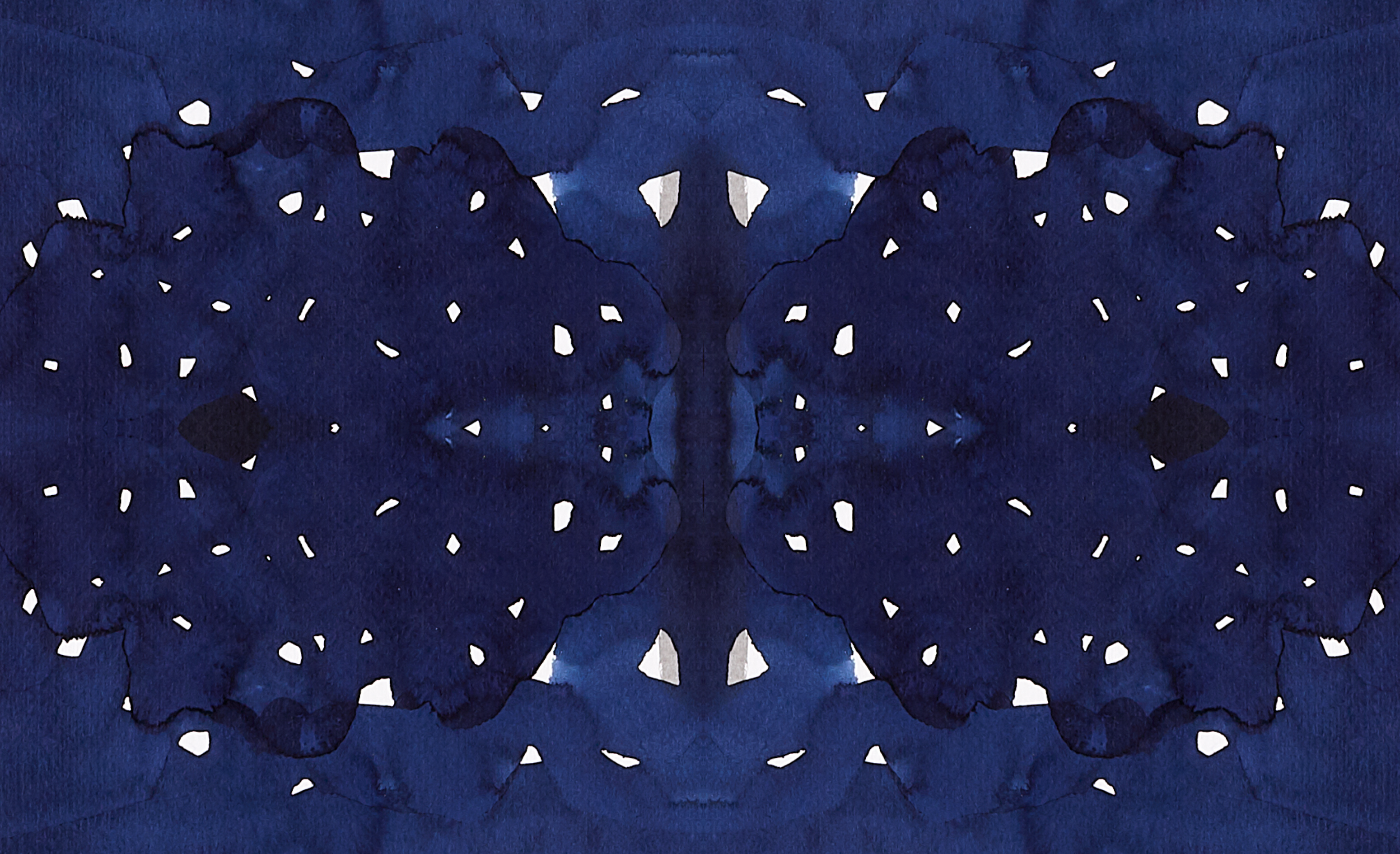




**LOST LIBRARIES,  
BURNT ARCHIVES**

edited by  
Sindi-Leigh McBride  
& Julia Rensing







LOST LIBRARIES,  
BURNT ARCHIVES



Lost Libraries, Burnt Archives

A creative publication  
© 2023

Editors:  
Sindi-Leigh McBride and Julia Rensing

Contributors: Danielle Bowler, Nicola Brandt, Sophie Cope, Dag Henrichsen, Duane Jethro, Atiyyah Khan, Bongani Kona, Lerato Maduna, Portia Malatjie, Sindi-Leigh McBride, Nisha Merit, Santu Mofokeng, Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, Jade Nair, Masande Ntshanga, Koleka Putuma, Julia Rensing, Lorena Rizzo, Ruth Sacks, Niren Tolsi, Eugene van der Merwe, Laura Windvogel, Carine Zaayman

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# *Introduction*

Sindi-Leigh McBride & Julia Rensing



Salvaged card catalogue at the Jagger Library (2022) 35mm film.  
Photograph by Sindi-Leigh McBride

*Lost Libraries, Burnt Archives* contemplates what surfaces when a library is burnt, an archive lost, and what emerges from the ashes and ruins. As African Studies scholars attuned to the gravitas of the University of Cape Town’s Special Collections, we were horrified by the loss of the Jagger Library to wildfire on 18 April 2021. Constructed in the 1930s, the Jagger Library originally served as the main library of the University of Cape Town but, at the time of the fire, was home to the Special Collections department which included the significant African Studies collections of published monographs and pamphlets, as well as a rare book collection, several specialist collections, and one of the largest African film collections in the world. We watched the blaze online from Basel, Switzerland, aggrieved for the implications of this loss, not only for the university and its community but for African Studies in general. As professor of International Economic Relations Adebayo Olukoshi succinctly puts it, “African Studies outside Africa has generally enjoyed better resource endowments than African Studies in Africa itself.”<sup>1</sup> For an African institution to no longer hold the wealth of knowledge resources that UCT Libraries Special Collections represented is both epistemically and politically devastating.

We later discovered that Duane Jethro and Jade Nair would be curating a commemorative exhibition and were really interested in learning more about their work through an active and inclusive learning approach that involved others. *Of Smoke and Ash: The Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition* is a collaborative project between the Centre for Curating the Archive, Michaelis Galleries, and the University of Cape Town Libraries. The public exhibition aimed to simultaneously memorialise the loss of the UCT Jagger Library building and its archive and celebrate UCT librarians and volunteers who participated in the salvage operations that followed. In their curatorial statement, Jethro and Nair explain: “We pay homage to the grief by creating a curatorial space evocative of the smoky, chaotic textures of the disaster. The exhibition is itself a salvage project.”<sup>2</sup> At the Michaelis Galleries, situated on UCT’s Hiddingh campus, a faintly singed smell permeated the materials gathered by the curators. Charred books and other found objects from the Jagger Library site were presented together with images and texts contributed by volunteers, artworks created by graduate students from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, and UCT’s own documentary record of the Salvage Process.

1 Adebayo Olukoshi, ‘African Scholars and African Studies’, *Development in Practice* 16, no. 6 (November 2006): 540.  
2 Duane Jethro and Jade Nair, ‘Curatorial Statement: *Of Smoke and Ash: The Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition*’, University of Cape Town, accessed 8 January 2023, <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/of-smoke-and-ash/page/curatorial-statement>

This publication takes its cue from how Jethro and Nair used exhibition-making as a medium to make sense of the tragedy, not only to mourn what is lost and celebrate the salvage efforts but also to expand how the event was understood. In our own work, we have been similarly interested in thinking about avenues to broaden approaches to knowledge production in African Studies. Like Jethro and Nair, we are committed to pursuing, in professor of Literary and Cultural Studies Pumla Dineo Gqola’s words, “new ways in which meaning might be further harnessed by placing the creative and the explicitly critical alongside one another.”<sup>3</sup> In that spirit, we reached out to the curators, designed a workshop for collective engagement with the exhibition, and invited a group of artists and academics interested in archives, art history, and other related topics.

The workshop took place in April 2022, exactly a year after the tragedy, and began with a guided tour of the gutted interior of the Jagger Library, led by Geographic Information Systems (GIS) specialist Thomas Slingsby that proved to be both informative and emotional.<sup>4</sup> This was followed by an exhibition walkthrough by the curators and a deep listening session by DJ and writer Atiyah Khan. She reflects on this in her essay, ‘Lamentations of Fire’, which includes a QR code that links to her impeccable set and can be listened to as a powerful sonic accompaniment while reading the book.

The perspectives presented emerge from an array of practices – photography, fiction, curatorship, and fine arts – as well as from different academic disciplines. In varied ways, contributors explore the complex layers of meaning connected to the fire at the Jagger Library. Jethro and Nair offer personal and professional reflections on the experience of engaging with the process of making sense of the destruction. In an interview, photographer Lerato Maduna shares insights into the emotional aspects of documenting the aftermath of the disaster and how this deepened her own artistic practice.

