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# The virtual stampede for Africa: digitisation, postcoloniality and archives of the liberation struggles in Southern Africa<sup>i</sup>

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## Abstract

*This article presents a polemical argument for a politics of digitisation that aims to politicise the archival disciplines while making sense of the conjuncture in which digitisation initiatives are mooted in Southern Africa. It argues for a blurring of the work of archivist and historian in reconstituting the archive of the liberation struggle. It alters the paradigmatic frameworks of the Cold War that have hitherto defined the structure of the archive. The article provisionally anticipates the trajectories of a politics of digitisation, while complicating our notion of information by tracking its emergence in colonialism and the restrictive paradigms of the Cold War. Calling for a constitution of the archive that undercuts both colonial precedents and Cold War paradigms, it argues for a politics of digitisation that will expand what can be said about the history of liberation struggles in Southern Africa by redefining the meaning of the postcolonial. The realignment is intended to provoke new conceptualisations of globalisation and the archive in the postcolony.*

The transformation of “archivistic” activity is the point of departure and the condition for a new history.<sup>ii</sup>

A striking feature of post-apartheid South Africa is the ever-expanding debate about the re-composition and refiguring of the archive.<sup>iii</sup> In the attempts to stage such a shift, the status of the archive has emerged as a source of uncertainty. In some instances it is perceived as a site of retrieval and representation, in others

as a site of power and in others it is viewed as a site where the production of history is already underway. The debate has been conducted in public and academic settings, in scholarly publications and postgraduate seminars, in institutions of public culture and in relation to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Each instance of founding a post-apartheid public sphere, it seems, is dependent on the ability to step out of the shadows of preceding conceptions of the archive and the governmentality forms it upheld. Apartheid affirmed the idea that the archive was not merely a storehouse of documents but an apparatus placed in the service of racial subjection. Emerging from apartheid's power, the question of refiguring the archive is equally a question of exceeding its normative definitions. In order to achieve this we may have to forego the notion of the archive as a prosthetic device of power and constellate its activity around the radical singularity of an event. By singularity of event I mean the ability to break with the referential frame of power that dominates our conception of, and approaches to, the archive.

This perspective is sorely absent in areas where new archives are taking shape, not least in areas of digital technology. A case in point is a project mooted by Digital Imaging South African (DISA) and the Killie Campbell Library at the University of KwaZulu-Natal to create a digital online resource of archival materials related to the struggle for liberation in South Africa. Backed by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, DISA seeks to complement a first phase on digitising journals relating to the liberation struggle in South Africa. The digital initiative had also expanded to include a regional focus on liberation struggles in Southern Africa, with the larger regional focus being funded and driven by a United States (US) partner, Aluka.<sup>iv</sup> In the process of its expansion the project has increasingly become more oblivious of the contestations surrounding the archive in South and indeed, Southern Africa. DISA-Aluka seems to unimaginatively and aimlessly trudge along reproducing notions of the archive as storehouse even when the materials of its archival construction demand to be treated differently, in the direction of breaking up the investments of the archive in the exercise of modern power.

Most digital initiatives have missed an opportunity of engaging the problematic of the archive that reflects the mounting debates that have unfolded in South Africa about the politics of collecting. Similarly too, many university administrations have allied with international foundations to displace notions of effective knowledge with commodified notions of information and empty phrases about research excellence. The well worn categories for selecting materials on the liberation struggle and their reference to normative metanarratives that once provided for the politically constraining choices made available by the Cold War, threaten to flatten the debate on the archive while helping to manufacture the paralysis that might ensue from the much spoken

about crisis of history.<sup>v</sup> The discussion about digitisation requires a different intellectual input that may offer the potential to extend the ongoing debate about the archive and its place in society. A meeting of scholars, archivists and public historians in February 2004 in Durban to discuss and solicit participation in the second phase of DISA generated debate about the digital archives. There were expressions of concern for intellectual property, protection of national heritage and discussion about the consequences for research and pedagogy. Amidst the criticism, there was also support expressed based on a view that a digital resource of archival documents would help to reconstitute serious scholarly investigations into the regional dynamics of the liberation struggles of Southern Africa. While interest in the project varied at the first consultative meeting there was tacit acceptance that the project had to be driven by Southern African intellectual priorities, that it had to avoid the pitfalls of earlier initiatives where the wholesale digitisation of South African collections was based on US need and interests, and that the project should lend itself to expanding what could be said about the history of liberation struggles.

