Obligations Towards 'Re-Housing' 'Memory-In-Exile' and 'Persons and Heritage-In-Extremis': From Archons to Besieged Subjects and Beyond

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Abstract

This paper is a thought piece and a journey of critical archival questing - although not a redemptive journey – it is engaged with in order to open-up points of archival potency, paradox and possibility for further critical reflection, reconfiguration and action. Given that this archival quest has been undertaken at a contemporary moment in which many thousands more displaced persons - refugees and migrants – risk their lives undertaking journeys to various 'promised lands' they may never see nor enter, I argue the obligation to return to, reconnect with and re-work the recurring motif that links diverse archival constituencies across space and time and that reminds us that the first, original constituency of the archive is that of the 'figure of exile' and of persons and heritage in extremis. This in turn demands that Derridean archival-heritage questions of the 'future', of 'promise' and of 'responsibility for tomorrow' be bound up and reconfigured within the foundational responsibility to 're-house' and 'give refuge' to 'memory-in-exile' and 'persons and heritage-in-extremis' and crucially too to develop new operational strategies to direct these towards understanding and empowering these 'besieged subjects' in the present [1-3].

Archival Questing and Heritage Fevers 'Old' & 'New'

'To suffer from a sickness ... Is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching from the archive right where it slips away... It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement' [4]. This paper, a thought piece, is a quest for, and critical reconfiguration of, the 'archive'. Our journey begins in the footsteps of Derrida and his own 'search for the archive' and subsequently opens-up into an odyssey across time and space that takes us from the domiciles of the 'archons' of ancient Greece, and, via the paradigmatic legendary archive – the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and its 'myth of return and redemption'-, to critically engage with the contemporary strain of 'Palestine archive fever' authored by the 'besieged subject'. Our itinerary is to critically return to these salient formative archival 'moments' to uncover insights into the repetitious desires, passions, and fevers that pervade 'old' and 'new' 'diagnoses' of 'archive fever' across North and South. Writ wider still, my interest is in exploring what is at stake in these aspirational quests, - synonymous with broader 'heritage fevers' and 'origin fevers'-, and in the tensions and conflict that accompany both imaginative and literal acts of possession.

Return and Redemption – 'Greek' Archons and Archive Traumas

'Let us not begin at the beginning, nor even at the archive. But rather at the word "archive"- [its meaning]. comes to it from the Greek arkheion: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the archons, those who commanded. The citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law... The archons are first the documents' guardians (ibid 2-3). 'Alexandria, which is our birthplace, has mapped out this circle for all Western language: to write was to return, to come back to the beginning to grasp again the first instance; it is to witness anew the dawn [1]. 'This pharmakon, this 'medicine', this philter, which acts as both remedy and poison... can be – alternatively or simultaneously – beneficial or maleficent' [4]. To walk in Derrida's footsteps requires us to take as our point of departure Freud's former 'domicile' – his London home now the Freud Museum and

archive. This is the setting for Derrida's 'Archive Fever' and his 'Freudian Impression' of archival forms. Derrida begins his lecture-journey by deconstructing the etymological roots of the word "archive". The 'Greek' claim to the archive is thus revealed to be the domicile of the figure of the 'archon' whose home takes the form of the archive and vice versa. As elite sovereign guardians, the archons as powerful personas not only provide the 'physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate' but are afforded 'the power to interpret the archives'. Crucially this revolves around guardianship 'as' and 'of' 'the law'. As Derrida has it: 'Entrusted to such archons, these documents in effect state the law: they recall the law and call on or impose the law' [4].

It is here that we need to pause our journey and with Derrida's help draw out the 'pharmakonic' traits of the archive. First the quest to possess and be possessed by the archive as 'curative' force is found in expressions of wish fulfilment, magical thinking and melancholic-nostalgia that in turn see the archive take on, project and invest in ontological-existential qualities of 'home', 'origin', or 'refuge.' The sense of well-being, belonging and security inherent in gaining protection from close proximity to benign ancestors is thus acquired. However, in Derrida's 'Freudian impression' of the archive the more 'poisonous' ancestry and repetitious 'pharmakonic' forces of sickness, repression, 'archio-violence' and trauma restlessly co-exist with the quest for fulfilment, wholeness and harmony. The archive is recast the scene of epic Oedipal violence and the destructive forces of the 'death-drive' that manifest as evil and malice [4]. This Derridean thesis crystallizes 'trauma in the archive' [5]. Writ large the over-arching 'promise' of the archive to 'cure' and 'redeem' is destabilized by the revelation (prophecy) of archival 'destiny': its self-destructive capacity; for Derrida its inherent flammability.