In many of the contributions, the issue of loss is evocatively explored without descending into gloom, for example, in Sophie Cope’s pairing of personal musings on loss and damaged astronomical charts salvaged from the Jagger Library. In her interview with artist Lady Skollie, who contributed the striking cover art for this publication, Danielle Bowler asks the questions, “How do you quantify loss?” and, “What is it, precisely, that

3 Pumla Dineo Gqola, ‘Whirling worlds? Women’s poetry, feminist imagination and contemporary South African publics’, *scrutiny2* 16, no. 2 (2011): 5.  
4 A panorama tour of the Jagger Reading Room after the fire is accessible online at <https://ibalimanifest.uct.ac.za/jagger/>



has been lost?” Short stories by Sindi-Leigh McBride and Masande Ntshanga respond to these questions and “construct an archaeology of absences”, reminding us of the potential and limits of what may be gained from absent presences.<sup>5</sup> Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, meanwhile, prompts a shift in attention to the regenerative opportunities of queer fire – understood as “an expression that moves queer bodies to make themselves and their labour visible” – in his reading of a performance by artist Qondiswa James, *The Fire This Time* (2022).

Reflective essays by Lorena Rizzo and Julia Rensing explore what remains after destruction, what we believe to be ‘saving’ from ruins, and how these questions relate to the concept of the archive. Carine Zaayman also reflects on the ashes left behind and what they tell us about “the hierarchies instantiated by archives”, while Portia Malatjie turns to South African artistic practices “to account for different forms of knowledge-production, conservation and dissemination.”

Transferring these considerations to other fires and other libraries, Nisha Merit interviews artist Ofri Cnaani about her work in response to the 2018 fire at Brazil’s National Museum, while Dag Henrichsen offers an epistolary perspective on the 2000 fire at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien in Basel, Switzerland. The more daunting dimensions of fire as an elemental force are evoked in the photo-essays by Eugene van der Merwe and Nicola Brandt who simultaneously engage complex ecocritical questions that arise when fires blaze at sites of colonial conquest. Ruth Sacks similarly reflects on the material and visual legacies surfacing from archives that speak to the violent reverberations of colonial projects.

There are contributions that urge thinking beyond the fire, the university, the archive: Bongani Kona shares a nuanced mediation on memory, while Niren Tolsi braves both the “fires of rage” and the horrors of lives lost to the ever-burning flames of global xenophobia. A smouldering poem by Koleka Putuma reminds us that, though “we have been intimate with fires for too long”, we remain in need of new ways of reading fires, libraries, and archives, which resonates strongly with Zanele Muholi’s important

5 Martin Hall, ‘People in a Changing Urban Landscape: Excavating Cape Town’, Inaugural Lecture, University of Cape Town, 25 March 1992. Cited in Gabeba Baderoon, ‘Oblique figures: representations of Islam in South African media and culture’, PhD dissertation (University of Cape Town, 2004), <https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/7965>

assertion that “the archive means we are counted in history.”<sup>6</sup> Iconic photographs by Santu Mofokeng are proof of just how true this statement is. For us, this creative publication is an attempt to expand knowledge production practices in African Studies, questioning not only who is included in libraries and archives but also how the ‘knowledge’ of these realities and related epistemic injustices emerge.

Akin to how the curators salvaged and commemorated, the contributions gathered here similarly parse through the old and assemble myriad new ways of knowing. In a way, this book, emerging from the ashes of many other books, is a response to a lost archive and a contribution to a new one in the making.

Finally, on the practicalities of book development: a limited print run inadvertently resulted in a forced intentionality about how this book is distributed, bringing to head the injustice of limited access to creative publications in South Africa. As such, the book was not made available for sale and instead distributed throughout and beyond university environments to public libraries, research institutions, and specialised archives throughout the country and beyond.

6 Muholi quoted in Suyin Haynes, “‘The Archive Means We Are Counted in History.’ Zanele Muholi on Documenting Black, Queer Life in South Africa,” *Time*, 3 December 2020, <https://time.com/5917436/zanele-muholi/>

# *Editors' Note*

This publication would not have emerged without the aesthetic and intellectual inspiration that we drew from [\*There Are Mechanisms In Place\*](#) (2018) edited by Nkule Mabaso and Nomusa Makhubu. A creative publication on artist Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum's work, the book follows the artist's solo exhibition of the same name, shown at Michaelis Galleries at the University of Cape Town (UCT) between 23 August and 21 September 2018. It is a marvel, centring and collaborating with Black women cultural producers in response to Sunstrum's work.

Among the many inspiring art books and catalogues that motivated us, [\*There Are Mechanisms In Place\*](#) was the lodestar while we were designing *Lost Libraries*, *Burnt Archives*. It was also a key motivation for us deciding to work with the same printer, Pulp Paperworks in Johannesburg. We have been vocal about this inspiration throughout this process – sharing this with participants at the initial workshop, authors who contributed to the publication, as well as publicly at the book launch at UCT on 28 February 2023. We were therefore horrified when it was brought to our attention that we have failed to cite this influence. It seems paltry after the fact, but omitting to reference a work that we hold in such high esteem (not to mention, scholars that we respect and admire) is a mistake that we regret immensely. Hence this note as the beginning of a shared reflection on the oversight. Another regret is the impossibility of adding this note to the 100 physical copies that have already been distributed.

In grappling with how this happened, the only explanation (not excuse) we can think of is this: when writing the introduction, our attention was consumed by presenting the context in which the book emerged (the fire and resultant commemorative exhibition) which necessitated acknowledging the numerous actors at UCT – from the curators of the commemorative exhibition to those working at UCT Libraries who facilitated our tour, and the bigger picture of those involved in the salvage operations which allowed for this broader project to take place. This does not of course justify the oversight or come close to remedying it. We share this only as part of our reflection of trying to understand the oversight.

We have formally apologised to Nkule Mabaso and Nomusa Makhubu, and are in conversation about possible ways to deal with this more productively. We would also like to sincerely apologise to anyone who feels uncomfortable about this error. In the spirit of the kind of ethical and accountable scholarship that we strive for, we invite anybody interested in discussing this further to please reach out.

7 November 2023  
Basel, Switzerland



Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Koleka Putuma* is a multi-award-winning theatre practitioner, writer, and poet. Her poetry tackles themes like homophobia, womanhood, race, and the dynamics of relationships, religion, and politics. Her debut poetry collection, *Collective Amnesia* (2017), was awarded the 2018 Glenna Luschei Prize for African Poetry and named 2017 Book of the Year by the *City Press*. It has been translated into 8 languages. She is a Rolex Mentor, Forbes Africa 30 Under 30 Honoree, and recipient of numerous awards for her play, *No Easter Sunday for Queers* (2020). Putuma is the Founder and Director of Manyano Media, a multidisciplinary creative company that empowers and produces works by Black queer women. Manyano Media published her sophomore collection of poems, *Hullo, Bu-Bye, Koko, Come In* (2021). In 2022, Putuma was awarded the Standard Bank Young Artist Award – a first for poetry.

Koleka Putuma

*"I am thinking about the potential  
for disaster to allow us to re-see  
(or see for the first time)  
The things that remain"*

*—Sophie Cope*

Tongues and tires  
are not the only things torched

in this country  
everything burns.

Flames leaping from the roof of the old National Assembly  
douse the Archbishop's ashes—

arson signaling an abscess.

Volcanoes on the outskirts  
boil over and into a CBD

veneered for tourists.

In a riot, a stampede shields  
a baby thrown from a building on fire.

Temples of learning and living  
swollen shut

by our chronic pyromania.

We have been intimate with fires for too long.

The Railway Depot furnace at Kaserne, Johannesburg  
provides an index of music and books

burned at municipal incinerators  
under the Customs Act of 1955,

archival documents compressed in trucks  
from Pretoria's Central Police Station to the furnaces of Iscor,  
volumes of censored shelves

dropped into a 20-meter high oven—

testimonials whistling into smoke.

Jacobsen's index spills  
a catalogue of confiscated ideas that would not burn,

lost libraries that were never logged as history,  
as fact.

What is feared most by those in power  
can be found in the spines they crackdown.

26 000 books were banned under the Publications Act of 1974,  
contraband funneled through broken telephones.

Reading has always been incendiary  
under the Riotous Assembly Act of 1930,  
under the Suppression of Communism Act of 1950,  
under the Public Safety Act of 1953,

we find

an index of texts lost,  
an index of texts out of print,

an index of texts buried,  
an index of texts drowned,

an index of all that remains;

we remember everything  
the fires could not erase.



# *Collaboration and Community: Volunteering and the Making of Of Smoke and Ash: The Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition*

**Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives**

**Date: February 2023**

Jade Nair (she/her) is a curator who has worked in the visual arts and heritage sectors for a decade. She has worked across diverse platforms including exhibitions, digital archives, documentary films, and book publications; she has collaborated with both private and public stakeholders in the arts and heritage sectors including NIROX Arts, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, and the District Six Museum. Jade mobilises her interest in fashion through curatorial practice to think through gender and race politics in fashion media and the garment and textile production industries.

