

Historical & Contemporary Justice and the Role of Archivists

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Introduction

This essay examines written documents as a form of and device for memory formation - memory tokens if you will. There are many types of memory tokens – historical sites, museum objects, and living individuals to name just a few. And like all memory devices, written documents have many limitations: Whose voice is being heard or lost; whose interests are being promoted or suppressed; and, who is allowed and not allowed to read them. In spite of these limitations it should be recognized that written documents can be powerful tools for exploring notions of justice - which I define here succinctly as the “demand of respect for the other.” While at first glance this simple definition may appear simplistic, in reality its examination opens up fertile ground across space and time for assessing historic and ongoing clashes of cultures across the globe and the omnipresence of power as the shaper of unequal social relationships of domination and its legitimation.

In the following paragraphs I offer a brief elucidation of the interconnection between justice and written documents: Their potential for notions of historical justice; for notions of contemporary justice; and finally in consideration of what these dynamics mean for how archivists, records managers, and other heritage workers might orient themselves and construct their professional identities. In the world of written documents, understandings of historical justice can be enabled through the reevaluations and retellings of the stories of the past, while understandings regarding contemporary justice are normally located in the realm of law and legal procedure, though this is a limiting perspective of the potential of justice. What concrete meanings can “justice” hold for people’s lives today in relation to written documents and other forms of memory and how might they contribute to informed examinations of the present? How *exactly do* archivists, records managers, and other heritage workers contribute to and limit possibilities for both historical and contemporary justice?

Archives and Historical Justice?

I purposely phrase “Archives and Historical Justice?” as a question. Archival connections to concepts of historical justice are multidimensional. They offer possibilities for a more accurate, multi-voiced, and multi-perspective version of the past. They also offer possibilities for a less accurate and narrower (both in voice and perspective) version of the past. The chance or planned survival of archives, as well as their purposeful destruction, illuminate the degree to which written documents become objects of manipulation that consciously attempts a preferred national or official version of the past. Two illustrative examples drawn from the African continent – Belgium’s colony in the Congo in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and Britain’s colony in Kenya in the mid-twentieth century - are deeply troubling, and deeply implicating of the control wielded by the “authorities” over the nature of the official archive and the stories it might tell.

Adam Hochschild's book *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1998) tells the tale of King Leopold II of Belgium, who, towards the end of the 19th century colonized an enormous expanse of land in west central Africa. While publicized in Europe and the United States as a humanitarian civilizing mission, in reality it resulted over the following three decades in an estimated 10 million African deaths due to land appropriation and forced labor to extract raw materials, rubber in particular. In 1904, in the face of increasing public pressure, Leopold sought to stave off losing the Congo by appointing a "Commission of Inquiry," made of up three judges favorable to the King. The Commission spent several months taking 370 depositions throughout the Congo, and the investigation came to be beyond the control of Leopold. And in 1908 Leopold was forced to relinquish personal control of the Congo to Belgium.

The Commission of Inquiry's work was one of the few times during the early European invasion of Africa that firsthand African testimony was recorded. According to Hochschild, "[t]he effect on anyone who read these stories could only be that of overwhelming horror." The Commission's final report omitted this African testimony and these voices were deposited in a "closed section" of the state archives in Belgium. It took many, many decades – until the 1980s – before these records became available to researchers.

In a chapter entitled "The Great Forgetting" Hochschild comments that the Congo offered "striking example of the politics of forgetting," pointing out that Leopold and colonial officials who took over control of the Congo after him "went to extraordinary lengths to try to erase potentially incriminating evidence from the historical record." In 1908, under Leopold's direct orders, the Congo State archives were systemically burned for eight straight days. As Leopold told his military aide, "I will give them my Congo, but they have no right to know what I did there." Leopold also ordered the Congo colony to conduct wide scale archives destruction.

And so it went until the 1970s when a Belgium ambassador to the region of West Africa had the chance to read charges of ten million African deaths in the Congo during Leopold's rule. Being a sensible ambassador, he sought information from Brussels to refute what he saw as outrageous charges. However, his plea for assistance fell on deaf ears. His curiosity ignited, he read widely about the Congo and discovered that many documents had in fact already been destroyed. However, he did find one set of records that survived: The firsthand African testimony from the 1905 Commission of Inquiry. These documents were not burned in 1908. Rather they had found refuge in the Belgian Foreign Ministry. After his reposting back to Belgium, in 1975 the ambassador sought access to these archives. Despite the fact that it had been seventy years since these records were created, these archives remained inaccessible. Ambassadorial status provided no favors for access, the Foreign Ministry ruling that archives whose disclosure would be detrimental to Belgium's reputation were off limits to researchers. At one point, a senior official told him, "You can see the files, but only if you promise not to write anything based on them." And only after aggressively pursuing these archives for eight

years, was this former ambassador granted access to the Commission of Inquiry testimony.

