

Article

# Insistering Derrida:

Cixous, Deconstruction, and the Work of Archive<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

*Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive* is the lecture Jacques Derrida gave in 2003 at an event to honor H el ene Cixous and mark the donation of her archive to the National Library of France. The lecture was a moving tribute to Cixous (her corpus, her genius, her archive), but it was also Derrida’s reading of Cixous’s "secrets of the archive". This essay explores "the secrets" – those of Cixous, those of Derrida - along two primary lines of enquiry. On the one hand, the question of archival stakes - what stakes are at play in archive? On the other, the question of the work of archive. For both Cixous and Derrida the work of archive is an endless opening to what is being "othered" and a tireless importuning of a justice-to-come. The work of archive is justice. But what does that work look like? Is there a deconstructive praxis in archive shaped by the call to, and of, justice? What stranger emerges from an insistering of the familiar Derridean formulations?

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## PREAMBLE

*A man of his word a man of heart, last analyst of the heart's aching, of the soul's suffering, did I say man I mean woman too, heart and soul, one is the laughter of the other ...*<sup>2</sup>

*You are always closest to the source, he says. Me, between the source and me, there are mountains of pipes and tubes, a real racket.*<sup>3</sup>

Jacques Derrida and Hélène Cixous met in 1964. Over precisely forty years they read each other's writings, collaborated closely, and developed ever-deepening friendship. They campaigned together against abuses of power, challenged the archontic in its many forms and expressions,<sup>4</sup> contributed forewords and other texts to each other's publications, wrote a book together, and wrote books about the other. They co-authored *Veils* in 1998. Derrida engaged the life and work of Cixous in *H.C. for Life, That is to Say* in 2000 and *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres, and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive* in 2003. Cixous returned the compliment with her *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* in 2001 and *Insister of Jacques Derrida* in 2006. Not surprisingly, my first encounter with the work of Cixous came through Derrida. Both of them participated in the international anti-apartheid campaign through the 1980s, and in 1986 she contributed an essay to the book *For Mandela*, co-edited by Derrida and Mustapha Tlili in support of the campaign. I say "essay" as shorthand for what is an extraordinary tapestry of genres. Two years later the small tapestry blossomed into the book *Manna for the Mandelstams for the Mandelas*, an even more extraordinary weaving of biography and fantasy, historiography and fiction, narrative and poetry. For me it became impossible to read Derrida without reading Cixous – the life and corpus of each were so deeply implicated in that of the other; as importantly, Cixous is a powerful exemplar of the deconstructive imaginary. Arguably, an account of deconstruction is impossible without a reckoning with Cixous's huge corpus.

In this essay, I re-read Derrida's reading of archive through a re-reading of Cixous. I read Cixous on, and in, archive. And I re-read Derrida reading Cixous. All this reading has as its fulcrum readings of Cixous's *Manhattan: Letters from Prehistory* (2002) and Derrida's *Geneses. Manhattan* is Cixous's most sustained engagement with archive,

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<sup>2</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Insister of Jacques Derrida* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 37.

<sup>4</sup> In deconstruction, the archontic refers to the apparatuses used to exercise power in relation to the "trace". For me the trace is defined by four movements: coding which mediates experience; structuring which blurs the boundary between "speech" and "writing"; the possibility both of a connection between signifier and signified and a necessary deferral of meaning; and, at once, the origin of difference and the effacement of origin.

written as she negotiated the donation of her own archive to the National Library of France (BNF). In it she explores what in Derrida's reading of the text are "the secrets of the archive."<sup>5</sup> As in all Cixous's writing, it presents multiple challenges to the reader. On the one hand, it is, formally, a novel. On the other, it is profoundly auto-biographical – the narrator and central character, a woman, shares with Cixous: birth in Algeria; a father who is a doctor and dies relatively young; a close relationship with a brother; vocation as an academic and writer; scholarship in Joyce, Mandelstam, and Celan; friendship with Derrida; resistance to patriarchy; and a writing process underpinned by "the crazy multiplication of notebooks."<sup>6</sup> Not that I am delineating "voice" with any assurance here – elsewhere Cixous warns that "autobiography is only a literary genre...It is a jealous, deceitful sort of thing."<sup>7</sup> That she says this in a "novel" bifurcates the uncertainty.