Much has transpired since that first 2004 meeting in Durban. The joint DISA-Aluka project has reflected on its own project through workshops on intellectual property, through inviting scholars to participate in selecting documents related to themes of its broad outlines and understandings of the history of liberation struggles. There has been a meeting of African Studies librarians, US-based foundations, scholars and members of DISA-Aluka at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, there has been a consultative meeting with senior members of the African National Congress (ANC) concerning the digitisation initiative, meetings with respective national committees throughout Southern Africa, and the question of digital archives has been taken up by the National Heritage Council (NHC) which convened a national process of consultation on various digitisation projects underway in South Africa.<sup>vi</sup> The South African based NHC is keen to develop policy on digital initiatives especially as these affect national heritage resources in South Africa. Its engagement flows from the seeming proliferation of projects which include the DISA-Aluka project, ANC-University of Connecticut project, the plants project convened in association with the Kirstenbosch based South African National Biodiversity Institute and Aluka, the Desmond Tutu initiative involving Kings College in London, the University of Witwatersrand and the University of the Western Cape, the Cultural Sites project of Aluka and the University of Cape Town, the Towards a New Age of Partnership (TANAP) project on the Dutch East India Company records, and the Michigan State University project on digitising video resources. Yet, in all the deliberations, legal and otherwise, the question of the relation of the proposed digital archive to the demand for expanding what can be said about the history of liberation struggles has been completely ignored.

The aim of this article is to raise the stakes of the discussion on digital archives by rearticulating the intellectual challenge that confronts us in the wake of the growing dependence of knowledge on technology. Specifically, I am interested in digital technologies as they affect mainly historical and political archives in and of Southern Africa. My argument is that we should not presuppose a politics of digitisation, either entirely in terms of notions of political economy or exclusively on the grounds of an ethical predisposition that leans towards the judgments of good and evil. The question of digital archives should not be surrendered to the terms of nationalism or to the presumed inevitability that underlie narratives of globalisation. Rather, the question of digital archives should be located in the frameworks of knowledge production, which for me is an effort to displace specific narratives of constraint that inhibit theorisation of the postcolonial predicament. In short, I ask for a re-examination of the intersections of knowledge and power by addressing the question of technology.

The creation of digital archives should therefore simultaneously be broached as a question of technology and epistemology. In the process, some care must be taken not to make a fetish of technology for fear, as Theodor Adorno hauntingly put it, of “a world where technology occupies such a key position as it does nowadays [that it] produces technological people, who are attuned to technology.”<sup>vii</sup> In clarifying this statement, Adorno suggests that

it is by no means clear precisely how the fetishisation of technology establishes itself within the individual psychology of particular people, or where the threshold lies between a rational relationship to technology and the overvaluation that finally leads to the point where one who cleverly devises a train system that brings the victims to Auschwitz as quickly and smoothly as possible forgets about what happens to them there.”<sup>viii</sup>

He concludes that “with this type, who tends to fetishise technology, we are concerned, baldly put, with people who cannot love.”<sup>ix</sup> There is a tacit reminder in this of Adorno’s deep-seated concern for how the effects of technology limit practices of representation in an essay titled “After Auschwitz”, which Bill Readings summarises as follows:

In ‘After Auschwitz’, Adorno says of the application of conceptual cognitive representations to the event of the Holocaust, “If thought is not measured by the extremity that eludes the concept, it is from the outset in the nature of the musical accompaniment with which the SS liked to drown out the screams of its victims” (Adorno, 1973: 365). To make the Holocaust a concept rather than a name, to claim that the death camps could be the object of a cognition, a representation by concepts, is to drown out the screams of its victims. After Auschwitz, history is no longer a rational unfolding. The summit of reason, order,

administration, is also the summit of terror. Calculation and accounting encounter the mathematical sublime of railway timetables and of genocide at the same time. If history could remember the Holocaust adequately, we would have forgotten its horror. It is an ethical necessity that the Holocaust haunt us, that it cannot be remembered but cannot be forgotten. The event must be immemorial.<sup>x</sup>

One can only hope that someday the same standards of memory would apply to the violence that engulfed Southern Africa during the Cold War in the name of apartheid. For now, suffice to say that in the work of the Frankfurt School we find not merely the concern with representation but also the tendency to view technology as mere mediation and therefore as a separable agency. Technology, Adorno reminds us, has a much more proximate relation to violence. What he does not tell us is that its proximity is equally prevalent in the knowledge/power nexus that Michel Foucault<sup>xi</sup> later opened to critical scrutiny.