Jade Nair



View of water-damaged books in the triage tent of the Jagger Library fire event.



When the mountain fire that destroyed the Jagger Library broke out on 18 April 2021, I watched it unfold, in horror, via social media and news stations. By the next morning, it had wrapped around the mountain towards the city bowl and filled my home with smoke and bits of charred paper (from the Jagger library perhaps?) and thus necessitated evacuation. In the context of the ongoing Covid-19 global pandemic, the destruction of the Jagger Library and now, evacuation from my home, meant that this was an emotionally charged time for me. In this text, I reflect on that time, particularly the experience of volunteering during the salvage process and the making of the memorial exhibition.

My experience with the Jagger Library began as an undergraduate student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and remained a constant presence as I went on to work at the Centre for Curating the Archive, a research unit at UCT. At the time of the fire, I was working on the digitisation of the Bleek and Lloyd archive, led by Professor Pippa Skotnes. The archive sits within Special Collections, then based at the Jagger Library and is an irreplaceable collection of dictionary slips, notebooks, and other paper-based materials documenting the !xam and !kun languages.

Whilst volunteering during the salvage operation, the idea for an exhibition that memorialised the Jagger Library was born. Dr Duane Jethro and I co-curated the exhibition, *Of Smoke and Ash: The Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition* (2022), which enabled us to bring multiple and nuanced perspectives to the making of the exhibition. We also initiated an open call to volunteers, inviting them to share their experiences of the salvage process in the form of text reflections, photographic documentation and creative responses. These materials constitute a co-edited publication by Jethro and me entitled *What Remains: Volunteer Memories of the Jagger Library Salvage Operation* (2022). Much of the curatorial work I did on this exhibition was informed by my own experience of volunteering during the salvage process.

The making of this exhibition was underpinned by collaboration, a strategy that reflects the nature of the salvage process that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the library fire. Whilst this process was led by the university library staff, it was made possible by hundreds of volunteers. This included staff and students from the university and, also, heart-warmingly, the larger Cape Town community – interested individuals, school children, and local Sea Cadets.

## DID YOU VOLUNTEER DURING THE RECOVERY AFTER THE UCT LIBRARY FIRE?



Photo by Dilshaad Brey

In 2022 the Centre for Curating the Archive, in partnership with UCT Libraries, will hold an exhibition commemorating the UCT Library Fire. It will honour our librarians and the volunteers who contributed to the salvage process.

We are reaching out to volunteers and participants only for materials reflecting their participation and the energy of salvage.

### WHAT DID THE SALVAGE MEAN TO YOU?

Please send us your: photographs of recovery work and participation; your written texts, notes and messages; other reflective recollections about that time including voice notes; and your artistic interpretations of loss and salvage, such as drawings, paintings, collage and other creative media reflecting your experience of the period.



Submissions can be made by scanning the QR code.  
Queries can be sent to: [ccaexhibitions@uct.ac.za](mailto:ccaexhibitions@uct.ac.za)



centre for  
CURATING  
the archive



LIBRARIES

MICHAELIS  
GALLERIES

## UCT LIBRARY FIRE COMMEMORATIVE EXHIBITION 2022



These volunteers, of which I was one, formed lines that stretched three floors below ground into the waterlogged basements of the Jagger Library to retrieve the precious materials housed there. Once the water-damaged materials were brought up from the basement, they were sent to the triage tent: a white marquee set up outside the Jagger Library on the university's plaza to conduct emergency conservation on the materials. Again, led by librarians, this tent was populated by volunteers with experience in conservation, and this was where the Centre for Curating the Archive staff were based, along with specialist conservators from DK Conservators, the University of Pretoria's Master's in Tangible Heritage Conservation programme, and a number of volunteer conservators from abroad. Through the donation of time and skills in combination with funding from corporate sponsors, the salvage process particularly highlighted for me the value of collaboration and interaction. Below, I answer the questions that were put forward to all volunteers in an open call to document their experiences.

### What motivated you to volunteer?

As a university staff member and alumna, the Jagger Library was a constant presence in my university life: as a research resource and a place that even held some of my own work in the form of documentary films that I had worked on, namely, *Movie Snaps* (2015), *An Impossible Return* (2015), and *Promises and Lies: Faultlines in the ANC* (2016), all directed by Professor Siona O'Connell. These films all consider life in the aftermath of apartheid and the legacy of colonialism in the Western Cape and draw on photographic and personal archives of photographers and the public.

At the time of the fire, I was working on the digitisation of the Bleek and Lloyd archive housed at the Jagger Library. This process, which is still ongoing, entails transporting physical materials from the university library's Special Collections to the Centre for Curating the Archive's (CCA) digitisation centre at the Michaelis School of Fine Art. The slips of paper and notebooks that constitute the archive are then scanned and assigned metadata by a project team which has included Fazlin van der Schyff, Dr Nina Liebenberg, Sophie Cope, and Roxy Jones.

During the salvage process, there was, for me, an urgency to access and assess that particular archive, but also to help in the salvage of any material. Ultimately, a crucial motivation was to salvage what was left of an important and invaluable resource for many communities and academic disciplines.



Jade Nair standing on the site of what was the Jagger Library reading room.





Construction workers clearing the site formerly the Jagger Reading Room

### **What was your experience at that time?**

Despite the enormous tragedy that the fire caused, the volunteering process was instructive and exciting. The grandeur and formality of the architecture, the silence in the ruin, and the invaluable materials that the Jagger Library had housed made it a formidable place to visit. Previously, before this experience as a volunteer, the library was not (for me) a welcoming space. I did not feel that it was a place that I could comfortably spend time, and the impressiveness of the building and its contents were as intimidating as the feeling of not being welcome. As such, having access to parts of the Reading Room and the basement stores that were, traditionally off-limits to non-library staff before the fire was thrilling and provided a fascinating glimpse into the usually invisible workings of the Special Collections library.

### **What memories do you hold onto?**

The camaraderie of the salvage effort. Meeting and working alongside colleagues and students from across the university's faculties; learning conservation techniques from the volunteer conservators; and working with the precious materials being sent up from the basement stores.

### **What did the salvage ultimately mean to you?**

The Jagger Library fire occurred just over a year after the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. It had been a long period of isolation that left many, including myself, longing for a sense of community. The salvage operation was an opportunity to join a large group of people working towards a common goal despite differences in disciplines and skill sets. It was truly energising in the sense that it created a tangible sense of community at the university.



# Sky in the Library: Notes on Mud, Gaps and Momentum in the Aftermath of the Disaster\*

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Sophie Cope* is a writer, visual artist, and 2021 recipient of the Michaelis Prize at the Michaelis School of Fine Art (University of Cape Town). She is interested in intersections of theory and practice, maps and territories, making and curating. Conceptually informed by a training in printmaking, she explores the symbolic and material resonances of books and texts across multiple mediums. She believes in the potential for creative practice to transform lived experience beyond the gallery context and is committed to a meaning-making that is dialogical and shared. She is also pursuing a career in clinical psychology.

Sophie Cope

Burned through, the roof fell in and was replaced by the sky behind it. *The sky behind the sky.* A library filled with burnt astronomical charts opens up the view to the sky above it. While the literal ash was falling, I turned towards the past, but the world of the present kept rushing in to meet it. I walked through the frame of the burnt-down library and breathe in pieces of a map of the sky.

*Things die and fall through themselves and then come back, old and new.*

*Book leaves turned back to tree leaves.*

*An earthworm on University Avenue makes a tunnel through a burnt page of the dictionary, eating the words into earth. There is monumental repair and fragmentation.*

The cycle made sense but felt as if it *shouldn't* have.

As I contemplate this, I am thinking about the potential for disaster to allow us to re-see (or see for the first time) the things that remain. In one sense, as the library is emptied of much of its ‘real’ material structure and language and content, it becomes open for interpretation. We can walk around and see any landscape we want in the walls of the burnt-down building. It can be filled (more than before) by whatever we bring to it. It can be a place for thinking about how the seemingly ‘impossible’ is often closer and more possible than one might think.

One day, it might be a library, with special books and special rules about how to behave around the books, and the next day, it might be a construction site with mud and scaffolding and falling pieces and things scheduled for demolition. And it might be both a construction site *and* a library. How does that work?

Strange, blurred rules and labels of places – how is one supposed to behave in a library-construction-site-archive-dump? The space’s transformation through the fire might force us to think about how the rules and ideas that we create about ‘what a library is’ (or any institution, or unsaid invisible norm) are always a little shakier than they appear to be. In this way, the burnt library allows us to think more about the concept of *loss* – our own loss, things not directly related to the burnt-book loss – as well as a general unravelling of institutional ‘norms’, in the aftermath of the unthinkable.

\* An earlier draft of this reflective piece was published in *What Remains: Volunteer Memories of the Jagger Fire Salvage Operation* (2022) edited by Dr. Duane Jethro and Jade Nair, an accompaniment to the exhibition *Of Smoke and Ash* (2022).