After he retired in 1989, the ambassador pursued his Congo project with great dedication. He combed archives across Europe and the United States looking for material that had survived. According to Hochschild, the ambassador, “found collections of private papers in Belgium [and discovered that] the most revealing material lay in the letters and reports of low-ranking, idealistic young colonial officers, newly arrived in the Congo and shocked that African realities did not match the noble rhetoric they had heard in Europe.”

What is most shocking from a "memory" perspective is the fact that prior to joining the Belgium diplomatic corps in his early forties, the ambassador spent 20 years in the Congo, rising to the position of assistant district administrator for the colonial regime. Yet, he was totally ignorant of the area's history just four decades prior to his time in the Congo.

Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain's Gulag in Kenya (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005) won the Pulitzer Prize for “General Non Fiction” in 2006. In it, the author Carolyn Elkins tells of her decade long research journey. In 1997 she intended to write a Ph.D. thesis on the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in the 1950s, described by her as a “movement launched by Kenya’s largest ethnic group, the Kikuyu, who had been pushed off part of their land in the process of colonization.” Based on a “preliminary sift” of the surviving official records in London, she felt confident that she could write a dissertation on what she initially believed would be a “history of the success of Britain’s civilizing mission in the detention camps of Kenya.” But, after nearly a decade of research she came to a rather different conclusion. Based on “an integrated reading of all the sources – written, oral, visual,” that she had assembled, Elkins reckoned that what resulted was “an astonishing portrait of destruction” and with a sense of very sad irony notes that “during the Mau Mau war British forces wielded their authority with a savagery that betrayed a perverse colonial logic: only by detaining nearly the entire Kikuyu population of 1.5 million people ... could colonial authority be restored and the civilizing mission reinstated.” Most chillingly, though, Elkins ultimately surmises that “in late colonial Kenya [there was] a murderous campaign to eliminate Kikuyu people, a campaign that left tens of thousands, perhaps, hundreds of thousands, dead.”

Elkins thorough descriptions of her experiences with official archives are quite illuminating: “I found that countless documents pertaining to the detention camps either were missing from Britain’s Public Record Office and the Kenya National Archives or were still classified as confidential some fifty years after the Mau Mau war I came to learn that the colonial government had intentionally destroyed many of these missing files in massive bonfires on the eve of its 1963 retreat from Kenya.” Elkins estimates that at least 240,000 individual detainee files had been among those burned. After years of research into the official archives, Elkins was able to find only a couple hundred such files, and all of those in Kenya. She came to the harsh conclusion that there “was a pattern to Britain’s cleansing of the records. Any ministry or department that dealt with the unsavory side of detention was pretty well emptied of its files, whereas, those that

ostensibly addressed detainee reform, or Britain's civilizing mission, were left fairly intact." A key lesson she drew from these experience was that, in this instance, the manipulation of the official archives "generated a picture of a relatively benign system of detention in colonial Kenya," a picture far different from what she came to find had actually existed.

After looking at these two cases I am struck by several questions. What type of "justice" is possible in these realms? What types of restorative possibilities exist and can exist? We can know that unspeakable things happened in the past and that staggering human rights crimes occurred on monumental scales, but can we actually offer any meaningful form of justice outside of telling a more accurate version of the past that challenges comfortable orthodoxy and the reputations of ghosts? These are questions that have no simple responses.

Archives and Contemporary Justice?

I also phrase "Archives and Contemporary Justice?" as a question, though the form of justice available in this arena is usually linked to systems of law and punishment. However, it is imperative that the construction of justice here not be bounded solely by these issues. It remains important to define notions of justice around recognition, psychological healing, and knowledge about individual, community, and cultural identity and story.

