

Biographies of Archives

In post-colonies where oral cultures prevailed previously, as in South Africa, the colonial archive exists today as the single most significant source of information about the pre-colonial past. In post colonies engagement with the pre-colonial past is often a project of contemporary redemption, a way of rethinking the denigrations imposed by a larger colonial (and in South Africa's case, apartheid) knowledge project, most notably that of scientific racism. The colonial archive was the locus of its evidentiary basis, and is regarded thus as profoundly contaminated. Yet, because colonial officials, settler intelligentsias and others archived so assiduously, actively capturing elements of pre-colonial knowledge in forms desired by the imperial and colonial powers and academies, the colonial archive brims with materials germane to the pre-colonial past. Skilled historians already mine it for such purposes. Mostly they mine for rare nuggets of fact, attentive to the basic bias of the archive.

I will argue that the time is ripe for significantly extending the methodological and theoretical apparatus that we bring to bear when engaging such an archive. Specifically I will talk about the way in which biographies of archives change the way in which we "mine" archives. This would involve spelling out what is entailed in the writing up of the life story of an archive, the challenges of tracking the iterative and recursive relationship between the archive on the one hand, and public and academic discourses on the other, the one shaping and reshaping the other over time. This destabilizes the conventional notion of the archive as a static space of neutral preservation and obliges a conversation about the relationship between archive and its contexts over time, and the attendant epistemological implications

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