I approach this as the loss of something that I did not know. This is significant because it turns the space into an echo chamber for all the other things that might have been lost before they were experienced properly. It is almost the loss of the *opportunity* to experience the loss. When you lose something you didn't really know, there is also the feeling of losing the future – the idea that there is a future in which this thing or this space *could*, at some point, become known. And so, while it's there, you don't think about it much. No sense of urgency. And then it's gone. Of course, 'the past' is lost when a library burns, but also, it seems, the future in which one can 'go and meet' these things from the past. And where does that leave us?

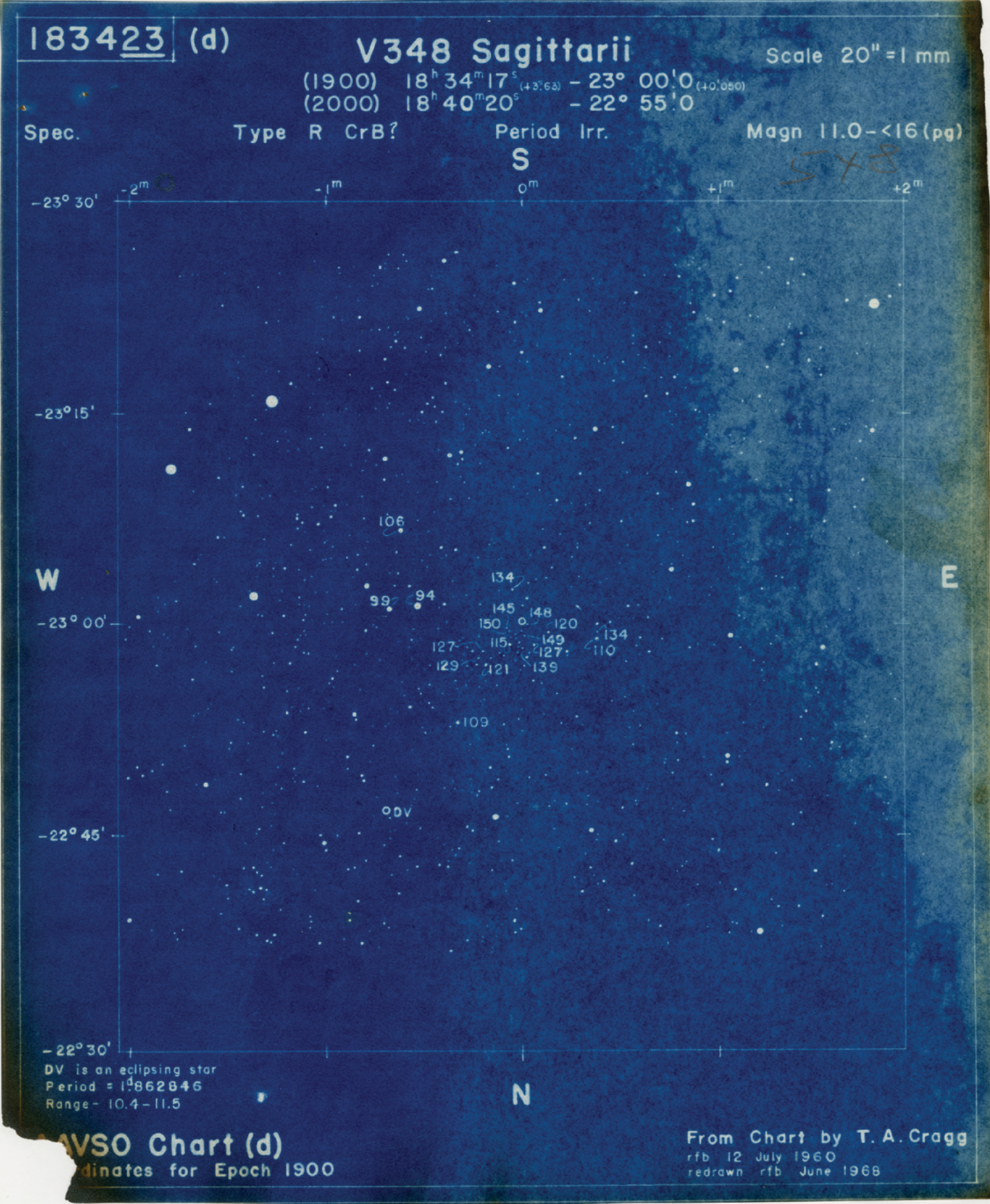
When the loss of a library implicates the loss of the future, it is also perhaps an invitation for the future to be reimagined.

I was thinking about all of these things: walking through the shell of a burnt library, tasting the fragility and transmutability of the archive, re-seeing the present in the aftermath of the disaster, when I created *Sky in the Library* – a projected video piece that I made for the 2022 Jagger Library memorial exhibition.