As with historical justice, archival connections to concepts of contemporary justice are multidimensional. They also offer possibilities for a more accurate, multi-voiced, and multi-perspective version of events, as well as the hazards of a narrow and manipulated interpretation of the present. The chance or planned survival of records, as well as their purposeful destruction, illuminate the degree to which written documents become objects of profound importance on contemporary human rights issues and the conscious manipulation of a preferred national or official version of the recent past. Although I focus my efforts here on the dramatic political changes occurring in Latin America over the past two decades, equally fascinating connections between archives and contemporary justice can be witnessed in a wide range of events across the world: From the sexual abuse trials of the Catholic Church in the United States to corporate cover-ups around the effects of tobacco and asbestos on individuals and communities to the seismic shifts in the political geography of Eastern Europe. Each implicates painful and drawn out battles over preservation and access to documents, the consequences of which have been enormous and ongoing. But such contemporary issues are not restricted and should not be solely viewed from on high as exercises having broad social import. The impact on specific persons in a way that honors their story external to the legal system must remain a central focus of examinations archives and contemporary justice.

For example, a recent press account related the story of an adult Mexican woman orphaned as a child by her government in the mid-1970s. Separated from her brother at the age of two when her parents were arrested and disappeared for guerilla activities, she located him in Washington, DC some thirty years later. She herself was ignorant of her original family history until she was 16 years old. She was able to perform this amazing

feat due to the fact of the declassification and opening of official Mexican state files in 2000, and supplemental use of additional documents such as “baby pictures, orphanage photos, adoption records, telephone books, and a captured Caller ID [number.]” (McKinley, Jr.)

More broadly speaking, the impact of archives on contemporary justice in Latin America during the era of military dictatorships provides insights and parallels to other global events.

Earlier this year, a former Brazilian military intelligence agent made charges that thousands of documents incriminating the former military dictatorship, which collapsed in 1985, still existed in secret archives outside of the custody and control of the civilian government, even though military and state intelligence agencies gave repeated public promises that no records from those years had survived. In 2003, the then Brazilian civil minister of defense offered that, based on these pledges, that these files had been “legally destroyed in the 80s and 90s, in accordance with established procedures.” However, in reality these files continued to survive, a point reluctantly admitted to by the intelligence agencies, in clandestine archives across the country – in an air force base, a school, and a ranch. Brazil’s current president, who was also a former political prisoner, came to face a public debate over the fate of these files and has been accused of not being as aggressive as Argentina or Chile in seeking forms of legal justice for dictatorship-era human rights violations. Some officials argued that these documents be deposited in the National Archives and limited access given to “serious” researchers, while human rights organizations in the country insist on “complete, unrestricted, and immediate” access alongside the establishment of memory institutions that provide settings where Brazilians can learn about and confront twenty-one years of military dictatorship that resulted in the murder, torture, and disappearance of hundreds of political prisoners. Also under dispute is whether former and current state officials who lied about the existence of these files should be punished, and whether or not release of these files would lead to improper invasions of privacy, such as revealing deeply personal information or the identities of political prisoner informants who provided information to the military, though this last point have been read as a veiled military threat of public embarrassment to former political prisoners now in government service. In early 2005, a government commission was examining options for handling these files. (Rohter, January 31, 2005.)

Brazil is not the only country in Latin America where clandestine archives documenting severe human rights violations have been surfaced. Recently, in Guatemala, 30,000 police files from the 1980s have been uncovered in the archives of the former National Police, confirming extra-judicial disappearances and abuses by security forces. Human rights organizations in Guatemala are insisting on a full accounting from this archive. It is estimated that in Guatemala’s nearly four decades long civil war some 250,000 people were killed and disappeared, most all violations occurring at the hands of the government. (“Guatemalan Police Files Depicting Abuse Found.”)

And in Chile in mid-2005, a large collection of intelligence files on hundreds of opponents of the former military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet were found on the

compound of a religious cult overseen by a German émigré who was a Nazi Luftwaffe medic during World War Two. According to the *New York Times*, this compound “enjoyed official protection” from the military dictatorship and maintained “close relationships” with army and intelligence officials. A Chilean report on human rights violations stated that the cult allowed state intelligence agents to secretly hide political prisoners on the compound. Rights advocates are eager to determine what information the newly surfaced files hold about activists opposed to the Pinochet regime. As of mid-2005 the files were unavailable to the public and were undergoing judicial evaluation. (Larry Rohter, June 17, 2005.)