Generally speaking, the rise of computer technology has generated a fair amount of skepticism about its relation to radically altering the human condition. Many would say that if globalisation were anything to go by, that it has facilitated the intensification of capitalist exploitation of the periphery far more than alleviated its burden. Neil Postman, for example, cites David Riesman's caution against over-emphasising the changes wrought by computer technology. For Riesman "computer technology has not yet come close to the printing press in its power to generate radical and substantive social, political and religious thought."<sup>xii</sup> Riesman argues that if the printing press was the gunpowder of the mind, the computer, in its capacity to smooth over unsatisfactory institutions and ideas, is the talcum powder of the mind.<sup>xiii</sup> Read alongside the Frankfurt School, we might be called on to rethink the realignments underway with the introduction of computer technology, especially as it places otherwise fragile institutions beyond the pale of criticism. This might mean taking up a critical position in relation to the intrusion of technology into the arena's of knowledge production and the African university more generally.

A critical model that addresses the relation between technology and knowledge should proceed with the troubling uncertainty, suspicion and concern that currently surround many digitisation projects in Africa. Often these sentiments are expressed in safer terms of intellectual property rights agreements, copyright issues, ownership, the sustainability of local institutions and related practical considerations of archival capacities and priorities. These are, of course, crucial matters although their pre-eminence in discussions about digitisation suggests a lack of prior political foresight and thought in participating in digitisation initiatives. The disjuncture between archival consideration and epistemological conditions has resulted in arguably fraught approaches to digitisation which hamper what might otherwise be an intellectually productive and necessary

discussion about the archive in general. One consequence of the drift towards a legalistic framework to deal with the challenges of digitisation is the neglect of the larger questions about knowledge necessitated and enabled by digitisation. We should not be entirely surprised by the concerns expressed about digitisation projects though. Postman makes the insightful comment that “it is not always clear, at least in technology’s intrusion into a culture, who will gain most by it and who will lose most.”<sup>xiv</sup> Others like Paul Virilio encourage us to understand the change wrought by computerisation without, in the process, being bound to an ideological approach.<sup>xv</sup> Virilio also argues forcefully that an emergent techno-science is wrecking the scholarly resources of all knowledge.<sup>xvi</sup>

How do we forge a politics of digitisation, one that is scrupulous about the histories, intellectual currents, conceptual developments and institutional dynamics that help to define the conjuncture of globalisation? To answer this question we may have to consider both the conjuncture of globalisation in which these projects emerge and also the pasts that give rise to a particular reading of that conjuncture. If the first is merely speculative in terms of the potential effects of digitisation on archiving, it nevertheless, I wish to argue, connects to the history of the archive in Southern Africa. That history is increasingly marked by the experiences of colonialism, apartheid and the Cold War, all of which were subject to competing theories of change that, incidentally, have not materialised in post-independence Southern Africa. In other words, the concern surrounding digitisation initiatives expressed through legal notions of intellectual property, copyright, and national heritage may have less to do with a sense of cultural sovereignty than with the effects of globalisation and its historical precedents in Southern Africa.

## The archive of globalisation

Most Southern African digitisation projects have targeted documents related to the history of liberation struggles. Given this emphasis it is not surprising that digitisation initiatives have been so contested. The reasons, while couched in terms of intellectual property, national heritage and the political economy of digitisation have not sufficiently acknowledged that the sources of contestation are also increasingly embedded in the Cold War narratives which the documentary traces of the liberation struggles bring to the fore. Rather than thinking of digitisation in terms of loss of cultural property we might think of it in terms of the more severe consequences of the overlap of disciplinary knowledge and technology, that is concerns about ownership, intellectual property and political economy while critical, need to be coupled with an understanding of the consequences of the overlap of knowledge and technology.

One possible consequence of the digitisation of African materials that is filtered through critical understandings of globalisation discourses is that it will probably perpetuate the unequal relations between the global North and South. Good intentions notwithstanding, we will perhaps see the rise of vast *technopolies* with powerful resource concentrations that, in our case, will continue to make Africans consumers of knowledge rather than producers of knowledge.<sup>xvii</sup> This is probably what is implied by the phrase the commodification of information. Already, we are faced with a situation where the bulk of publishing on Africa is based in Europe and North America, placing the published material outside the reach of a general reading public. As a consequence we continue to experience expanding levels of illiteracy, high university dropout rates, not to mention creeping mediocrity that is having an adverse impact on the formation of a viable and dynamic public sphere in Southern Africa. This has been the forfeited promise of modern Southern African nationalisms as they increasingly set out to meet the demands of the apparatus of global governance.

Digitisation may also have very specific consequences for the formation of public spheres in post-independence societies. Pierre Bourdieu warns us that one of the effects of globalisation, and by extension the technologisation of knowledge, is increasing depoliticisation of society.<sup>xviii</sup> The depoliticising effects of globalisation tend to limit our conception of digitisation projects to technical matters of preservation and access. However, since several digitisation projects have mainly targeted politically charged collections, this very move is already indelibly politicised. I argue for a mobilisation of these political effects in the interests of expanding what can be said about the histories of liberation struggles. It is not enough to dwell on how the liberation struggles were won, but also on their outcomes, their relations to global processes of the Cold War and newer arrangements of global hegemony, their complex conceptual points of departure in the racial premises of the modern state and their general failure to finish the critique of colonialism. Not only will this hopefully resonate in the domain of intellectual production but it may also open up the mediations of technology in knowledge production to scrutiny and criticism.

