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*Living the Legacy*

**MEMORY FOR JUSTICE**

**REPORT ON A COLLOQUIUM**

**18 August 2005**

**The event**

On 18 August 2005 the Nelson Mandela Foundation hosted a colloquium dedicated to exploring the theme of “Memory for Justice”. Nearly 100 participants representing more than 30 institutions attended (see Appendix 1). Colloquium activities were grouped around four sessions (see Appendix 2):

- Introduction by Nkosinathi Biko (Founder and Executive Director of the Steve Biko Foundation). Mr. Biko’s presentation focused on memory as a powerful catalyst for social change.
- Keynote session addresses by international speakers David A. Wallace (Visiting Assistant Professor, Catholic University of America) and Gudmund Valderhaug (Director of Strategy and Planning, Norwegian Archive, Library and Museum Authority). Dr. Wallace’s address focused on the role of archivists in striving for historical and contemporary justice. Mr. Valderhaug’s address focused on the social power exercised by archivists, and identified systemic shortcomings in archival user services.
- Panel discussion on the South African terrain, which examined South African experiences of memory construction in the wake of the apartheid era. The panel was chaired by Sibongiseni Mkhize (Director, Market Theatre) and comprised five South Africans:
  - Graham Dominy (National Archivist, National Archives of South Africa);
  - Sello Hatang (Director, Promotion of Access to Information Act Unit, Human Rights Commission);

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- Anthea Josias (Senior Project Officer, Centre of Memory and Commemoration, Nelson Mandela Foundation);
- Khwezi ka Mpumlwana (Director, Nelson Mandela Museum); and
- Neo Lekgotla laga Ramoupi (Researcher, South African Research and Archival Project, Howard University).
- General discussion led by Ciraj Rassool (Associate Professor, History Department, University of the Western Cape) and the two international speakers.

A key goal of the colloquium's organizers was to ensure a productive balance between formal presentations and open discussion. From this dialogue *emerged key propositions and questions*, for institutions, for practitioners, and for society as a whole. These are detailed below. No attempt has been made to prioritize these propositions or to resolve any tensions or contradictions that may exist between them. References to specific sites and cases have been excluded in favor of propositions carrying general application.

## **Key Propositions and Questions**

### **Archives and Other Memory Institutions**

- The archive must be understood as a social resource that reaches across conventional disciplinary boundaries.
- The archive is a site of ambiguity. It is best understood as a contested terrain for memory construction that in turn shapes contemporary understandings of society.
- Current political landscapes always play a formative role in shaping archives, both in their scope and content, as well as access to them.
- The challenge faced by those who maintain memory institutions is, fundamentally, a structural challenge. Structures of power design, shape, consign and represent the archive. The justice potential of the archive must be identified and fought for in these contexts.
- There are limitations to a document-focused orientation for engaging and understanding the archive. The role and work of documents is one dimension within broader societal memory processes. A wider frame of reference and utilization of resources is necessary.
- Justice as a concept needs to be examined in the context of dissimilar traditions, cultures, and epistemologies, which often compete and contest



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with one another for supremacy. The shaping roles played by memory institutions in these relationships must be explored.

- The dimensions of power at play in all acts of memorialization must be examined and, if necessary, confronted.

### **Archivists and Other Memory Practitioners**

- Those who work with archive should be guided primarily by a concept of, and commitment to, justice.
- A commitment to justice must be made central to the professional education of memory practitioners.
- The “archival profession” is socially constructed, and elements of this construction favor the status quo and impose a spurious philosophy of de-politicized and objective practices and methods.
- The role and work of archivists and other memory practitioners are best understood in terms of individual, institutional, and societal power and influence. The exercise of such power and influence by those who work with the archive must be properly appreciated.
- There are always systemic barriers to participation in, and access to, the archive. Prevailing relations of power and influence in societies (even in democracies) tend to disadvantage certain voices. The call of justice sounds two imperatives: 1) to pro-actively enable participation and access; and 2) to construct the archive beyond the normative assumptions circumscribed by power and the status quo.
- The voices that are absent in the archive can often be filled by imaginative engagement with resources conventionally not regarded as archival, such as oral histories.

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- Archivists and other memory practitioners are relatively weak socially and politically, thus limiting their capacities to serve justice. At the same time, these practitioners are powerful agents in the construction of the past.
- Discussion and debate around the ideas raised and addressed by this colloquium are largely and regrettably absent in professional archival forums. Their inclusion needs to be fostered and nurtured.

## **Society**

- Injustice is routinely documented by those who perpetrate it. Such records are systematically hidden, sanitized, neglected, or destroyed. Justice requires resistance to such processes.
- The archive provides a powerful resource for restorative justice. It can be a catalyst for recognizing previously ignored injustices, as well as a tool to rectify the distortions of the past. At times, even its noted absence can be a catalyst for restoration.
- Disclosing what was hidden (and what remains secret) is but a first step. Questions remain as to how the process of disclosure – moving from not knowing to knowing – can act as the foundation for justice. What is the next step beyond creating a more accurate version of the past? And how does that - can that - shape and connect to contemporary struggles for justice?
- Memory is about the future, a future which we should be making by resisting exclusion and marginalization.
- In moving from oppression to liberation, close attention needs to be paid to the resilience of privilege and inequality.
- Democratization routinely is associated with bureaucratization. The ideals of a liberation struggle must, necessarily, be tempered by the need to manage competing priorities in contexts of limited resources.