*Geneses* is the lecture Derrida gave in 2003 at an event to honour Cixous and mark the donation of her archive to the BNF. The lecture was a moving tribute to Cixous (*her corpus, her genius, her archive*), but it was also Derrida's reading of Cixous's "secrets of the archive" in *Manhattan* and other texts. My intention in this essay is to explore "the secrets" – those of Cixous, those of Derrida – along two primary lines of enquiry. On the one hand, the question of archival stakes – what stakes are at play in archive? On the other, the question of the work of archive – by "work" I mean the construction, or formation, of archive; professional archival practice; engagement with archive by readers and other mediators; and impact (both actual and potential) in society of such formation, practice and engagement. For both Cixous and Derrida the work of archive is an endless opening to what is being "othered" and a tireless importuning of a justice-to-come. The work of archive is justice. But what does that work look like? Is there a deconstructive praxis in archive shaped by the call to, and of, justice? What stranger emerges from an insistering of the familiar Derridean formulations?

## EXERGUE

Like Derrida, Cixous was born in French colonial Africa. From Algeria, she too found her way to the metropolis, up to the pinnacle of the academy, and ultimately to a world stage crossing multiple disciplines. Like Derrida she attracts reductionist labels, but as he points out she is not contained by any one of them, nor by the catch-all "great-

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<sup>5</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Geneses, Genealogies, Genres and Genius: The Secrets of the Archive* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 80-81.

<sup>6</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Manhattan: Letters from Prehistory* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 85.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Sellers, ed., *The Hélène Cixous Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 126.

militant-French-feminist-theorists-of-the-thing-called-woman.”<sup>8</sup> She troubles every label; every category, episteme, orthodoxy, and genre. She resists theory while using it:

[Theory] is indispensable, at times, to make progress, but alone it is false. I resign myself to it as to a dangerous aid. It is a prosthesis. All that advances is aerial, detached, uncatchable.<sup>9</sup>

She advances with minute analysis of texts, an idiom profoundly autobiographical, a gorgeous narrative poetry, and a licence to play with words. She outdoes Derrida at this play, her signature arguably being a willingness to stretch language to its limits. As she describes (and performs) her advance:

To write by shreds, by storm clouds, by visions, by violent chapters, in the present as in the archpast, in pre-vision, in the true chaos of verbal tenses, crossing over years and oceans at a god’s pace ... - this is forbidden in academies, it is permitted in apocalypses. What joy it is. All those who secretly have not broken with the earliest times are so happy when they find the giantities of their magic stage under the policed mask of a volume.<sup>10</sup>

Her collaborator on the seminal text *The Newly Born Woman*, Catherine Clément, asserts (almost complains): “Yours is a writing halfway between theory and fiction.”<sup>11</sup> I would typify it rather as somewhere-way between theory, fiction and autobiography. In it she causes trouble for “Literature” and every other manifestation of what she calls “omnipotence-others”.<sup>12</sup> For her “there is no more genre.”<sup>13</sup> There are no limits for geneses and genealogies. And genders – not two, but many, innumerable - always already open out of one another. Her lexicon is unreservedly paradoxical.

If, as I would argue, Cixous’s “omnipotence-other” is best understood as a form of archive, a great apparatus of power and authority, we find her in archival battle on fields carrying names like “Logocentrism”, “Phallogocentrism”, “Frenchness”, “the French language”, “Literary Theory”, “Psychoanalysis”, and so on. In my reading of Cixous these many omnipotence-others coalesce into a single meta-archive which she calls “phallo-

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<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, *H.C. for Life, That is to Say ...* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 141.

<sup>9</sup> Hélène Cixous and Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Rootprints: Memory and Life Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 4.

<sup>10</sup> Hélène Cixous, *Stigmata* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 190.

<sup>11</sup> Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 136.

<sup>12</sup> Cixous, *Manhattan*, vii-viii.