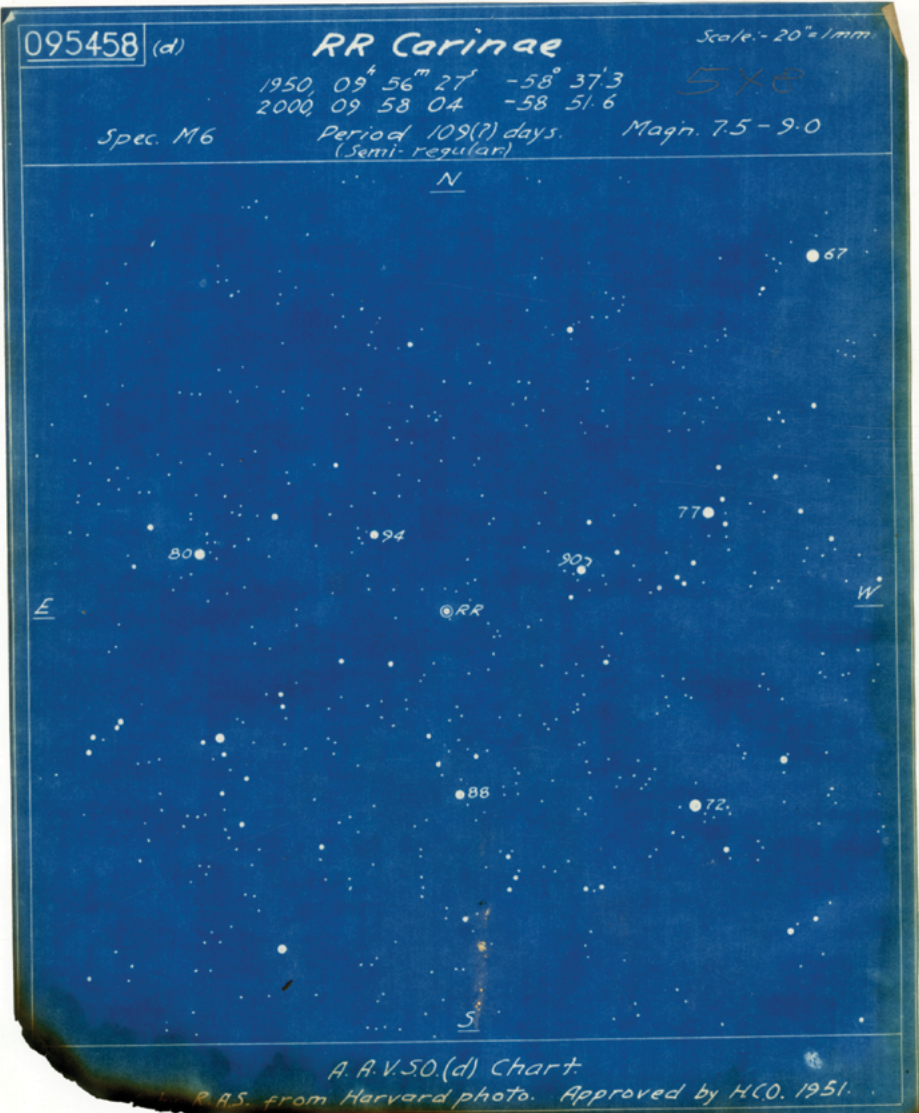
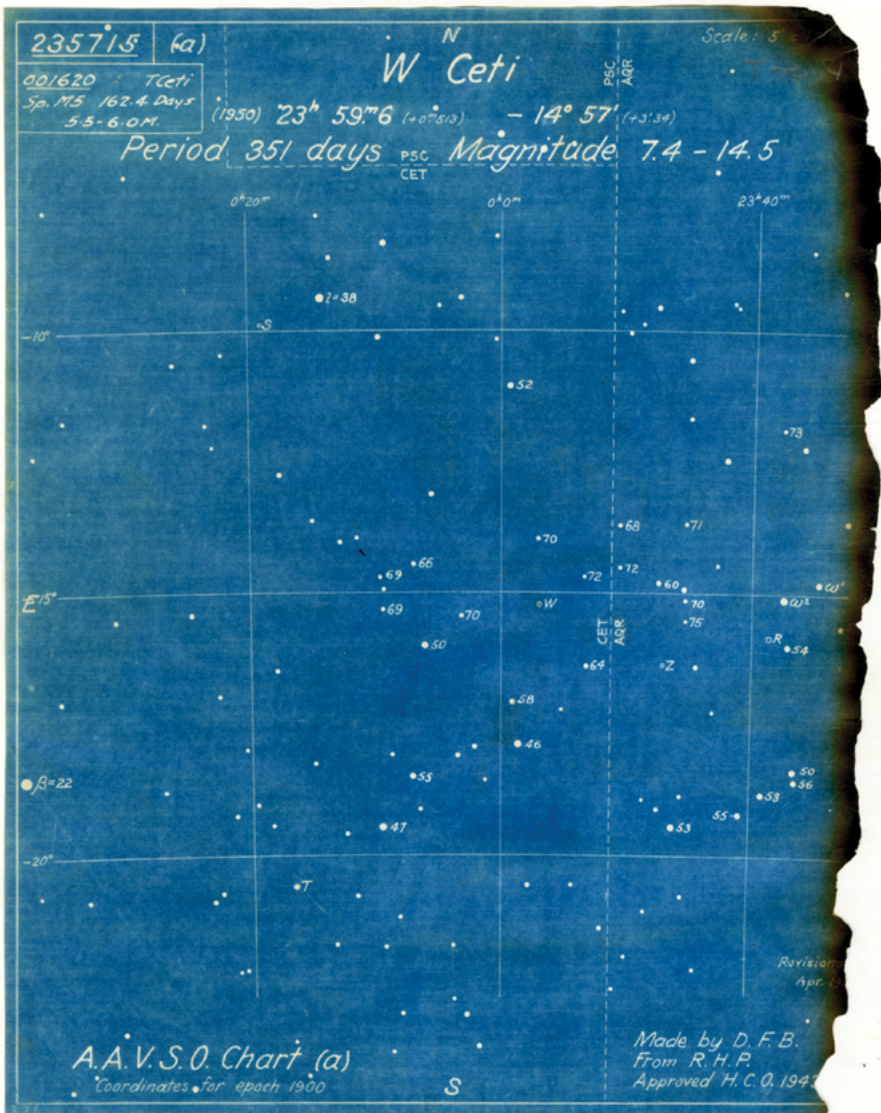
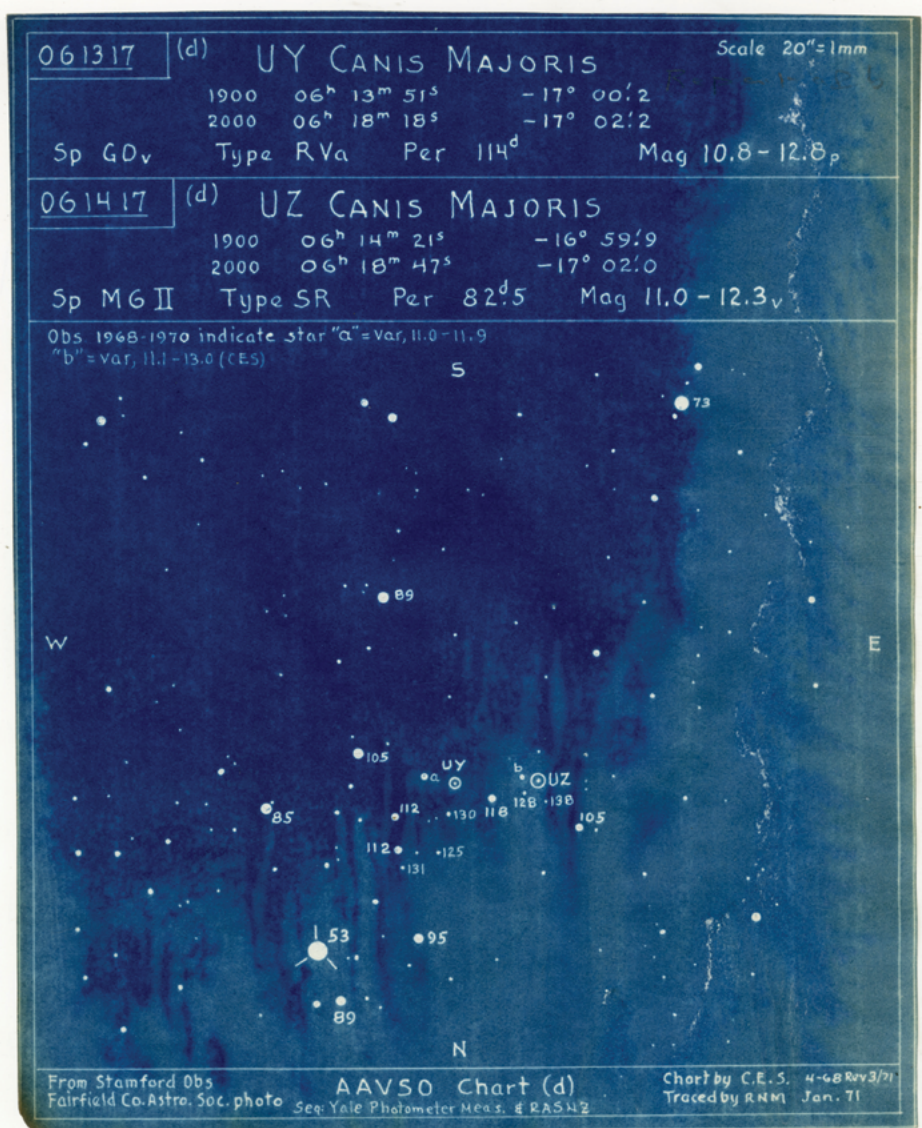
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The work is a dynamic pairing of scanned blue astronomical charts salvaged from Jagger Library and a photograph of the sky above the library where the roof used to be. Positioned as book pages, the projected maps and 'territories' of the sky in the library fall through each other. These maps are marked both by hand-traced constellations and by fire and water from the event. They stand as material records of the destruction of the library and also as objects that have survived this destruction – albeit burned and changed. I am interested in these blurred relationships of maps and territories, change and constancy, and the life of the fragments in the aftermath.

*Sky in the Library* is a way of 'feeling the gap' which was left by the fire – a mode of responding to loss, absences, inverses, transformations and of redescribing the fragments as new things in the present. Instead of filling the gaps, we need alternative narrative representations to reckon with the aftermath of disaster. Because materially, whether legible or entirely dissolved into ash, everything is still here.







All artworks by Sophie Cope



# Lerato Maduna: Photography & The Art of Archiving

Lost Libraries, Burnt Archives                      Date: February 2023

**Lerato Maduna**  
I was born and raised in Soweto, Johannesburg, and I am currently based in Cape Town. I am mother, sister, and daughter; I am invested in healing my childhood traumas. I am currently enrolled in the MFA programme at Michaelis School of Fine Art at UCT. I also hold a BTech in Photography and Diploma in Television and Film Studies from the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). I am also an alumna of the Market Photo Workshop in Johannesburg. For over a decade, I have worked as a photojournalist and documentary photographer for a broad range of print publications and online platforms and worked as a creative researcher in the film industry. I am also a senior photographer in the Communications and Marketing department at UCT.

Sindi-Leigh McBride & Julia Rensing

*“The photograph is able to speak of multiple and simultaneous deaths; it is a text of – and between – deaths. It is particularly well suited as an aide-mémoire and contributes to a different and constantly changing form of knowledge.”*  
— Siona O’Connell<sup>1</sup>

*“All photography is a record of a lost past. Photography does not share music’s ability to be fully remade each time it is presented, nor does it have film’s durational quality, in which the illusion of a present continuous tense is conjured. A photograph shows what was, and is no more [...] in this sense, every photograph is a time-lapse image, and photography is necessarily an archival art.”*  
— Teju Cole<sup>2</sup>

From the moment the fire hit the slopes of Devil’s Peak on 18 April 2021, a vast photographic archive emerged, visually documenting the disaster in real time. But also, interestingly, the aftermath of the fire is just as extensively captured: photographs of the Jagger Library Special Collections in ruins abound; these images of blackened shelves and destroyed books accompany the reports and blog posts shared by both the University of Cape Town and local and international news media reporting on the tragic loss of the library.

1        Siona O’Connell, ‘The Aftermath of Oppression: In Search of Resolution through Family Photographs of the Forcibly Removed of District Six, Cape Town’, *Social Dynamics* 40, no. 3 (September 2012): 591.  
2        Teju Cole, ‘Disappearing Shanghai’, *The New Inquiry*, 30 September 2012, <https://thenewinquiry.com/blog/disappearing-shanghai/>







Most of these visual documents were created by Lerato Maduna, Senior Photographer at the Communications and Marketing Department of the University of Cape Town. Meaning that, much of what we have seen of both the destruction and of what remains, has been seen through her eyes, with her camera lens. From the ashes of one archive, Maduna has built a new one – chronicling flames, ashes, debris, destruction and archival agency.