That Derrida specifically names the ancient Bibliotheca Alexandrina as the 'west's' 'paradigmatic' example of 'archive fever' grounds archival discourse in a particularly potent myth-history which sees the legendary institution emerge as an idealized 'Greek' icon although yet again marked by extreme 'pharmakonic' forces [3]. Here our footsteps cross-over with those of Alexander the Great and his quest, or rather, his attempted conquest of the, East. As Alexander and his fellow Greeks leave behind mainland Greece, Alexandria's potent possession and characterization as an extension of the Greek homeland - the 'New Athens' – and further still as the 'meeting point of East and West' and the 'birthplace' of 'cosmopolitanism', thus legitimates a dominant 'western' claim to the city's foundational values of: universalism, intellectualism, humanism, philosophy and secularity [1-3]. These values are subsequently taken up by archival discourse and grounded in the grand project to create, collect and disseminate 'encyclopedic universal knowledge'. Simultaneously on an ontological level the Alexandrina provides for the 'Greeks' in 'diaspora' the promise 'refuge' in archival form: the 'rehousing' of 'memory-in-exile' [4]. The archive is thus situated as a response to original traumatic displacement and dislocation. More particularly it is the ancient Alexandrina's acts of literary possession and translation that are

credited with placing 'Alexandria at the birth of our world' [1] and which cast the city and archive as 'one of the great wombs of western literature' and as the 'memory of the world' (Polignac in op.cit). Homer's epics were first archived and annotated as fixed texts at the ancient institution. Thus, added to existing archival dramas is the powerful re-working by the 'west' of Alexandria and Alexandrina as both odyssey and as homecoming.

It is however with much paradox and great effectiveness that it is the destruction of the ancient Alexandrina (its flammability/ vulnerability/ tragedy) that ultimately secures its status as a phoenix-like institution and gives archival discourse its 'redemptive formula'. The event of the Alexandrina's destruction is thus read by the 'west' as the traumatic loss of an ancient ancestor and embeds the institution in an entropic, politics and poetics of melancholy and loss. Crucially the ancient institution as the 'west's' much mourned 'lost object' generates a redemptive urge that gives birth to the repetitive desire to rebuild the Alexandrina 'on the ruins'. Not only has this project become bound-up in the 'myth of return and redemption' articulated by Foucault above ('to write was to return') Butler B [1] but wider archival-heritage-musicological discourse has similarly cultivated the Alexandrina as its ancestor-paradigm. The Alexandrina has thus emerged as the idealised 'template' and 'blueprint' for the resurfacing of the archival-heritage-museological project within the 'nodal points' of 'western' tradition: The Renaissance, Enlightenment and further into modernity (op.cit). A related intellectual engagement argues that the wider modernist turn to the archive – and writ wider still the turn to heritage and origins - is characterised in terms of modernity's philosophical preoccupation with its 'own loss of origin', its 'feelings of ontological homelessness' and with projects to redeem and re-house modernity's memory-in-exile (op.cit). Within a secularising thesis the archive is thus strategically positioned as modernity's metaphysical mirror. It is here that modernity and the archive/museum/heritage/origin are similarly imbued with metaphysical attachments to redemptive qualities (op.cit). Here too the secularisation of the 'redemptive-messianic' aspect of archival quests offers a means to be possessed by the archive in terms of securing not only a remembered past but the 'promise of a future'. The colonial-possessional archival force is similarly endowed with prophetic articulations about archival visions of 'duty' and 'destiny'. These attachments also give more depth to the intellectual odyssey which invests the archive as the 'west's' secularizing humanist force and privileged medium for reflecting upon the human condition and to address the core question: what it is to be human? (op.cit).