Historical considerations, as also debates about history in Southern Africa, have been surprisingly absent among the many concerns expressed about digitisation initiatives, even when these digital archives are predominantly concerned with history. Cursorily, it is interesting that the matter of digitisation should be undertaken without considering how the end of the Cold War entrenched views about capitalism that, in its more recent manifestations, signaled an idea of *exchange* as a universal language. Alongside this, a normative discourse has emerged that is premised on a hegemonic world order constructed on the basis of consumption (in archival terms, access), not production. In the various

scenarios of digitisation, these are the tropes shared by purveyors and opponents of the use of digital technology and resources in education. What is elided in the ascending orders of hegemonic discourse, and we might say, the totalising narrative of Empire, is the element of production by which capitalist relations were once known, comprehended and challenged.

A further elision that results from avoiding historical considerations, is that digitisation may in fact be harnessing nascent nationalist tendencies by making available to embattled states the instruments of legitimation. This is an expression of an elite discourse against which many scholars continue to struggle. The resultant optimism surrounding the archive in normalising power in one instance produces a corresponding anxiety about its function as a technology of state in another. Combined with the technological advantages of cyberspace many, and here I include myself, worry about the further instrumentalisation of the state. The focus on the history of liberation struggles recasts some well worn binaries of domination and resistance that fail to take into account the problem of subalternity in contemporary Southern Africa. Monopolies over histories of liberation struggles and access to liberation archives highlight the increasing fragility of states as they become more bureaucratised under the pressures of globalisation. It is necessary to inquire into the relationship of technology, elite formations and the instrumentalisation of politics in Southern Africa as these are put in the service of state projects.

Finally, digitisation also accompanies a growing fear that academic production is being skewed in favour of the wealthy institutions of the global North where scholarship on Southern African does little to enhance the critical debates, as also public debates, about postcolonial social formations. This neglect is supported by the rabid anti-intellectualism taking root in Southern Africa and the transformation of universities into conduits of state developmental goals. This must not be misconstrued as an argument about the banal concepts of insider/outsider knowledges. Rather it is a reminder that the location of intellectual production is a crucial factor in how many African states respond to academic criticism. Given the ways in which digitisation projects are negotiated at an institutional level rather than as part of academic debate, many projects sharpen an already problematic division of intellectual labour. It is interesting that the DISA-Aluka project was initiated through an agreement with an archive at the University of KwaZulu-Natal before involving academics in a selection process. In this sense, academic input was largely restricted to doing the spade-work even though many South African academics were deeply engaged in a discussion about the future and public status of archives at the time.

These scenarios hinge on a more fundamental discrepancy at the heart of the archive. It relates to the way the archive is folded into the complicities of

knowledge as a necessary condition for colonialism and later, during the Cold War, apartheid. In Southern Africa, the constitutive relations of power and the further exercise of that power was founded and enabled by a vast disciplinary apparatus. Since the nineteenth century, and in some instances much earlier, vast archives of discipline and punishment paint a harrowing picture of the complicity of knowledge in achieving social subjection. The archive was never far from the needs of colonialism. Scholars such as Anne Stoler direct our attention to ways in which knowledge was placed in the service of colonial governmentality.<sup>xix</sup> In another phrasing of this complicity, Clifton Crais speaks of ethnographies of the state to demonstrate the proximity of knowledge to power in his book, *The Politics of Evil*.<sup>xx</sup> My own work has shown how modes of evidence of the nineteenth century colonial archive are fundamental to the task of finishing the critique of apartheid.<sup>xxi</sup> Crucial to this interdependency between knowledge and the exercise of power that permeates the work of many scholars is a sense of an emergent practice of collecting “native life”.

