

Archive Notes: Travelling Africa & the Archives

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In 2012 I made three significant changes to my MA course, “Travelling Africa: Writing the Cape to Cairo”, which I first taught at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2006. I always revise it annually in terms of the course coverage, but now, instead of two conventional 4,000-word essays based on the syllabus (which includes travel writing, journalism, novels, films), students submit a 1,500-word creative/critical travelogue and an “archive project”: that is, a 5,000-word critical preface to an appendix of some 25 pages of archival material. In both cases, the only requirements are that students respond, in some way, to ideas of “travel” and “Africa”, and that their work is grounded in critical readings on travel or travel writing. At the end of the course, we showcase the archive projects in our annual “Travelling Africa & the Archives” conference.

The idea behind the archive project is inspired by the historian Antoinette Burton’s collection of essays, *Archive Stories*. Burton makes us think about our own journeys to archives, and issues of provenance, access, selection. Thus, as preparation, and to complement the reading on the course, the syllabus includes physical travel in the form of archive excursions: for example to our own SOAS Archives, the manuscripts and maps at the British Library, King’s FCO collection, and further afield to the National Archives at Kew, the Royal Geographical Society, and (by riverboat from Embankment), the Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.

We “workshop” various critical readings on the archives in advance of these excursions, so we are also engaged with the work of Ann Laura Stoler on the colonial archive; so too we consider the connections between archives and architecture by reading from Burton’s monograph, *Dwelling in the Archive* together with Achille Mbembe on “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits”: to what extent do archives depend on an “official” repository? If, as Mbembe writes, ‘not all documents are destined to be archives’,² what about more private archives?

Some of the projects students have embarked on have taken this route instead, so that long hidden or forgotten family archives have been the core of their appendix. Others have looked at hand-written diaries of naval officers rounding the Cape of Good Hope, or footage of state visits by African leaders. In their critical preface, students reflect as much on their archival selection as on the content of what they have chosen, on the whereabouts of the archive and their access to it, on the genesis of their interest, and on their consultations of other archival material that it might be in conversation with. In this way, they are involved in creating an anthology of archival material that expands our ideas about “travel” and “travel writing”, from colonial times to the present day. They

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² A. Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and Its Limits’, in C. Hamilton et al. (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), pp. 19-26, at p. 19.

may consider issues of transcription, authorship, authenticity; and they critically analyse ways of “reading Africa” and representation, considering issues such as documentation, composition, genre, mapping, illustration.

It has been exciting to see the stunning and original work produced by students on the course, and the different archival collections they choose to focus on (ranging from difficult-to-decipher manuscripts, to typescripts, out-of-copyright published accounts, to new digital archives). The three archive projects revised for publication in this journal are evidence of inspired independent research, and the extraordinary range of texts and images in the archives that negotiate a more complex and nuanced picture of “travelling Africa”.

References

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