Palestinian Archive Fevers – Besieged Subjects and Contemporary Repossession

'Palestinian archive fever …spreading among Palestinians everywhere. Whether in Ramallah or London, Haifa or San Francisco, Beirut or Riyadh… the full dimensions can hardly be imagined' [6]. 'Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past… Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a

triumphant ideology or restored people' [7]. To pursue our archival quest further this second part of our journey tracks the symptoms, the potential remedies, and crucially too the transformations at play, in particularized expressions of 'Palestinian archive fever.' My interest is in how the diagnosis and its response has led in turn to new critical reconfigurations of the 'archive' authored by the 'besieged' subject thus challenging the sovereign power of the 'archons' and their exclusive possession of the archival domain. To pursue these alternative re-worked archival formations we need to indulge in the motif of repetition and make our own critical return to the Freud Museum in order to engage with the work of two Palestinian intellectuals: Said and Doumani. Doumani's connection to this space is via the debt he owes to Derrida J [4] while subsequently taking it in new directions to address the full force of popular contemporary 'Palestinian archive fever' Doumani B [6] Said in turn was invited to give his own Freud lecture entitled 'Freud and the Non-European'[8]. His lecture-journey takes us on pathways marked by violent contestation in order to critically recast the transformational- 'pharmakonic' qualities of cultural forms – including that of the archive - from the perspective of the 'non-European' 'besieged subject'(op.cit).

As both Said and Doumani demonstrate the 'figure' of the 'besieged subject' unlike that of the 'archon' is typically 'exiled' 'outside' dominant archival discourse and/or exists as a repressed non-sovereign subject on the archival fringes. Both here and in his wider work Said brings to the fore the struggle of Palestinians to 'wage' a 'battle' for the 'right to possess a remembered presence' and to 'reclaim a collective historical reality'[7]: the force and fevers of which that Doumani explores in detail. Said further argues that Palestinians, like that of others of modernity's exiles, require a framework to work through the alienations of their literal, lived experiences of traumatic displacement. As both Derrida and Doumani would agree the archive is one such 'template' that keeps being returned to and invested in by marginalized constituencies as part of postcolonial quests for repossession. Here the 'promise' of the archive to redeem, restore and reconstitute again affords access to a longed-for vision of wholeness, belonging and origin. The archive reworks the Alexandrina's 'myth of return and redemption' and similarly grounds Said's model of a 'triumphant ideology' in the realpolitik. The archival fevers of desire, passion and nostalgia that led the 'west' to position 'Alexandria' as 'lost object' now sees a Palestinian-led archival project acting to repossess 'Palestine' as their 'lost object'.

In his 'Freud lecture' Said takes this point further to reflect upon the tension between 'figurative and literal' worlds that accompany the possessional acts of (Orientalist, Zionist) settler-colonialism in Palestine [8]. He addresses the violence at stake in the material objectification of the quest to possess/ re-possess home, origin and refuge as 'facts on the ground' and the dispossession of the 'other(s)' that accompanies these acts. The literalization and territorializing of these fevers and desires to possess the 'all too perfect' reality of the homeland thus works to the exclusion most notably of 'indigenous' populations (op.cit). It is the exclusivity of

the Zionist identification with archival 'stories of destiny' and with the 'proverbial people of exile' that has led to the dispossession of 'Palestine' and exacerbation of its status/non-status as 'lost object' [2]. As Said argues heritage-archival-cultural forms – specifically that of the material force of archaeology - continue to be pressed into the service of sustaining a violent politics of separation that operates across 'imaginative' as well as 'real' geographies. Similarly, Doumani argues that the contemporary strain of 'archive fever' spreading among Palestinians, is symptomatic of the connectivity's between this contemporary 'archival impulse' and foundational and continued violence: he argues that it, 'this is not an unusual obsession for any social group that experiences the traumas of dispossession and displacement on a massive scale as the Palestinians did in 1948. Nor is it unusual that the archival impulse is still strong six decades after that seminal event' further iterating, 'After all, 1948 was not a moment, but a process that continues as I write. The appropriation of Palestinian land and control over the movement of Palestinians is a daily reality. Indeed, not a day passes without a Palestinian home full of memories and memorabilia being destroyed by Israeli bulldozers; or without some olive grove, patiently tended and referred to by name across the generations, being cleared out for the building of Jewish only roads' [6].