<sup>13</sup> Cixous, *Stigmata*, 185.

logocentrism”,<sup>14</sup> an expression of patriarchy and positivism across disciplines, genres and societal spacings.<sup>15</sup> She wages battle against its subjection of thought to binary opposites, all “related to ‘the’ couple, man/woman.”<sup>16</sup> And yet to do so she acts as a woman, struggles as a woman, writes as a woman, at once resisting the gendered roles and identities foisted on her by phallo-logocentrism and inviting in consideration of how anatomical difference shapes experience – according to Susan Sellers, she “suggests that women’s real or imagined experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, for example, entail the possibility of a radically different relation to the other.”<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly this has led to her work being branded by some as a form of biological essentialism. Her relations with feminisms have always been difficult. As are her relations with any form of orthodoxy. She calls insistently, insisteringly, for an ever-bifurcating bisexuality:

The one with which every subject, who is not shut up inside the spurious Phallogentric Performing Theater, sets up his or her erotic universe. Bisexuality – that is to say the location within oneself of the presence of both sexes, evident and insistent in different ways according to the individual, the nonexclusion of difference or of a sex, and starting with this “permission” one gives oneself, the multiplication of the effects of desire’s inscription on every part of the body and the other body.<sup>18</sup>

She insists on space which allows “the springing up of selves one didn’t know,” space in which *inter alia* heterosexuality is opened to its others, in which “I is this exuberant, gay, personal matter, masculine, feminine or other where I enchants, I agonizes me.”<sup>19</sup>

## CIXOUS AND ARCHIVE

Unlike Derrida, Cixous has little time for the explicit theorization of archive. And yet her engagement with it is every bit as fulsome. She generates it, plays in it and with it, does battle for and against it. Her own corpus, of course, is a monumental archive - from published work to private correspondence, from thousands of dreams noted down to recordings of her seminars. Some of it, as I indicated above, is now archived in that monumental repository, the BNF. (It is worth noting, in passing, that in *Insister*, she

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<sup>14</sup> Cixous and Clément, *Newly born Woman*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-65.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>17</sup> Sellers, *Reader*, xxviii.

<sup>18</sup> Cixous and Clément, *Newly born Woman*, 84-85.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

describes herself as “this Library that I am.”<sup>20</sup>) Resistance to omnipotence-others, arguably the defining movement in Cixous’s work, is itself a form of engagement with archive. Such resistance, more precisely an absence of such resistance and a longing to find the capacity to resist, is a recurring theme in *Manhattan*. Here the omnipotence-other determines the limits of possibility, expresses the power of the master’s word, imposes a language, fascinates, seduces and disempowers. This is not far removed from Foucault’s formulation of archive as “first the law of what can be said...”,<sup>21</sup> and *when* it can be said, *how*, and *by whom*. Cixous, through her narrator-character, unfolds the experience of feeling excluded, of being “bowled over and internally deported by a whirlwind of omnipotence-others,” and of “accepting dispossession,” “abdicating reason,” and “conceding superiority.”<sup>22</sup>

The plot of *Manhattan* hinges on the relationship between two lovers, a woman and a man, both scholars, and unfolds largely in the rare manuscript collections in the libraries of Yale (the Beinecke), Buffalo and Columbia universities. For the book’s narrator, these places “have powers of fascination, herein termed ‘omnipotence-others.’”<sup>23</sup> So, the archive as omnipotence-other. In *Manhattan* Cixous also uses a number of other figures for archive – tomb, mausoleum, necropolis, hospital, trace, scar and wound. (Elsewhere she plays with the figure of the braid.<sup>24</sup>) Out of this play of multiple figures emerge attributes of archive which subvert, from within, omnipotence-other’s apparatus of power and authority. I find three such attributes named in the text. First, any collection, any corpus, any discourse, any archive, remains immeasurably vaster than the storehouse supposed to hold it. What is gathered in storehouses are remains, remainders, fragments. And even the notional “comprehensive” store or “complete” archive is always incomplete, defined ultimately by its exclusions and absences, by the incessant movement of the contexts which determine meaning and significance. One chapter of *Manhattan* is devoted to the main character’s “yellow folder,” “a file into which I’ve been tossing vestiges, debris, scraps, hangnails, flakes, prints, chips of defeat for decades,”<sup>25</sup> and to a reflection on “forgettings.” The archive at once returns what has been forgotten, shows what it has forgotten, and stimulates forgetting. Second, the full meanings and significances at play within any part of a storehouse’s content are indeterminable. For its content is an ever-shifting swirl of recording and imagining, of narrativizing and fictionalizing. A scene in *Manhattan* has the narrator challenged by her brother, who

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<sup>20</sup> Cixous, *Insister*, 38.

<sup>21</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 129.

<sup>22</sup> Cixous, *Manhattan*, 6, 117, 168.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>24</sup> Cixous, *Insister*, 149, 173 and Derrida, *H.C. for Life*, 90-91.