But perhaps the most revelatory uncovering of an archive in Latin America thought to be cleansed from history was found at a remote police station in Paraguay in 1992. Termed “The Archive of Terror” totals some 600,000 pages, and provide the best available information on Project Condor, a joint agreement from the 1970s by intelligence agencies from at least eight Latin American nations – Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru – to coordinate their activities in order to maintain a distorted sense of collective security. In reality, Operation Condor, in the words of researcher Peter Kornbluh:

became the most sinister state-sponsored terrorist network in the Western Hemisphere ... Those targeted went far beyond members of militant ... guerilla movements; ... they included civilian political figures from the region, and Latin American exile leaders in Europe and the United States. Victims numbered in the hundreds as the Condor nations collaborated in cross-border manhunts – tracking, surveillance, kidnappings, torture, interrogation, and elimination of opponents. (Kornbluh, p. 324.)

In his book *The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* (New York: The New Press, 2004), researcher and journalist John Dinges came to the conclusion that declassified US documents on Condor demonstrate that the US “encouraged and supported the integration of the security forces [of the six original Condor countries, and that this] activity was applauded in Washington, not criticized, as was seen as a needed response to ‘international terrorism.’” (Dinges, p. 250.)

The surfacing of Condor related documents in Paraguay is the direct result of the dedication of Martin Almeda, who was viciously tortured over the course of several weeks by military officials in 1974, despite the fact that consensus now holds that Almeda was wrongly tied to a plot to assassinate the former President of Paraguay. During one of his torture sessions his captors phoned up his wife and let her hear his agony. Days later she died from heart failure. Almeda was released after four years and went into exile, only returning to Paraguay in 1989 with the collapse of the military dictatorship. Using a clause from a newly enacted national Constitution, Almeda used the courts to seek official state information on his arrest, incarceration, and wife’s untimely passing. The police informed Almeda that any police archives documenting him would have already been destroyed. Not to be deterred, Almeda joined forces with a human rights activist Congressman and went public with a request for information from the years of the dictatorship. Remarkably, a former policeman contacted him through an

intermediary and indicated knowledge about official documents that had been secreted at a remote police station. In exchange for a promise of employment for one of his children, the former policeman provided a handwritten map, indicating which building on the police station held hidden files. After locating the precise office indicated on the map, they came upon a most remarkable collection:

hundreds of ringed archive binders, bound chronological volumes of police interrogation reports, boxes of surveillance tapes and photos, jailhouse log books recording the arrival and departure of thousands of prisoners, correspondence with security forces from Chile, Bolivia, Argentina, Uruguay, Brazil, and the United States ... summary reports in alphabetical order with photos and fingerprints of thousands of Paraguayan and foreign prisoners, many of them on the lists of disappeared. (Dinges, p. 240.)

Almeda also found his own interrogation reports in this collection, reports that he had earlier been told had been destroyed. This archives origin was traced to police headquarters in the national capitol a short walk from Parliament. Also uncovered at this police station were boxes buried in its courtyard that contained “yellowed and moldy remains of scores of ID cards of political prisoners who had been executed.” All of these documents are now maintained under the custody of the Paraguayan Supreme Court, and efforts are underway to digitize and make available over the Internet thousands of key documents. (Dinges, pp. 236-240. See also, Kornbluh, pp. 334-341.)

While it initially appeared that there would be no form of legal justice meted out in any of the Latin American dictatorships, combinations of political will, preserved archives, living testimony and other investigative methods, such as the exhumation of mass graves, are having a powerful impact on facing the recent past. According to Dinges, by 2004, “human rights prosecutions were reaching a crescendo, resulting in hundreds of extradition petitions, indictments, and imprisonment for many of the military officers who had enjoyed years of court-protected immunity.” The value of the Condor documents discovered in Paraguay was that amnesties granted to human rights violators during democratizing transitions in Latin America covered only those violations that occurred within the perpetrators’ national borders. Hence the cross-border operations of Condor opened up a window for prosecution for crimes committed in other countries. The Condor countries were aggressively systematic in erasing evidence of their activities. According to testimony given to a US Congressional committee by a former Argentine army intelligence officer, days after the formal transition between military rule and democratization, an Argentine military plane containing secret documents was transported to a bank vault in Switzerland. At roughly the same time, author Martin Edwin Andersen, reported being shown orders from the Argentina’s military high command that directed that, in Andersen’s words, “all evidence the secret repression be destroyed.” Fortunately though, Condor partner countries often failed to exercise similar discipline, including extensive intelligence, military, and diplomatic records in the United States, thousands of which have recently become available for the first time. (Dinges, pp. 230-231 and 246-247; Andersen, p. 328.)