Missionaries, colonial administrators, ethnographers, travellers and geographers combined to produce a vast network of knowledge that today form the outlines of state archives. Knowledge was a precondition for colonial governmentality; not only placed in the service of colonial governmentality as Stoler suggests. The claim is not altogether original – its traces can be discerned in the works of both Valentine Mudimbe’s *The Invention of Africa*<sup>xxii</sup> and Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.<sup>xxiii</sup> It has since become the stock of a considerable scholarly writing on Africa, Latin America and Asia. Unfortunately, what neither Mudimbe nor Said elaborate on is the technologisation of knowledge and its subsequent packaging and circulation as information. There is a crucial question that connects the earlier discourses on the colonial archive with the more recent phase of the rise of an information economy. Whereas in Europe, knowledge of these distant places of empire functioned to normalise power, in the distant places themselves it served to intensify its grip on the subject. Archives function very directly to define and sustain the relative intensities of the exercise of power. When Verne Harris, Sello Hatang, Michele Pickover and others speak of the archive as always being about power, I suspect they are not necessarily all registering the same level of disquiet. It is important to bear this in mind when we proceed with our deliberations about the politics of digitising African archival resources, especially given the competing configurations of power in discussions of archives. However, there is a tacit agreement that the connections of archive and power shift our very conception of archives. We are not merely dealing with repositories of raw material or storehouses of information. Given this long-standing and imbricated relation of knowledge, archive and power, digitisation should not be seen as merely subtractive or additive, or even developmental for that matter. The introduction of digital technology into the realm of archives generates total change to an entire system – its effects are what

Neil Postman<sup>xxiv</sup> calls ecological. The conceptualisation of the archive is now increasingly up for grabs, and digitising initiatives are seemingly intensifying the contests over the redefinition of the archive. To contest it in the interest of averting the normative narratives of power it may help to explore how to align the process of crafting a politics out of digitisation with a reorientation currently taking place in the field of knowledge production.

## Colonial precedents and Cold War constraints

A major consideration in the question of the archive in Southern Africa is its relation to the modular form of the colonial archive. The colonial archive reflects a particular mode of evidence that is a consequence of the rise of new disciplines in the nineteenth century and the requirements of Empire.<sup>xxv</sup> Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Edward Said described the specialised disciplines that arose in the nineteenth century in which “the human subject was first collapsed into swarming detail, then accumulated and assimilated by sciences designed to make the detail functional and docile”.<sup>xxvi</sup> Said points out that from these disciplines evolved a diffuse administrative apparatus for maintaining order and opportunities for study. The emergence of the archive in Southern Africa did not only emerge with the rise of new disciplines, but also power. In Southern Africa, the conditions of conquest were propelled by the will to know and the will to power.

Nationalist historiography was an effort at reversing and displacing the claims built on the basis of the colonial archive, but not under conditions of nationalism’s own making. The rise of segregation and apartheid in South Africa, the struggle for independence in Southern Africa and the ideological parameters of the Cold War all gave new meaning to nationalist agendas of recuperating pasts trampled over by the needs of colonial domination. This was not a case of history repeating itself first as tragedy, then as proverbial farce. Rather, it was a case of nationalism’s overt concentration on underdevelopment at the expense of a critique of the disciplinary techniques that functioned as the condition for underdevelopment. For the purposes of the present discussion, I want to argue that nationalism, in its effort at dislodging the primacy of the colonial script, proceeded to work within the script of the Cold War. The regional experience of apartheid and opposition to it were produced under conditions of constraint of Cold War ideologies and their reliance on technologies of domination.

In targeting the history of liberation struggles in Southern Africa, many digitisation initiatives may be leading us back into the impasse in which nationalism found itself by unwittingly perhaps reproducing instrumentalised

notions of technology. The probability arises as the records of liberation struggles are increasingly treated as information related to the late twentieth century and not as responses to a longer history of colonialism and its aftermaths in Africa. It fails to see in the documents of the liberation struggles the discourses that are essentially vehicles of Cold War ideologies. The inheritance of this Cold War script is indeed of considerable human consequence and a key factor in making the postcolony barely livable. Achille Mbembe has described what we are up against in disconcerting terms:

In the framework of the strategic ghetto that Africa has become in the aftermath of the Cold War, another more basic spatial arrangement and another geopolitical situation are currently taking form. Three processes separated in time but complementary in their effects are involved in this development. First, the processes currently underway are situated within the major ongoing movements of destroying and reconstituting the nineteenth century state. Sometimes they occur in precisely the spaces as they did in the last century. On another level, dynamics that were introduced by colonisation and essentially continued by the independent regimes are grafted onto these processes. Through the mediation of war and the collapse of projects of democratisation, this interlacing of dynamics and temporalities leads to the 'exit of the state.' It promotes the emergence of technologies of domination based on forms of private indirect government, which have as their function the constitution of new systems of property and new bases of social stratification.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Mbembe's assessment implicitly requires us to think our way out of this impasse. His formidable phrase "technologies of domination" echoes Adorno's caution. Globalisation has not merely meant the corporatisation of institutions in Southern Africa, but the point at which a sense of hyper-disciplinarity is produced. This sense of hyper-disciplinarity is itself a hangover of the Cold War and entails a growing convergence of discipline and technology. Under these conditions, it is necessary to guard against adding to a heightened sense of disciplinarity that extends its grip on the subaltern subject or results in an intensification of the subaltern effect.