<sup>25</sup> Cixous, *Manhattan*, 35.

opposes her literary world of fable to his of rootedness in “the memory that goes on living in the earth” and the reality of cows grazing in a field. She responds:

Song of my brother to the Cow Standing On Its Four Legs, himself lowing in the bush, himself the Cow Standing at the far end of the field, himself caught in the grips of the vision and the fable.<sup>26</sup>

Third, the archive has a way of subverting the conscious desires of those who create and curate it. Any archive will surprise readers with its content. Serendipity and chance make their mark. What was erased or destroyed may return. What was selected may disappear. What is found might not have been selected. Processes of erasure might not be completed.<sup>27</sup> Three attributes, then, their subversive potential distilled in the assertion (used by Cixous’s narrator in *Manhattan* to refer to the book she is writing, the tale she is telling, the archive she is constructing): “the Tale won’t let itself be pushed around.”<sup>28</sup>

*Manhattan* is but one of many books in Cixous’s corpus which addresses archive in very direct ways. In *Stigmata*, for instance, she gathers in the traces on the subjectile of her “self”, more precisely her selves - this Library that I am. In *Rootprints*, another instance, she reproduces and reads fragments (extracts from notebooks, photographs) from her archive. *Dream I Tell You* is a selection from her notebooks of recorded dreams. In *Double Oblivion of the Ourang-Outang* the narrative begins with her discovery of a box containing a long-forgotten record of her earliest writing for publication, recounts her wrestling with the questions of re-reading and preserving – she considers the possibility of donating the record to the BNF, but decides ultimately (in the book’s final scene) to place it in the garbage. And so on. Then, of course, there is that archetypal scene, or site, of archive formation, described at length by Derrida:

She always writes by hand, no matter what, she writes using a tool – pencil or pen – that is, without a machine or a machine-tool; without a typewriter or a word processor ... I should have liked to have devoted some remarks ... to Hélène Cixous’s phenomenal handwriting, to its form, to its lines, to its rhythm and to the economy of its quasi-stenographic shorthand, to its graphic body and to the archival stakes in all that ... Her handwriting reminds me of all the squirrels in the world.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.,165.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 25,56.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.,24.

<sup>29</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, 39-40.

What are the archival stakes in the choice of a writing tool? What are the stakes in the forms and rhythms of a handwriting? In the figures one chooses for archive, the selections one makes for publications or repositories? The omnipotence-others one replicates or resists?

## ARCHONTIC POWER

What I would call “omnipotence-otherness,” following Cixous, wields its power through apparatuses comprising, fundamentally, controls over information, records, taxonomies and contexts. Scholars and commentators from many disciplines, working within a range of epistemes, have revealed how the exercise of power hinges on control of information. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, for instance, has offered compelling critiques of democracy - in the global North and within the Atlantic tradition especially - demonstrating how elites depend on sophisticated information systems, media control, surveillance, privileged research and development, hegemony over systems of knowledge production, censorship, propaganda, and so on, to maintain their positions.<sup>30</sup> Equally, there are expansive literatures which demonstrate recordmaking, both in its “paper shuffling” and “bit crunching” forms, to be, in the formulation of Bruno Latour, “the source of an essential power.”<sup>31</sup> Recordmaking functionalities - Latour’s bringing of distant domains together, flattening of convoluted and hidden domains, viewing of masses of occurrences synoptically, circulating of records along networks, summarizing and displaying them – are being enhanced exponentially by multiplying and ever-faster digital technologies: the source of an essential power, frightening in its deployment for the surveillance of citizens or the prosecution of war, invigorating in its deployment for the provision of public services or the combating of disease. Of course, records do not speak for themselves. They speak through the taxonomies which categorise them and the actors – from records managers to historians, bureaucrats to journalists, archivists to activists – most adept at using taxonomy. This is, if you like, another locus of power, one held most firmly by the custodians of, and the actors privy to, classification systems. As Geoffrey Bowker and Susan Leigh Star put it:

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<sup>30</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York, Routledge, 1990) and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York, Routledge, 1993).

<sup>31</sup> Bruno Latour, “Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands,” *Knowledge and Society* 6 (1986), 28.