As with the issue of historical justice, there remain outstanding questions. What type of “justice” is possible in the contemporary realm? What types of restorative possibilities exist and can exist? What beyond the cultural authority and concrete outcomes of the law can be seen as having a justice dimension? What is lost when we view contemporary justice through a predominantly legal lens? What are the other forms of thinking of justice should we be concerning ourselves with? And how, where, and why should archivists, and especially records managers, position themselves in these struggles? My experience in records management conferences evidences a focus on risk management and records destruction to stave off legal organizational liability. I feel we must open a discussion about the various ethical and moral dimensions to such an orientation.

Archives and Justice: New Professional Approaches?

I want to close with a deeper examination of what the above means for professional theory and practice. Theodore Schellenberg has been a central figure in U.S. archival theory for the past half century, and in some circles he continues to have enormous international import. In 1956 he dramatically concluded his very influential book *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1956) on the capacities and talents of archivists as opposed to what he sees as the shortcomings of historians. Speaking as a proud archivist, I am certain that the following purported archival capacities and talents do not in fact exist, and that the description of historians seems more familiar. Schellenberg concluded that:

Historians may lose their balance, their objectivity, their attitude of suspended judgment, as they often have in times of trouble ... The archivists job at all times [however] is to preserve the evidence, impartially, without taint of political or ideological bias [a]rchivists are the guardians of the truth, or, at least, of the evidence on the basis of which truth can be established. (p. 236.)

Despite its age, I believe Schellenberg’s description of the archival endeavor continues to hold high currency within the profession. Here the archivist is seen as a neutral, non-political, unbiased preserver and custodian of the “truth” of the past. In reality this attitude, while it makes for an ennobling professional rhetoric, is a myth. As the above examples demonstrate, the archives are largely a place of unexamined perceptions and assumptions about its contents and that while maintaining important documents, cannot be in any way construed as fortresses of the “truth.” The history of the political dimensions of recordkeeping and preservation make any such claims completely unsustainable upon close examination.

And the role of professional codes of ethics remains equally problematic as a means for organizing our values. Ethical codes largely provide a bureaucratic insular view of our social responsibilities through their focus on procedure and policy and “professionalism” at the expense of a broader moral calling. For example the recent redraft Society of American Archivists’ Code of Ethics, based on a fear of litigation and under advice from legal counsel, locates the law as an unquestioned social value, stating that “[a]rchivists must uphold all federal, state, and local laws.” But the law can also be a farce used to oppress people in a manner that has absolutely no bearing to morality or justice. A recent text on archival ethics makes a similar point: “[l]aw and ethical courses of action do

sometimes conflict, forcing individuals to make a choice. In doing so, however, it is a matter of personal conscience, and the individual must be prepared to face the consequences of his or her action.” (Benedict, p. 16.)

So then, what might a code of ethics for archivists and records managers that privileges the call to justice look like? I think it has to be based more affirmatively on human morality as our core professional value, and not on what we do and do not do to records from a professional practice orientation or the paramount adherence to the law. This point has been wonderfully amplified by archivist James O’Toole, who has called upon archivists to embrace a broader vision of morality over the narrowing orientation of codes of ethics. Pointing to the widely reported abusive characteristics of East German surveillance files, O’Toole is not content to focus only on the crimes of the state here - it is the recordkeepers themselves who must be called to historical account:

The very existence and nature of the recordkeeping system itself demands scrutiny. The file clerks could perhaps think their actions were morally neutral: after all they were not interrogating suspects or killing them. But they were maintaining the records that permitted such activities, and their complicity is thus more apparent after the fact than it may have been at the time Their culpability may even be greater than otherwise because they could delude themselves into thinking that their own role was not really significant. (O’Toole, p. 17.)

Though there has been some awareness of the issue of archives and justice in the profession – as evidenced by a recent spate of publications and organizing efforts, such as a joint UNESCO and International Council on Archives roundtable on “Archives and Human Rights” and the international entity “Archivists without Borders” – it remains to be seen if such organizing efforts will be bound around traditional practices such as the production of guides on locations of archives documenting human rights abuses, or whether they will substantively engage the processes behind the archives themselves and what their examination can tell us as to our strengths and weaknesses in enabling dimensions of justice. What I am hoping for here, is a more explicit acknowledgement of the politics that shapes all aspects of the archival endeavor, an acknowledgement whose focus is on asking the difficult questions around our responsibilities to humanity, as opposed to listings of professional practice or overriding concern with the prerogatives of power and its ability to leverage real punishment to those who fail to heed its demands.

