support to the ideologies of colonialism and apartheid in particular, and by implication, post-apartheid nationalism. This session will seek to refine this view by examining the question of to what extent, historically, the archive, engaged, shaped, and was shaped by, wider questions of the public interest, public discourse and public deliberation.

Papers in Session 3 will use case studies to examine questions of the usefulness, potentialities and limitations, of colonial and apartheid-era archives in a post-colonial situation. It will explore differences between state and private archives of those periods, and will review methodologies for the use of archives created in the colonial and apartheid periods.

Session 4 |

This session will focus on the drawing of analytical and political distinctions between “public interest” and “national interest,” and consideration of the role of archive in relation to each of these notions. We will seek to identify key areas of engagement of the archive in the national interest, looking in particular for where this happens in nodes of concentrated investment. We will also look at where it does not happen: the spaces of elision and of contestation.

We will examine the role of heritage institutions in the aligning of archive and the national interest, and seek to identify places where this alignment is ruptured. We will also look at the counter-efforts of various archive activists to align the archive with larger questions of the public interest, at the nodes of concentrated investment and the spaces of elision here too.

We envisage that papers in Session 4 will, in certain respects, draw on discussions of the previous three sessions, and will facilitate summation of the entire conference.

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Conference Registration Form |

Personal details |

Full name : _____

Contact details |

Email address : _____

Cell no. : _____

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Institutional affiliation |

Organisation : _____

Position held : _____

Postal address : _____

For registration please fax your completed form to |

Contact: Razia Saleh, Senior Project Officer, Centre of Memory

Tel: 011 853 2612

Fax: 011 728 1111

Email: razias@nelsonmandela.org

Nelson Mandela Foundation, Mandela House, 107 Central Ave, Houghton,
Johannesburg



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