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Review of Ghosts of Archive: Deconstructive Intersectionality and Praxis

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Cover Page Footnote

All views expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Archives and Records Administration or any other agency of the United States Government.

Verne Harris. *Ghosts of Archive: Deconstructive Intersectionality and Praxis*. New York: Routledge, 2021.

In *Ghosts of Archive*, Verne Harris deconstructs the relationship between archives and power to posit an archival praxis centered around justice. He argues that archives are a nexus for complex, overlapping systems of oppression that use records to define norms and stifle dissent. Those “ghosted” by power nevertheless haunt archives: ghosts of the past appear as traces in records that document how the powerful surveilled and suppressed them; ghosts of the present appear as activists who use records to prove and prosecute injustice; and ghosts of the future appear as anticipated users who will one day draw on records to create an equitable society. The work of archives is therefore justice—to advocate with and for society’s ghosts by standing up to those who would silence them.

How can archivists do this? Harris’s justice praxis includes identifying voices ghosted by power, challenging metanarratives, dismantling intersecting vectors of oppression, and engaging in archive “banditry”—actions that “push the envelope, cut a few corners and even, if need be, break the law” in service of justice (124). This is “not the quiet, safe work” archivists may imagine for themselves (129). But when “matters of life and death” hinge on the availability, accessibility, and completeness of records, archivists cannot assume a passive, neutral stance (129). They must realize their “responsibility before the ghosts” and fight to end oppression (47).

While Harris’s ideas are not new—indeed, he has explored them for decades in other writings—*Ghosts of Archive*’s value lies in its powerful blend of scholarly commentary and personal memoir. Harris synthesizes the ideas of an international, interdisciplinary coterie of thinkers, including Jacques Derrida, Michelle Caswell, and Carolyn Hamilton, even as he wrestles with how their ideas can underpin a coherent praxis. Harris’s theoretical musings may be difficult to follow for readers new to archival theory. But he always eventually grounds theory in practice, specifically his experiences working for South Africa’s National Archives and the Nelson Mandela Foundation. This is when Harris is at his best and readers see how archives have the potential for oppression and liberation, harm and healing.

Harris’s passionate call to have faith in the struggle—“even when justice seems always and only to be coming, never here” (141)—appeals directly to readers already engaged in this work. But *Ghosts of Archive* is relevant to any reader, in or outside the archives profession, who is interested in social justice.