In a challenging speech to the profession in 2004 from the mantle as President of the Society of American Archivists, Tim Ericson raised key questions along these lines that left many of the participants on their feet clapping wildly and others sitting in their chairs with their arms folded. After tracing the rise and recent dramatic rebirth of the national security secrecy state in the United States, Ericson pleaded with archival educators to “instill on our students an ethic of activism that will start them thinking in proactive terms.” He encouraged established professionals to stay abreast of current affairs and forge “more formal relationships” and ally with activist organizations battling the “culture of secrecy.” On the level of personal responsibility, Ericson pleaded with the profession to “make activism a priority and position ourselves as a profession that really is interested in and knowledgeable about issues such as access to government records and

their value to maintaining our civil liberties.” Ericson called on the profession to not settle for quaint “soft news” stories about our profession’s noble preservation of national heritage, and instead take action to become more visible in the hard news pages on issues of pressing national import. As a means of underscoring this value and demonstrating its potential, he related a story of how a personal email to a reporter on a local dispute on access to internal email of a local county board, fed into a formally published letter in the paper that led to a local radio interview on access to electronic public records to a request for an interview for a feature article on public access to public records. Ericson’s key point is the recognition that “people are interested in these issues [and that] we need to take advantage of that fact and use it to spread our message and weigh in on the side of access to public records.” (Ericson, p. 52.)

I believe that a useful argument can be made on the connection between technically “illegal” leaking of records and archives and the struggle for justice. Leaking has become a fundamental tactic for entering information in the mainstream outside of official, legal, and ethical channels. However, reading any daily newspaper witnesses time and again the mentioning and citation of leaked documents, that I have found provide critical information that oftentimes directly challenges the comfortable and confident stories offered by official spokespersons. It is sometimes through the practice of leaking that society can enter into meaningful discussions about current events.

Conclusion

Ultimately, though, I believe that the connection between archives and justice depends, in part, upon a sharp examination of what types of archives survive, which do not, and why this is the case. It also depends in part on sharp examinations of “document viewing:” Who gets to create, edit, use, withhold, and destroy? And to what effect? Only by looking expansively at the role, biography, and genealogy of the available written historical record and the stories they can tell and, perhaps more significantly, cannot tell, can we assess versions of history based off such sources. We need to better understand when and how and under what conditions the stories held by archives provide extremely poor history and contemplate on what corrective actions are possible.

It is a sad fact that almost all of human history is permanently irretrievable. We may have documents that can shine insights into the past, but the voices of the majority of humanity are lost. That is a loss that cuts at least in two ways – tragic loss of knowledge from “the other” and ability for the heraldic celebratory past to become “the past” and unduly shape the minds of our contemporaries. With the exception of depositions to the Commission of Inquiry, local voices from King Leopold’s Congo colony have been silenced. However, Carolyn Elkins examination of the Mau Mau war offers the restorative value of living oral testimony. After finding the near uselessness of the official archives in tracing the story of the Mau Mau war, Elkins decided to seek out still living witnesses. Along with her research assistant, she conducted oral histories with elderly Kikuyu, assembling some 600 hours of interviews from three hundred ex-detainees and villagers. Essentially what she created was an archive more accurate than the traditionally more valued official archive, a result that should give us pause in contemplating what an archive is and what it might be.

Finally, does or can the concept of justice always imply a concrete result? How does telling more accurate stories about the past help us now? Education? Shaping individuals one at a time? These can lead to a more subtle and not easily identified shifting of attitudes and behaviors of individuals, institutions, and nations.

Public knowledge about both the past and the present are moving targets that are highly mutable. To me, what we believe as individuals, as societies, and as nations is highly contingent on the quality and availability of the information available to us. And it is the control of information - whether that control manifests as destruction, censorship, secrecy, security, privileged access, or preservation - which shapes our collective and individual ideologies that assist us in making sense of the world we all inhabit, though the sense we make can be nonsense.

The control of information enables governments and institutions to “sell” a version of the world to their members, and one of the more salient lessons of history informs us that we should be very careful about what we choose to “buy” from the vendors of “reality” and “truth,” as these vendors frequently offer what author Thomas Powers called a “child’s history” of the world. (Powers, p. 6.)

Access to information is fundamental to forming a deeper, more meaningful, and more accurate understanding of our world, leading to the changing of minds, of values, and hopefully, structures of domination. That to me would be a justice I would like to see archives more openly and aggressively for.

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