The archives of the liberation struggle in Southern Africa are enabled by the narratives of the Cold War, not only in terms of their theories of change, but also in terms of their motivations, strategies and tactics. The tonalities of intrigue, fear, torture, surveillance and reporting, coupled with arguments about struggles against colonialism and apartheid in Southern Africa, are central features of these narratives. Nationalism in Southern Africa was indelibly marked by the paradigmatic choices made available by the Cold War, even as the end of the Cold War helped to erode the grounds for maintaining the tyranny of apartheid. We might say that since 1990, Cold War narratives are now in jeopardy, deeply

suspected for their incredulity: failed promises of change on the one hand and a trail of death and destruction left in the aftermath of apartheid which has placed Southern African nationalisms in a compromised position. How, under this inheritance, might we constitute an archival event that exceeds these limitations even as it erodes the last vestiges of the prevailing discourses of the Cold War as determinate frameworks for Southern African nationalisms? Put simply, how are we to constitute the archive of the liberation struggles in Southern African when the Cold War narratives that function as their condition of possibility, increasingly lack legitimacy?

The incommensurability between Cold War narratives and the promise of postcolonial futures resembles the sentiment expressed in Jean Francois Lyotard's phrase, "incredulity towards metanarratives".<sup>xxviii</sup> Digital archives of the liberation struggle seem to have run up against a similar breakup of metanarratives. The digitisation of the archive would be compelled not to repeat the logic, terms and concepts specific to the Cold War. And it will have to do this by breaking down the extreme reliance on positivism and reinstalling the place of narrative (if we accept Lyotard's argument) in the domain of the archive. In other words, the creation of digital archives of liberation struggles under conditions which specify the incredulity of metanarratives would have to surrender attachments to ideas of informatics for a more nuanced understanding of an archive if it is to avoid Cold War prescriptions. The archive in this conception is neither a scene of communication in the Habermasian sense<sup>xxix</sup> nor a storehouse, but a place which hosts language games necessary for clearing the space and helping us find ways out of an impasse.

If the constitution of digital archives on the history of liberation struggles in Southern Africa potentially fractures the foundational fictions of the Cold War, how might such digitisation projects dealing with the evidentiary base of liberation struggles remain attuned to the processes described by Mbembe? How, in other words, might it opt out of this sorry story of the rise of "technologies of domination"? The promises of emancipation have, it seems, generally folded into expressions of nationalism, nativism, and the slippage into the regulations of the market and the discourses of global governance. The history of liberation struggles has been unmoored from their respective universal bearings and globalisation has proven to be a detrimental if not virulent substitute.<sup>xxx</sup> By asking for an expansion of what can be said about the history of liberation struggles I am asking for a reflection both on the break-up of its Cold War dependencies and for a critique of its more recent normalisation in the wake of the Cold War. The conditions of possibility for this, I suggest, lie in the way in which the notion of the event has undergone something of a change in the discourse of history. The archive of the liberation struggle may need to be formed around this renewed concept of the event.

## The archive as postcolonial event

The Cold War conditions in which struggles against apartheid unfolded in Southern Africa requires us to rethink both what we mean by the event of history and how the archive might organise itself around such a renewed concept. Herein lies the epistemological potential of digitisation, which might both shed light on the conditions of constraint and allow for the emergence of a concept of postcoloniality. Stated differently, we might say that a reformulated concept of event may provisionally be called postcolonial because as it unravels the structures of domination it anticipates the conditions necessary for the struggles ahead. Mostly though, the designation postcolonial is an allusion to the tasks of setting to work on colonial conditions of knowledge that continue to haunt the frameworks of knowledge.

Historians of Africa have found that the question of the archive in contemporary Africa activates the tensions that once defined the struggle against different forms of domination. The archive is a network of knowledge and power that is fraught with political difficulty, caught between a public sphere struggling to come into its own and nation-states bounded by discourses of development, national identity, and political legitimacy. The politicisation of the archive and its social meaning is derived not simply from the conditions of political conflict that it aspires to communicate as an institution, but by the demands that historians and the discipline of history more generally make on an archive. The inversion of perspective is of profound consequence in particular in South Africa, where the creation of a post-apartheid archive converges with the need for rewriting national history. Historians of Africa, who seek out the continent's post-colonial or post-apartheid futures, understand that the archive cannot merely be approached as a storehouse of historical raw materials: in post-colonial Africa, the archive is the site where the politics of history is rendered meaningful and effective. This much was alluded to in a footnote to a recent article on the Aluka project:

The image of a historian mining the archive at the beginning of writing therefore requires serious revision. What is equally critical is the form that the recomposition of the archive takes and the quality of historical narration it supports, against the power of inherited orthodoxies, when the historian is unexpectedly unmasked as the new archivist. The modalities of collecting that serve as the foundation of an archive of cadastral prose – of official documents relating to institutions of power – with its obligations to the state, or one that privileges a sense of history as hagiography, no longer adequately serve to answer the demands made on the archive by the public sphere. The question that emerges in the aftermath of the decentering of the archive as state institution is how the archive might work as a

public institution – as a space, not of authority, but of democratic debate. By this statement, we do not merely mean to ask how the archive can be made more accessible, or how we might expand its purview to include the perspectives of those who are marked by a prior exclusion: we seek to understand how the reconfiguring of the archive is the point at which a postcolonial history might surpass the limitations of official histories. The question of digitisation has to come to terms with the discussion of the archive that has emerged in histories of the struggles against colonialism.<sup>xxx</sup>

The frameworks for researching histories of liberation struggles in the aftermath of the Cold War cannot be limited to a choice of either national or global. More appropriately in my view, we should think of frameworks that allow the local and the global to bring each other to a crisis. It is here, I believe, that we should plant the seeds for a politics of digitisation, in the midst of an aporia that may activate new intellectual directions through which to understand the contemporary world. This would mean making the promise by the Aluka project, to overcome the colonial and Cold War imprints on the archive, the facilitating point for imagining different relations of knowledge production.

Two scenarios may better help to underscore the historical frameworks in which discussions of digitisation are taking place. At one level, the digitisation of the archive approximates, however inadequately, what print capitalism was for the rise of the imagined communities of which Benedict Anderson speaks. In his argument, the novel, newspaper, census and map created a sphere of unbounded seriality that promoted the replication of the nation form throughout the world.<sup>xxxii</sup> The nation was imagined through the fundamental technological developments in print capitalism. The Internet and new digital technologies have the potential to perform the function that print capitalism once did. It can create endless possibilities for invention, or in Anderson's terms, for unbounded serialities.

At another level, the potentialities of digitisation are confronted with the increasing marginalisation of the political re-imaginings in a world bifurcated by the processes of globalisation. This second option for thinking about digitisation is perhaps best summed up in a response to the endless productivity assigned to the rise of print capitalism by Benedict Anderson. In considering the proposition of a modular form of nationalism, Partha Chatterjee, a political scientist of South Asia, posed what I think is the most serious challenge to Anderson's discussion of the serialisation of nation.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Chatterjee wondered what was left to the imagination of the third world if the nation was said to be founded on the modular form of print capitalism. Chatterjee was not however asking us to think of this other imagination of the third world as merely different from that of the west. He is too savvy to argue such a naïve position. Rather, he was asking why

it was that if third world nationalism was made up of the same resources of the west, the third world nevertheless always appeared as a failed example of theories of change. Speaking from within the politics of despair, Chatterjee was perhaps pointing out that nationalism appears to have failed to overturn the epistemic conditions that once gave colonialism its motive and subsequently sustained its effects.

Two critical matters flow from this unfortunately truncated outline of the debate between Anderson and Chatterjee. On the one hand, the discussion on technology and society has not sufficiently taken root in Southern Africa even as many higher education institutions have pursued international partnerships and grants to digitise archives. The decisions have been driven almost entirely by technological considerations at the expense of academic debates currently unfolding in South Africa. Digitisation seems to be the new-found developmental project of the African university, even though in South Africa, they are based at the wealthiest and most resourced institutions (which, in my view, were also least consequential in overcoming apartheid).

On the other hand, there is in Chatterjee's response a warning to anticipate a return of the same for those who are constituted, in Fanon's famous words, as "the wretched of the earth."<sup>xxxiv</sup> It is a reminder, that for many, the postcolonial is becoming simply unlivable. The unlivable postcolonial predicament calls for an astute sense of politics coupled with a sensibility and responsibility not to constitute *technopolies* in the name of an already long and bitter struggle. That would be tantamount to drowning out the screams and making us forget the horror. In Chatterjee we might also read the echoes of a plea not to replicate the modalities of the colonial archive by which some of us are returned again and again to the position of the margin, to the subordinate proposition of the statement. There is a need in archival disciplines to instead return the technological to a subordinate position to the epistemological and political. The only helpful digitisation projects in Africa then, are those that self-consciously generate debate about *our* modernity, the ways in which Africa's marginality is reinscribed sometimes by using the very same resources of knowledge and technology to escape its predicament. Most importantly, the digitisation of African materials should not be aimed at creating minority discourses in the US or even multicultural syntheses that are eventually returned to Africa for consumption. Both are highly flawed discourses. Instead, they should clear the space for an investigation of *our* modernity, which daily harbours potential to produce mangled bodies and devastation. And in turn, they should leave behind some resources to re-imagine ourselves in light of such an abject script. This would require a greater blurring of the distinction between archivist and historian, perhaps so that we may be better placed to expand what can be said about the history of liberation struggles.