Each standard and each category valorizes some point of view and silences another. This is not inherently a bad thing – indeed it is inescapable. But it is an ethical choice, and as such it is dangerous – not bad, but dangerous.<sup>32</sup>

I am outlining quickly, using shorthand, a discourse within which many voices and perspectives explicate the power of omnipotent-otherness. But it is Cixous and Derrida, in my reading, who offer the most convincing accounts of the logic underlying this phenomenon. And they do so precisely by insisting on the *contexts* within which information discloses meaning and significance. In Derrida, the archive is first the law determining *contexts*. There is nothing - in his hyperbolic formulation - outside context.<sup>33</sup> For both Cixous and Derrida, then, the archive is a construction, one which issues from and expresses relations of power, and which is the condition for any engagement with information and any exercise of power. In these readings archive reaches *everywhere* – across the geopolitical spread of an empire into the depths of an individual's psychic apparatus. For them the archive is the very possibility of politics. The stakes could not be higher.

In Derrida, the law of archive must be understood in relation to his concept of trace, generally, and of the archival trace in particular. For Derrida<sup>34</sup> the archive is constituted by two movements: a tracing on an exterior surface, or substrate, by inscription, imprint or invagination; and a consigning of the traces to a place, virtual or material.<sup>35</sup> Archontic power is invested in the apparatuses necessary to make these movements: power to trace, to determine what is traced and how; power of consignment, to determine what is consigned, how it is contextualised, when it is accessed and by whom. These apparatuses might be big and sophisticated – those which support, for instance, “the colonial archive”, “the war on terror” or the BNF - or they might be small, crude and without professional or disciplinary imprimatur, as in the case of an individual's Facebook page, or of the narratives allowed and disallowed in a particular family archive,

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<sup>32</sup> Geoffrey Bowker and Susan L. Starr. *Sorting Things Out: Classification and its Consequences* (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000), 5-6.

<sup>33</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc.* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 136.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

<sup>35</sup> For me there are three primary movements in archive: to trace, to exteriorize, and to deem. The latter is not unrelated to Derrida's movement to consign, but it reaches beyond consignment. It assumes an act of deeming an external trace to be worthy of protection, preservation, classification and the other interventions called “archival”. This “deeming” is also not unrelated to the “deeming” which takes place in traditional western archival practice, but it posits an intervention which can be almost without apparatus and professional or disciplinary authority. Anyone can *deem*.

or of Cixous's dream notebooks. Always, unavoidably, there is apparatus. And, always, there is the exercise of archontic power.

In *Geneses* Derrida repeatedly names the archontic (without using the word) in relation to Cixous, delicately, with a fine thread barely visible in the rich textures of the book's tapestry. (In both of their work, the writing is a weaving with multiple threads, textures, patterns and layers.) Here I identify the thread in just four instances. He names it in her writing generally, its unique, challenging idiom and signature tantalizing, if not frustrating readers:

... the extreme vigilance of a most refined and practised literary conscience, a most audacious one as well, but also a highly supervised and supervising one, one skilled like none other at founding itself on literature's secret, that is, the cryptopoetic power that seals up everything, sign and seal of universal literature in new French language, everything one must not tell. She seals off, she blocks, blocks as one boards up a door or as one sentences the reader not to read what he reads or condemns him to read what he doesn't know how to read.<sup>36</sup>

He names it in her relationship with the BNF, an engagement with very specific relations of power, and dangers. What authority is accrued by such an institutional alliance? What powers are diminished or lost? It is awareness of these stakes, Derrida argues, that informs the way she shapes *Manhattan*:

*Manhattan* is a book ... made, among other things, in order to speak to the BNF about the BNF, to tell of its achievement and its work, at a time when the author was *already* aware of the alliance ordained, already underway between the BNF and herself.<sup>37</sup>

He names it in citing a particular passage of *Manhattan*, when he calls her "a narrator who knows what she is saying and what she makes others say and what she allows to be said."<sup>38</sup> And he names it in her *Dream I Tell You*, a selection of fifty dreams from the thousands in her notebooks.<sup>39</sup> Why these fifty? What are the privilegings, the secrets? And, almost as subtext, so delicate, these are not so much fifty dreams as fifty memories of dreams: "In interrupting itself, the dream keeps the trace of this interruption upon waking as well as a trace of that which may thus have been cut off."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, 46.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-36.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