We spoke with her about the experience of professionally documenting the transformation of the Jagger Library in the aftermath of the blaze, and how this influenced her own insights into and perceptions of what an archive is and what an archive does. At the time of the fire, Maduna was not able to access the area because of security concerns on site; she only began photographing the smouldering scene the following day. Since then, she has returned multiple times to bear witness to the changing space. She described her initial impressions of grave sadness, “walking through that building, seeing books toasted and water everywhere on the different levels [of the library]”, remembering also how she noticed a lost and scorched warning sign, signalling and instructing on what to do ‘in case of a fire’.



And yet, she returned again and again, spending many hours in the desolate now-defunct organs of the building, motivated by an impulse to keep pushing the continued documentation. This ethic of persistence was representative of her unit at the university:

“We have always been encouraged to think ahead, to ask ourselves, ‘Okay, a year from now, what are we going to show? What are we working towards?’ And one of the things we were thinking about was the commemoration. So that was something to consider, to kind of counter any regret [of not documenting].”

Spending so much time meticulously documenting the ruin, the archival remnants, the salvage project and the changes of the place inadvertently led Maduna to contemplate the agency of archives and our illusion that we have any control over them. Put differently, she was forced to confront the widely held myth that libraries and archives are safe storage spaces:

“One could say that UCT libraries likely felt like they had it under control, that they had it on lock-down, that they had created this whole infrastructure around protecting and preserving certain things. And then what happened?”

The preservation of this particular archive was undone by the fire, and with it, any illusion that these spaces are designed for perpetuity:

“In as much as we might feel like we have control over archives or we dictate what happens to archives, [...] I believe that archives and visual works actually have lives of their own and that they have purposes that they have to play. In a sense, when an archive surfaces or disappears, that is part of the archive doing its work.”

Maduna’s intuition is in fact reflected in the science of archive management. Caroline Williams explains that two concepts used by archivists when considering how to manage records and archives are those of the life cycle and the continuum:





“The life-cycle concept is based on the notion that any record has a life, and that like an organic being once it has been generated it has an active life in maturity, a less active life in old age, and in the end is discarded (it ‘dies’) and either destroyed (hell) or transferred to the archives (heaven). (The process of deciding on its long-term future has sometimes been described as purgatory.) We can think of it as the lifespan or time period from the creation or receipt of a record through its useful life to its final disposition. Most records do progress from being current, to semi-current, to non-current (or -active if you prefer).”<sup>3</sup>

But what happens when we take seriously the agency of an archive? Or consider that the ‘death’ of the Jagger Library (as it used to be) might actually be a manifestation of the archive claiming its existential rights, presence, and even perhaps its wilful absence. To paraphrase Maduna: perhaps the destruction of April 2021 was an instance of an archive “liberating itself from a certain cycle”? Taking seriously the archives’ claim to a life of their own is crucial to her photographic practice of “documenting our time” through photography. She does not lay any personal claim to these photographs, many of which have been used across different media platforms, shared on social media, and reproduced and re-contextualised in all kinds of formats. For Maduna, this is part of ‘letting go’ of the work, to afford agency to both the lost archive and the new digital photographic documentation of that loss:

“I don’t feel like I have control over what happens to the works that I have helped to manifest [...] and sometimes I don’t feel like I even want to have control. Those works also don’t belong to me. They are collaborative efforts between myself and other people, and between situations that involve other people.”

Rather than be precious about the photographs that she has taken, Maduna is instead concerned with how the digital realm is replete with images that circulate constantly, endlessly competing for viewers’ attention. Contemplating the consequences, she explains:

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<sup>3</sup> Caroline M. Williams, *Managing Archives: Foundations, Principles and Practice* (Chandos Information Professional Series) (Oxford: Chandos, 2006), 3.





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HELIX



“So much gets lost and loses meaning in this machine that just turns out so much content and so much visual material on a daily basis. Are we documenting or just adding to the noise, the digital noise?”

Perhaps it is this mindfulness, this awareness of a personal contribution to a collective, universal archive that lends a solemnity to Maduna’s photos. Perhaps this is because there is something both intensely personal and affective about constructing, caring for, and feeding photographic archives. Even those tracing tragedies. In this sense, Maduna’s photography truly emerges, as Teju Cole has aptly put it, “an archival art.”<sup>4</sup>

In her own work as an artist and academic, Maduna is concerned with how photographic family archives surface, and she works with her own family archive as an example of this. When she first encountered the photographic archives of her mother and grandmother, it struck her that the women in her family chose the medium of photography to express themselves and document their lives to tell stories of their time, long before it became her own chosen mode of expression. During the political unrest of South Africa in the 1970s, Maduna’s mother took photographs of herself and her loved ones, often posing in their school uniforms, and in doing so created photographic repositories that portrayed the self in a different light to the reality of extreme disruption and despair of the time. Maduna reads this as an act of performance, as a “work of art” that does not mirror the lived experience of that particular time, but instead creates a new, self-chosen visual representation of time and self:

“There is a tension between history and performance and how our grandmothers and mothers put on a show for us to see them in a different light from what history portrayed them as.”

Working with these family archives granted Maduna a window into her foremothers’ past, and she is now especially appreciative of how they began the family tradition of archiving through photography:

<sup>4</sup> Teju Cole, ‘Disappearing Shanghai.’

“I always saw myself as the photographer in the family; but then, when my great-aunt, my grandmother and my mother’s archives surfaced, I realized that I am, in fact, not the first, but this is an inherited thing. My foremothers communicated their situations and their feelings through photography, and they were even doing it more interestingly [...] They were more creative.”

A shared impulse seems to resonate here: the urge to create for the future. To document for future generations to see, envision, and contemplate on certain eras and places through the visual world of photography. And yet, while it is her chosen medium of expression, Maduna, reminiscing about her encounters with the smoke, debris, and ash at the Jagger ruin, remains aware of the more embodied dimensions of the scenes and moment she photographs – or, in the case of the Jagger Library, of the experience in this particular archive. She calls attention not only to what can and must be captured but also to what is left uncaptured, unarchived, and incommunicable:

“That burnt smell. You can only imagine when you see the images. But that smell? Not even motion-picture could communicate that to the viewer. That’s the kind of thing you experience by being there. Everyone who went there can somehow always be returned to that sensorial memory. I just documented glimpses of what happened, but there were so many other sensations of being in that space that could not be archived.”



All photographs by Lerato Maduna



# Heritage Work: Co-Curating the Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Duane Jethro* is a Junior Research Fellow at the Centre for Curating the Archive in the Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town. He focuses on the cultural construction of heritage and contested public cultures. Between 2019 and 2020, he worked as a researcher at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage, CARMAH, at the Humboldt University, Berlin, founded by Professor Sharon Macdonald. His book, *Heritage Formation and the Senses in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Aesthetics of Power* (Bloomsbury Academic), is a cultural history of heritage and sense making in the post-apartheid dispensation.

Duane Jethro

Interpreting the language and labour employed in making sense of disasters as memorials is central to my work as a heritage studies scholar. The rhetorical devices used to describe and come to terms with a socially significant tragedy or triumph; what material culture it attracts and nurtures; who claims it as heritage and how this is done; and what social contestations it triggers – these are some of the interpretive questions I use to approach disaster. On Sunday 18 April 2021, as a wildfire raged on the slopes above the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) Upper Campus, the conceptual barriers that compartmentalise scholarly ‘work’ and being situated in a disaster slowly came undone. A haze of smoke engulfed the city. Images and footage of the ever-progressing fire flickered with increasing frequency on my social media feeds, and notices of heightened concern about the safety of staff, students, and library buildings shuttled through chat platforms. It wasn’t long before the first nightmarish footage of a ferocious blaze inside the Jagger Library building circulated online that afternoon, leaving many aghast. For me, it also left in ashes one notion of scholarly objectivity, igniting the challenge of what it meant to do heritage scholarship ‘at home’.

In what follows, I briefly reprise my participation in co-curating the Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition with my colleague Jade Nair, curator of the Michaelis Galleries, and interpret the curatorial project as an exercise in marking a historic tragedy. That is, doing heritage work.

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The Jagger Library fire was shocking perhaps because of the ferocity of the fire and the scale of the physical damage it caused. It also violently undid the symbolic sense of security and steadfastness of the library as a safe place of knowledge keeping and learning. All heritage disasters require the careful negotiation of the meaning of the event after the fact. Who is affected, what was lost, who is to blame, and how that which is lost is to be remembered are things that are negotiated by stakeholders that see a vested interest in the loss. The process of negotiating terms and brokering collaboration around the exhibition illustrates well themes of exchange and debate that occur at other sites of heritage disaster. In mid-June 2021, Jade Nair, my

colleague and co-curator, wrote to me with the idea of “addressing the library fire in an exhibition format”, which prompted a pivot to the curatorial and collaborative exhibition making as a heritage method. It was a novel and exciting challenge. In our first meetings, we discussed what struck us about the Jagger Library disaster and the salvage operation. As a participant in the salvage operation, Jade shared observations about the frenzied conservation of damaged materials conducted in the triage tent – the special enclosed area set up for the emergency conservation of wet materials brought up from the Jagger Library basement stores. The general tragedy of the loss, the burnt matter, its careful preservation, and the communal work of volunteer participation were themes I recall that stood out at the time.