## Endnotes

<sup>i</sup> An earlier version of the present paper was presented at the Centre for Humanities Research, Contemporary History and Humanities Seminar, University of the Western Cape in September 2006 and the South African Historical Archives conference, Johannesburg, 16-18 November 2006. The paper was subsequently adapted for the workshop on archives hosted by the Centre for the Study of Public Scholarship at Emory University, 9 April 2007. I am grateful to all who commented on the paper in its various forms.

<sup>ii</sup> Michel De Certeau, *The Writing of History*, translated by Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 75.

<sup>iii</sup> See the essays contained in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh, eds. *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002).

<sup>iv</sup> For a further discussion on the DISA-Aluka project, see Allen Isaacman, Premesh Lalu and Tom Nygren, "Digitisation, History, and the Making of a Postcolonial Archive of Southern African Liberation Struggles: the Aluka Project," *Africa Today* 52, 2 (2005): 55-77.

<sup>v</sup> Christopher Saunders and Cynthia Kros, "Conversations with Historians," *South African Historical Journal*, 51 (2004): 17.

<sup>vi</sup> For a fuller continent-wide survey of digitisation and its consequences see Peter Limb, "The Digitisation of Africa," *Africa Today* 52, 2 (2005): 3-19.

<sup>vii</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, translated by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 200. See also Joseph Masco, "Nuclear Technoaesthetics: Sensory Politics from Trinity to the Virtual Bomb in Los Alamos," *American Ethnologist* 31, 3 (2004): 349-373.

<sup>viii</sup> Adorno, p. 200.

<sup>ix</sup> Adorno, p. 200.

<sup>x</sup> Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (London, New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 22.

<sup>xi</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 23.

<sup>xii</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 117. The interest here is in Postman's sense of the limits of technology.

<sup>xiii</sup> Postman, p. 117.

<sup>xiv</sup> Postman, p. 12.

<sup>xv</sup> Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, translated by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 2005), p. 8.

<sup>xvi</sup> Virilio, p. 2.

<sup>xvii</sup> The term "technopolies" belongs to Neil Postman.

<sup>xviii</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Firing Back: Against the Tyranny of the Market*, translated by Loïc Wacquant (New York, London: New Press, 2001), p. 38.

<sup>xix</sup> Anne Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form," in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, Razia Saleh, eds. *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002).

<sup>xx</sup> Clifton Crais, *The Politics of Evil* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>xxi</sup> See Premesh Lalu, *In the Event of History: On the Postcolonial Critique of Apartheid* [Manuscript in preparation].

<sup>xxii</sup> Valentine Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1978).

<sup>xxiv</sup> Neil Postman, *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).

<sup>xxv</sup> See Premesh Lalu, *In the Event of History: On the Postcolonial Critique of Apartheid* [Manuscript in preparation].

<sup>xxvi</sup> Edward Said, "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions", *Critical Inquiry* 4, 4 (1978): 710.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Achille Mbembe, "At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality and Sovereignty in Africa," in Arjun Appadurai, ed. *Globalisation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), p. 39.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>xxix</sup> Jurgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987).

<sup>xxx</sup> Lyotard addresses a similar question in relation to the labour movement. "Its theoretical movement," he argues, "meant of course that the class struggle did not derive its legitimacy from local popular or working-class traditions, but from an idea that was to be realised: the idea of the worker emancipated from the proletarian condition. But the International broke up over the Alsace-Lorraine question and in 1914 both French and German socialists voted war credits in their respective countries. By beginning the construction of socialism in one country and by abolishing the Comintern, Stalinism openly ratifies the superiority of national proper names over the universal name of the 'soviets'. The rise of independence movements after the Second World War and the recognition of new national names seem to indicate a strengthening of local legitimacies and the disappearance of any prospect of universal emancipation. Newly independent governments enter the sphere of influence of either the capitalist market or Stalinist-style political apparatus, and the 'leftists' who were fighting for universal emancipation are eliminated without mercy. ...The world market is not creating a universal history in modernity's sense of that term." Andrew Benjamin, ed. *The Lyotard Reader* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 322.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Allen Isaacman, Tom Nygren and Premesh Lalu, "Digitisation, History, and the Making of a Postcolonial Archive of Southern African Liberation Movements: The Aluka Project", *Africa Today* 52,2 (2005): 77.

<sup>xxxii</sup> See Benedict Anderson, *The Specter of Comparison* (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993); *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), p. 3.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1968).