## THE ARCHONTIC

In my reading, the question of power and archive is dominated by voices and voicings that express more or less structuralist presuppositions and assumptions. I would, for instance, position Foucault here. Some might find in certain formulations of omnipotence-otherness by Cixous a structuralist dimension – in *The Newly Born Woman*, for instance, Catherine Clément responds with disquiet at one point:

At the moment, it seems to me, you are making mastery absolutely coincide with knowledge, except in a few exceptional cases.<sup>41</sup>

In narrowly-defined archival discourse Derrida is often interpreted in what I would call structuralist terms. This is to ignore Derrida's problematizing of the archontic, his marking of the archive as deeply divided against itself, and his identification of that which is always already deconstructing the archontic impulse in the process of archive formation. This is what I call "the anarchontic": that energy, that logic, that set of attributes, which gives to archive a fundamentally subversive potential. Archive is never simply an expression of, and an instrument for, replicating prevailing relations of power.

So, a pair – the archontic and the anarchontic – suggesting themselves as binary opposites. The deconstructive move in relation to binary opposites is not simply to wage battle against them. It is, rather, to expose their provenances and deployments. It is to use them strategically, play with their spectrality – by demonstrating how each "opposite" opens out of the other, and how each bifurcates endlessly. So that when Cixous, for example, uses the word "woman", she evokes what I would call a spectral chain troubling fundamentally the pair "woman-man". Nonetheless, as Spivak warns, it is not possible to escape essentializing. Even "in deconstructive practice, you have to be aware that you are going to essentialize anyway."<sup>42</sup>

In *Geneses* Derrida uses his engagement with Cixous to unfold the bifurcatedness of archive. Of course, as always with Derrida, he is doing several things at once. At one level, he is addressing "the secret" as a concept. At another he is addressing simultaneously secrets-in-general and a clutch of specific secrets. He is also naming "the secret" as integral to the dynamics of consignment:

We shall define libraries in general as places devoted to keeping the secret but insofar as they give it away. Giving a secret away may mean telling it, revealing it, publishing it, divulging it, as well as keeping it so deeply in the crypt of a memory that we forget it is there or even cease to understand and have access to it. In

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<sup>41</sup> Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 144.

<sup>42</sup> Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic*, 51.

one sense a secret kept is always a secret lost. This is what happens in general in the places one calls library archives.<sup>43</sup>

But his most pressing concern, in my reading, is to name the attributes of archive which subvert its own construction - the secrets at the heart of *Geneses*, the secrets of the archive, the secrets revealed by Cixous in *Manhattan* and other texts. I discern him reading four. The first is Cixous's storehouse unable to contain its content. Derrida names it with the statement "Jonas is bigger than the whale."<sup>44</sup> He replaces Cixous's multiple figures for archive with that of the whale, which he "lifts" from Cixous' usage of it in *Manhattan* as a metaphor for banishment. And then points it at the BNF as the latter receives the Cixous archive:

... this great French National Library, as yet unsuspecting of the problems that await it with the corpus that it is pretending like the Whale to swallow and keep down.<sup>45</sup>

Second secret: Cixous's indeterminable meanings and significances, represented in the statement "the door is barred but please come in."<sup>46</sup> Especially if the door carries the name Cixous. Here Derrida shifts from *Manhattan* to *Dream I Tell You*, taking ten pages of text to address the archive that is Cixous's.<sup>47</sup> He names: opaque idioms of the author, cryptic and vagrant fragments, excluded content, unknown contexts, readings (interpretations, mediations) yet to come, names without stories, stories without names, and embargoed (or otherwise censored) content. Again, he turns to the BNF with a word of warning:

The BNF, for its part, with all its distinguished competencies, with the incomparable knowledge of its readership for centuries to come, will forever be essentially incapable of determining ... that which it welcomes."<sup>48</sup>

Which is why he can say: "The BNF, infinite memory of unreading and forgetreading."<sup>49</sup>

Third secret: Cixous's "surprising content", expressed in a line from *Manhattan*: "Why have I not tossed out 'the incriminating bits'?"<sup>50</sup> Fourth secret: Indexing spaces are

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<sup>43</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, 20.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-36.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 75-76.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>50</sup> Cixous, *Manhattan*, 56.

deranged.<sup>51</sup> Here Derrida is using as an example the Beinecke Library's curation of the Homer, Shakespeare and Joyce versions of Ulysses. He elaborates:

Bigger and stronger than the libraries that act as if they have the capacity to hold them, if only virtually, they derange all the archival and indexing spaces by the disproportion of the potentially infinite memory they condense according to the processes of undecidable writing for which as yet no complete formalisation exists. This is also true of Hélène Cixous's great oeuvre.<sup>52</sup>

Then, again, he turns to the BNF, naming the impossible task, both technical (classification, dating, categorising, cataloging, delimiting the internal boundaries of the corpus) and ethical.<sup>53</sup> For archival description is about naming, technically and ethically, the contexts which illuminate texts<sup>54</sup> – but what to do with limitless context and an “incessant movement of recontextualization”?<sup>55</sup> So he comes back a last time to describe “the condition of impossibility of a taxonomy overlap.”<sup>56</sup>

Four secrets, then. And yet they constitute, really, one secret, namely - and here Derrida uses Cixous's “pushing-around” metaphor - that the archive, in its structure, in its formation, and in its use, is devious. As Derrida says:

The archive's trustees may find themselves, because of the archive's devious structure, dispossessed of all power and all authority over it. The archive won't let itself be pushed around, it seems to resist, make matters difficult, foment a revolution against the very power to which it feigns to hand itself over, to lend and even to give itself.<sup>57</sup>

Yes, the archive *is* an instrument of power. It *is* a technology of rule. A set of apparatuses producing and reproducing dominant narratives. An omnipotence-other. But it is also a subversive space. It is about a feigning and a fomentation, a resisting. It is a domain hospitable to resistance.

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<sup>51</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, 14-15.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-58.

<sup>54</sup> The International Council on Archives defines “archival description” as “the process of analyzing, organizing, and recording details about the formal elements of a record or collection of records ... to facilitate the work's identification, management, and understanding.” Peter Walne, ed., *Dictionary of Archival Terminology* (Munich: KG Saur, 1988).

<sup>55</sup> Derrida, *Limited*, 136.

<sup>56</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, 72.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

The work of archive, the work as it is, as it is to be found, is, then, profoundly bifurcated. A bifurcation redoubled endlessly in principle. The archive of power, of rule, the omnipotence-other, is always already challenged from within and without. Moreover, the counter-archive, the one outside, of resistance, carries within it, unavoidably, the movements of the archontic. And the archive of rule, for instance “the colonial archive”, can be harnessed for liberatory work after oppressive rule is ended, by “the post-colonial” in this instance. In South Africa, the records of the apartheid security establishment – those that had not been destroyed as the apartheid system crumbled - were used by the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission to support “truth-recovery” and “reparation”; the records of a range of apartheid institutions are still being used to support land claims by dispossessed communities. These “liberated” records can later, of course, and almost certainly will be, used for new forms of oppression.

But what is the work of archive as “calling”? What *should* the work of archive be? What responsibility do archivists in the BNF carry in relation to the Cixous archive? The deconstructive move – articulated by Cixous, by Derrida - in face of these questions is the double injunction to respond to the call of justice - a justice which is the relation to “the other” - and to an impossible ethics of hospitality to every “other”. What might that mean for the BNF archivists? At the least, I would argue, a paying of the closest attention to what is being othered in the BNF collections, a listening to the ghosts. Listening, then, to the whispers of absent authors, cryptic idioms, names without stories and stories without names, absent content, unknown contexts, the incessant movement of recontextualization, readings of content (past, present and future), readers excluded or obstructed, and so on. The list is endless. This is not easy work. It requires courage and imagination. It demands a continuing state of being-haunted. And it is, most often, resisted by structures and systems of power – for attending to the ghosts is readily seen by these structures and systems to be subversive. Arguably, it *is* subversive. It questions everything. It tends to disturb dominant narratives. It diverts energy, time and resources from what is seen to be core business. And it allows what is regarded as “personal” into the “professional”. Dangerous space. So that this work unavoidably will involve, to some degree, what I call archive banditry – a determination to shape professional work in a relation of hospitality to the voices which press in from outside (and therefore from deep inside) the structures and systems which one benefits from. These ones who engage in banditry are not the ones which convention speaks of as lawless. Rather, these ones honor justice as a law for practice which trumps the laws which polities pass to protect their interests. The ones who honor the archival trace rather than the biggest and strongest “tracers” in their jurisdiction. The ones who will not be bought, or simply go away.