What is crucial to recognize, Doumani argues further, is that the spread of 'archive fever' in Palestine reveals the vital role of 'lay persons' and a variety of 'actors', - individuals, institutions, groups - that have become an essentialized part of the archival-heritage networks many of which are located 'outside' routinised notions of the heritage-archival profession/ professionals. Therefore, not only is the 'genre of memorial literature written mostly by laypersons about their families, and towns, among other matters' highlighted by Doumani but a context in which 'Until proper archival collections are established, [it] therefore, … becomes incumbent on individuals, family associations, universities, think tanks, research centres, city clubs, student groups, and a wide range of non-governmental institutions (cultural, political, religious, charitable, and so on) to take matters into their own hands; hence the tremendous expansion in both technological and social spaces of archival activity' [6].

It is evident that this popular commitment is bound up in the recognition of the need for strong cultural activism as a form of resistance and the creation of an 'archival democracy' as Doumani B [6] has dubs it. This has effectively made the archive 'everyone's concern' and has helped replace the once dominant technicist-led diagnostic approach to problem solving with alternative recasting of the archive as 'social spaces'. It is here too that 'new technologies' offer alternative points of access to social and cultural networks at a time when the 'everyday realities' of daily life for Palestinians increasingly bound up in restricted mobility. Moreover, the desire to address recent history and to create spaces and opportunities for remembering and commemoration is also clear. Doumani reiterates this, 'I mention the archiving of the present, not just the past, because Palestinians are still incapable of stopping the continued and accelerating erasure of the two greatest archives of all: the physical landscape and the bonds of daily life that constitute

an organic social formation' [6]. The need to network and support the use of both traditional and new technologies within this scenario is strong and again part of Doumani's reflection on the nature of Palestinian archive fever, '… someone or some group is busy interviewing old people and compiling genealogies, searching for photographs and letters, collecting textiles and folksongs, visiting and repairing manuscripts, and compiling information on old houses and destroyed villages' (ibid.). Links are also actively cultivated and maintained between the occupied territories to the Palestinian diaspora, again new technologies and social media play a key role and 'have made it possible for the masses … to engage in archival activity. Anyone with access to a digital camera and/or sound recorder and a computer can share data files with millions of others and create a dense network of connections that can transcend geography if not always language and class'. This focus on both 'virtual' and 'real' archival reconstruction within Palestine and in the diaspora is a crucial means by which 'besieged' communities can gain a sense 'wholeness-in-dispersal' and resolve to some extent the desire to maintain connectivity in diaspora. The recently constructed Palestinian Museum fulfils an anchoring role within such a vision - as the Palestinian 'mothership' - networked with international 'satellite' museum-archival spaces.

Archival Futures – Reconfiguring Promise and Responsibility

It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come [4]. To bring our quest to conclusion requires us to make a third and final return to the Freud Museum to better address our emergent archival themes. Indeed, Freud's archive/home/museum is a poignant example and reminder, of the original 'diasporic condition of the archive' with 'its founding being a consequence of exile' [5]. Indeed, Freud's enforced flight from the Nazi Anschluss and subsequent exile from his Austrian homeland led him to identify and find refuge in London as his chosen 'Promised Land'. Our chosen companions on our quest similarly have articulated in different ways our moral-ethical 'debt', 'duty', 'response' and 'responsibility' towards the 'exilic', 'besieged subject' and the pressing need to give refuge and recognition to 'the archive of another' [4,6-8]. Our archival questing although not necessarily a redemptive journey has, I hope opened-up points of archival potency, paradox and possibility for further critical reflection and reconfiguration. Given our archival quest has been undertaken at a contemporary moment in which many

thousands more displaced persons - refugees and migrants – risk their lives undertaking journeys to other 'promised lands' they may never see nor enter, I would argue our obligation to return to, reconnect with and re-work the recurring motif that links our archival constituencies across space and time and that reminds us that the first, original constituency of the archive is that of the 'figure of exile'. This in turn demands that questions of the 'future', of 'promise' and of 'responsibility for tomorrow' be bound up and reconfigured within the foundational responsibility to 're-house' and 'give refuge' to 'memory-in-exile' Butler B [1] and to develop new operational strategies to direct these towards empowering these 'besieged subjects' in the present.

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Professors' Azza Kararah and Mustafa El-Adabbi intellectual guardians and keepers of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. They are both sadly missed and deeply respected.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest.

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