After much negotiation, and in partnership with UCT Library, we affirmed the expansive work processes and UCT Library-led volunteer participation as a key starting point for framing the curatorial proposition. In our curatorial deliberations, we settled on honouring the loss of Jagger Library and celebrating the people who worked to save its holdings. We also set a date of April 2022, which would give us sufficient preparation time and more firmly anchor the symbolic significance of the exhibition as the one-year anniversary of the disaster. In simple terms, then, in the end, the Jagger Library exhibition would memorialise the loss of the library and its collections as well as commemorate and celebrate the UCT Librarians and the many volunteers who participated in the salvage operations.

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The challenge of curation, as an exercise in heritage work, is to find ways of materialising theory as installations that function as a coherent whole in an exhibition space. How do you draw on the affordances of burnt matter to best capture something like Achille Mbembe’s notion of the archive as a built documentary repository, for example? How do you materialise Derrida’s abstract idea of absences in signification in a compelling and informative way? Teaching related to the exhibition provided an opportunity for a sustained consideration of how to bridge theory and practice in an engaging

and integrated way. Between April and May 2022, I taught an extended module, ‘Burning Matters: Destruction, Art, Theory and Practice’ in the Michaelis School of Fine Art as part of the 4th year course ‘Theory and Practice’. I explicitly profiled it as a theatre for exploring theory and concepts related to the Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition. Integrated into the exhibition making process, the module was also an entry point for students hoping to participate in its materialisation. We therefore issued an open call for assistance with installation and creative interpretation of an installation design we had planned. Aaron Sheldon assisted me in constructing a debris sculpture, using packing crates and burnt matter that sat in the centre of the exhibition space. Paige Eitner Vosloo, Ciara Dunsby, Chloe Spreckley and Zenaéca Singh worked with a set of burnt architectural drawings and a damaged storage cabinet found in the Jagger basement to produce an engaging installation titled *Black and Fagg Interrupted*. Through participation in the setup, but also the design of engaging, thoughtful art installations, students were co-participants in the exhibition’s making. Coordinating these processes from teaching theory, to facilitating installation, I, too, participated in the integrative, collaborative work of operationalising theory as heritage work.

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Jagger Library Debris

The memorialisation of sites of disaster often requires the sensitive use, care, and treatment of materials related to the event in the aftermath. For our exhibition, we decided to use a mix of materials with direct relevance to the site and the disaster, but that also best captured the terms of the memorialisation of loss and the commemoration of the participants. We drew on UCT Libraries' extensive online documentation of their disaster management project on their special Jagger Recovery webpage, including a timeline, images, and moving written reflections by librarians. We also solicited the opinion of volunteers – who we were very much interested in hearing from – by developing an appeal to the public that evoked lively, rich responses.

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In 2021, we started identifying graduate students in the Michaelis School of Fine Art who were engaging directly with the library or themes that it raised, marking them out for inclusion in the exhibition. In the final exhibition, we included the original graduate work of Debra Pryor, Eugene van der Merwe and Laurel Holmes, which spoke to different features and aspects of the disaster, and a special projection installation by Sophie Cope, titled *Sky in the Library*, which was setup in the projection room. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, we wanted to work with objects, books, and burnt materials from the Jagger Library site. Material of this kind is generally charged and valuable because of its connection to a site known to have historical significance and, because of its scarcity, as being limited to that place. This is the case with all heritage disasters.





Using a mix of this material – from physical artworks, debris, images, and projections – we wanted to create an immersive environment that was evocative while being sensitive to the hard work put in by librarians and staff. The exhibition was also meant to be informative of the salvage, what it entailed and its scale, but also of what Jagger Library was and remains as an archive. Finally, as a continuation of the generative elements built into the exhibition, we also included space for feedback from the public, placing notes by a salvaged window grate for visitors to complete and peg their responses on. These were potent tokens of remembrance that marked the importance of bearing witness and the power of librarianship in times of disaster, but also hinted at the future.

Eugene van der Merwe's three colour images of Devil's Peak fire, Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition.





Debris Sculpture

Co-curating this exhibition was an encounter with what the Jagger Library is, and was, as a library and a ruined archive. Working through the salvage, we surfaced the history of the building and the many collections of books and archival collections held there. In that way, as I understand it, the exhibition was a way of creating a deeper understanding of the Jagger Library and the African Studies print collections. As an exhibition of a rare disaster, it also functioned as a deconstruction of libraries as archives in general, showing its constituent parts, burnt, dissected, and partially recombined as aesthetic material stripped of its archival infrastructure and utility. Co-curating the exhibition was, in my case, an exercise in thinking about the curatorial process as a site-specific practice in salvage, as ultimately a revelation of the nature of the Jagger Library as an archive. Staged in a public forum with both a memorial and commemorative orientation, it illustrated the doing of heritage work.

All photographs by Duane Jethro

# Unmade Pavilion

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

**Ruth Sacks** is a visual artist and academic whose first monograph, *Congo Style*, is forthcoming (Michigan University Press). She is a member of faculty at the University of Johannesburg (Visual Art Department) and obtained a PhD through the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research. Sacks has been instrumental in setting up local, artist-run platforms such as the large-scale group project Response-ability (Johannesburg, 2021-2022). She has exhibited widely in South Africa and internationally, including at the M KHA (Antwerp, 2019), National Museums Kenya (Nairobi 2017), ZKM (Karlsruhe, 2011), Performa (New York, 2009), and the Venice Biennale (2007).

The fire at the University of Cape Town’s Jagger Library raised many questions concerning the full depth of what was irretrievably lost. What had been digitised would never entirely be reconstructed. The surfaces of books and papers, their smell and feel, and the experience of the library space itself could never be entirely restored. Emplaced objects in the Jagger Library and archives, and the story told by that particular environment, will now always be permeated by burnt remains, ash, and smoke-stained walls. Even if the building is restored, the fire will dominate future readings.

When we visited the ruins of the Jagger Library as part of the *Ways of Reading After the Fire* project, the spectre of colonialism never seemed far away. The lost Jagger Library archives had never been accessible to all in the first place. Many of its now-lost objects had always represented subjects to be cracked open through primary research, raw matter to be translated into words. In this sense, all archival objects can be seen as potentially unmade plans, reminding me of an archival finding that I once made in Brussels (2013) and have kept ever since. An archival object that speaks to the uncopiable qualities of surface, texture, and density, which a fire may destroy or lay bare.

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## Colonial Reminders

The pages that follow depict the fragments of plans for a colonial pavilion from circa 1898. Victor Horta, the well-known Belgian architect who designed them, had intended the pavilion as a showcase for fragrant woods extracted from the Congo Colony at the 1900 Paris World’s Fair. They were never realised. By 1900, the Belgian King Leopold II’s colonial regime in Africa was facing accusations of atrocities. Horta’s Art Nouveau vision of curling iron and crystal panels was inappropriately luxurious for a colonial power faced with the ‘Red Rubber’ scandal. The inhumane methods of gathering rubber in the Congo had been exposed by a British and American



campaign, the Congo Reform Association. Neighbouring European nations and factions within Belgium were quick to declare the king's colonial mission villainously avaricious. The fact that other European powers, most notably France, used the same violent methods of extracting rubber (and other natural materials) from African colonies was not widely discussed.

Horta's plans were in line with the other fantastical Art Nouveau constructions that were realised in Paris at the 1900 World's Fair. The always imaginary Belgian pavilion would have been made up of Gothic arches with domed windows, creating a light-flooded interior. Horta wanted the pavilion to be dismantled after the exhibition and sent to the African colony to be used as offices for the Belgian colonial administration. This complete lack of engagement with the realities of both maritime travel and the tropical climate in central Africa accentuate the designer's indifference to the realities of the Congo as an actual place and, with this, real people being exploited.

The paper plans of colonial folly draw attention to what European architects failed to see when imagining the colonial endeavour. Congolese lives lost for the sake of amassing wealth for Belgium now underwrite its elegant curvature. Horta's plans for a luminescent pavilion serves as a complement to the extravagant obfuscations of history books that paint colonial conquerors as heroes bringing civilisation to the unenlightened.

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### *The Object In The Archive*

I found the unmade pavilion plans at the Victor Horta Archives in Brussels, the city known as 'the birthplace of Art Nouveau' (I was researching the colonial underpinnings of Belgian Art Nouveau at the time). The archives and library are attached to a museum of the artist's former house. As with most formal archives, an appointment needed to be made well in advance before the visit could take place. The documents and older books that I was interested in needed to be selected from the catalogue before they were

brought to me. The plans themselves feature in several books on Belgian Art Nouveau, and/or Victor Horta. They are too precious to be handled, so I was given digital copies to view. The right to reprint them was protected by copyright until very recently, after which it cost a great deal of money to work with them.