## PRELUDE

And what of Hélène Cixous? What is the work that she is doing? What does her work with archive signify? What is the calling she hears in relation to archive? Here I cannot pretend to give authoritative answers. Her corpus of work and of life is huge, beyond me, one I have only touched. So, a preliminary touching of these questions, then, a provisional formulation. She is haunted, and responds by paying the closest attention to the ghosts:

I have this need to let myself be haunted by voices coming from my elsewhere that resonate through me. I want to have voices.<sup>58</sup>

Voices from outside. Voices from inside:

The thing AboutwhichIknownothing remains secret, this gift which makes me who I am. One writes like a rescue effort to oneself in the dark: an act of despair because we know there is a treasure to which we will never have access. How ignorant we are about ourselves! And yet we sign.<sup>59</sup>

Cixous pays attention to what are arguably the most difficult ghosts to be hospitable to – the ones deep inside. She listens attentively to the ghosts of her dreams, the voices of which come from the inside-outside of the unconscious. Of course, she also pays attention, in what feels like one movement, to the voices outside-outside. The ones banished to the margins by society, or kept outside, or erased. This has spurred her activism across the decades and across “the issues”. And, of course, as a woman writing consciously from outside-inside phallo-logocentrism’s omnipotence-other, she writes subversion:

What woman has not stolen? Who has not dreamed, savored, or done the thing that jams sociality? Who has not dropped a few red herrings, mocked her way around the separating bar, inscribed what makes a difference with her body, punched holes in the system of couples and positions, and with a transgression screwed up whatever is successive, chain-linked, the fence of circumfusion? A feminine text cannot not be more than subversive: if it writes itself it is in volcanic heaving of the old “real” property crust ... it is the invention of a new, insurgent

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<sup>58</sup> Susan Sellers, ed., *Hélène Cixous: White Ink: Interviews on Sex, Text and Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 167.

<sup>59</sup> Sellers, *White Ink*, 177.

writing that will allow her to put the breaks and indispensable changes into effect in her history.<sup>60</sup>

She is, for me, a bandit, an archive bandit. Like Derrida. In 2003 he described her authorial banditry:

The writing or the poetics ... although rooted in the French idiom, for that very reason, paradoxical as it might seem, resists the codes and customary usages of French language and literature. It resists them, one might as well say, it encounters fierce, frightened, threatened, denied resistance. The same analyses should show how these resistances are tied to those of the people and powers-that-be of French culture, its university, its schools, above all its media. What Hélène Cixous's work does to these codes is a storm so unpredictable and so intolerable that there is no question of her garnering a following.<sup>61</sup>

In 2004 he reflected on the first emergence of her banditry and contrasted it to his own:

I remember the first manuscript Hélène confided in me ... It arrived like a meteor in my garden. The socio-editorial field, the "readership" of the time was not ready, it seemed to me (was I mistaken?), to receive and to measure what was beginning there. So I feared for her ... Before taking a certain number of liberties with writing, it was necessary that I first be accorded a certain amount of credit. Before this, I betrayed the norms only in a prudent, cunning, and quasi-clandestine manner.<sup>62</sup>

No one can prescribe for another what to do with the ghosts and when. Or demand particular forms of banditry. In deconstruction only listening is prescriptive. And arguably that is *the* act of banditry.

So, Hélène Cixous the bandit; and Hélène Cixous the archon. Cixous the terror of omnipotence-others; and the honoured guest of the BNF. Cixous invoking apocalypse in response to the academy; and scaling extreme academic heights. Cixous the unveiler of secrets; and the keeper of more than most. Cixous the warrior against all binaries and what Derrida called memorably "this theoretical toilet of the phallus";<sup>63</sup> and the thinker of men inscribing their femininity and women their masculinity.<sup>64</sup> I suspect that she has

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<sup>60</sup> Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 96-97.

<sup>61</sup> Derrida, *Geneses*, 54.

<sup>62</sup> Sellers, *White Ink*, 168-169.

<sup>63</sup> Hélène Cixous and Jacques Derrida, *Veils* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 85.

<sup>64</sup> Cixous and Clément, *The Newly Born Woman*, 81.



embraced the both-and of deconstruction in ways that Derrida found difficult, ways fundamental to the imagining of justice and an archival praxis inspired by that imagining. I suspect that Derrida was right when he insisted (always the insister, but also the insistered) that Cixous was closer to “the source” than he. I suspect that her work offers a way of imagining deconstruction outside of its own aging omnipotence-other...

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