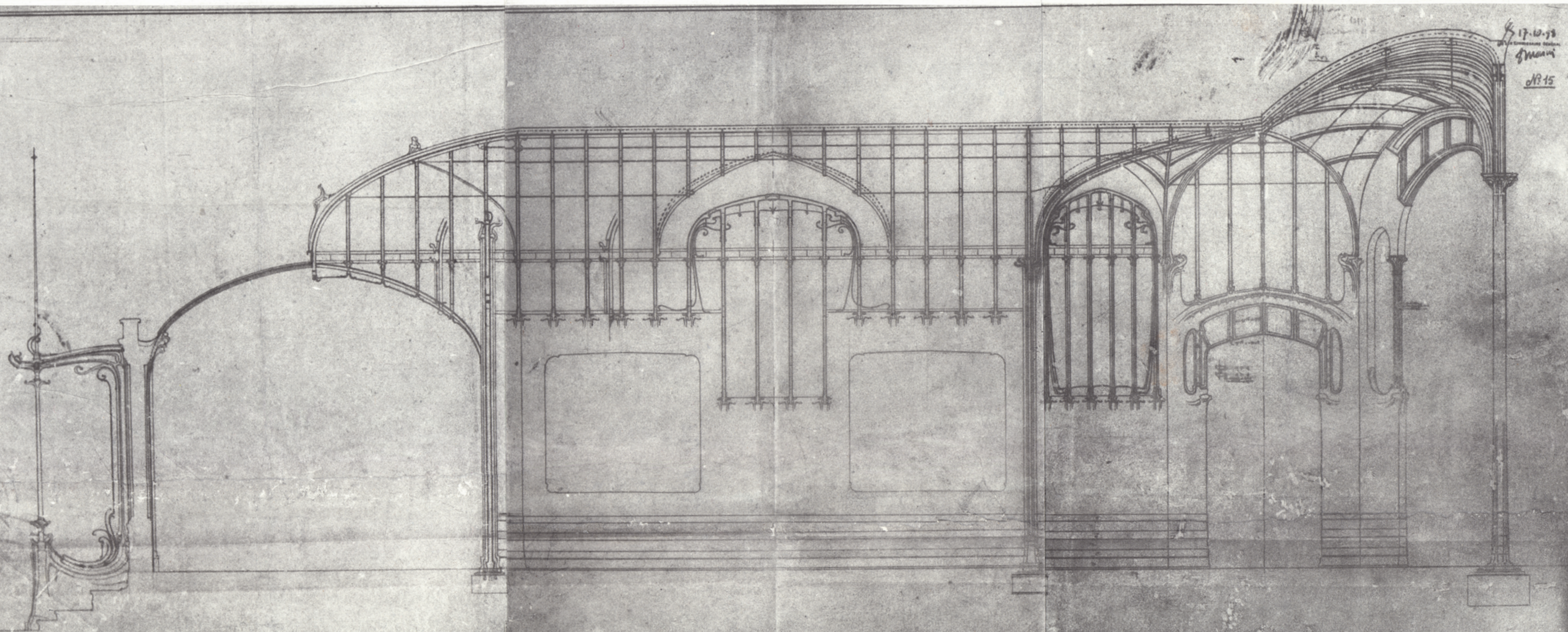
By accident, I obtained a large-size digital copy 10 years ago from the archive in Brussels without paying for it but was never sure how to use it. I knew that I wanted to print the copy as large as the originals and that I wanted the print to travel, to get damaged and dirty in the process. There was something about the process of archiving – how some people's heritage gets frozen in time while others don't – that I wanted to disrupt. My intention was to transgress some of the preservation rituals around the official Victor Horta archives.

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In the last few months, I have been experimenting with the idea of making copies of the plans in different media in ways that allow for their messy surfaces to come through. The digital scans from the archives retained all the marks and discoloration of the original, and I have been amplifying these. My copies do not attempt to look like anything other than what they are – reproductions of an original. The way these copies of the plans are reframed is important.

In the images that follow, copies of a scan of one of Horta's plans for the pavilion (an elevation labelled as Plan 15) are on display. The original print was made via a series of gravure etchings onto a handmade A0 sheet of paper. The surface is extremely thin and fragile. I added to the process of disrupting the archive by travelling with the print. Instead of transporting it in the correct manner, with suitable packaging and care, I folded the print and put it in my suitcase on a trip to Germany. It acquired new fold marks and some bruising. I then entrusted the print to the editors of this publication, its new archivists. Their instructions were to use or store it in any way they choose.





## POSTSCRIPT

In finalising the layout for this chapter, we decided that Ruth's archival finding should reflect the dominance of the colonial oppression in both the archive and the residues that she investigates, while continuing to occlude the full view of Horta's delusion. As such we elected to print this on tracing paper, so that the full picture remains opaque and Horta's project remains incomplete, unmade, and troubled.

*Unmade Pavilion* (Paper) is a continuation of ideas and texts from Ruth Sacks' artist book, *The Remaindering* (2022), that deals with the ambiguous physical residues of particular regimes in the Congo.



# Lost or Found: Reckoning with Archival Ruins

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Julia Rensing* is a PhD candidate at the University of Basel. In her dissertation, she explores the role and function of photographic archives in contemporary art and autobiographical accounts from Namibia. She is interested in how artistic practices shape and contribute to discourses on colonialism, gender, and memory. Rensing is also a member of the initiative Freiburg-Postkolonial – a research project which promotes public debates about the colonial legacies of Freiburg and beyond.

Julia Rensing

“Ruins hold histories but are less than the sum of the sensibilities of people who live in them. Instead we might turn to ruins as epicenters of renewed claims, as history in a spirited voice, as sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected political projects.”<sup>1</sup>

—Ann Stoler

The walls are blackened by soot, the plaster damaged and crumbling. The surface of the Ionic columns splintered, disintegrated. The reading room halls, usually filled with people and shelves of books, are cleared of life. Miraculously, the exterior of the building seems untouched; moist red vine leaves cover the walls. It is bizarre how destruction can seem so random and systematic at the same time. As I contemplated this, I was struck particularly by the sensation of the smell. Standing inside of the Jagger Library, and judging by the mere sight of it, the place could have been an old, abandoned ruin, left to decay many decades ago. But the toxic scent of burnt things and ashes that still lingered in the air made the destruction so poignant and recent to me. It was the same smell that prompted me to think about the conditions of ruination and the significance of colonial ruins today. I wondered about the ways in which processes of ruination transform a space, particularly spaces such as the Jagger Library which – as libraries or archives – were sites for the storage of (and access to?) knowledge.

Reading Ann Stoler’s works on ruins and ruination, I reflected on her claim that ruins can function “as sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected political projects” as I encountered two fascinating interventions with archival ruins:<sup>2</sup> the films a *so-called archive* (2020) and *No Archive Can Restore You* (2020) by artist Onyeka Igwe and the salvage project *Building Early Accra: Preserving Historical Building Permits in Ghana* (2020-2021) by trained architect and architecture scholar Kuukuwa

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Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination’, *Cultural Anthropology* 23, no. 2 (May 2008): 198.

2

Stoler, ‘Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination’, 198.



Manful<sup>3</sup>. Both projects engage with spaces that we can broadly consider as archival ruins – and yet they complicate easy labelling or understanding of them. These projects offered instructive insights into my questioning of the phenomena of archival ruins and the allure that ruins evoke in general.

Let us begin to consider this almost universal fascination with forsaken and decaying buildings. There are whole industries around ‘lost places’ – photographic essays, film shows, or podcasts centre the issue. In the tourism sector, we witness increasing trends of visitors travelling to deserted sites of tragedy (‘dark tourism’) or so-called ‘ghost-towns’ such as Kolmannskuppe, an old diamond town in the south of Namibia with solid brick houses, now half-filled with sand and left to decay when the German inhabitants abandoned the place between the 1930s and 60s. Regarding the representation of old archives, there too is a strong interest in the public and cultural sphere, with examples of artistic projects being *Sea of Files* (2022) by Dayanita Singh, Zarina Bhimji’s *Yellow Patch* (2011), Guy Tillim’s *Court Records, Lubumbashi, DR Congo* (2007) or François-Xavier Gbré’s photographs of the *Imprimerie Nationale* (2012) in Porto-Novo. In her comprehensive study on the relevance of contemporary ruins for societies around the world, Siobhan Lyons speaks about the phenomenon of “ruin porn”, which she conceives as “an expression of a very specific kind of anxiety that is rooted in humanity’s transience, and our rising *awareness* of this ephemerality.”<sup>4</sup>

However, with a view to lost archives, I believe their states of ruination signify something more than merely ephemerality. There is a kind of inherent contradiction in the concepts of ‘ruin’ and ‘archive’ that I am interested in. Carolyn Hamilton explains how “the presence of an archive is invariably a power-laden assertion in public life” as it implies declaring a certain subject or area “as having a history worth preserving, investigating and reinvestigating,

3 Manful is currently a visiting post-doctoral scholar at the *Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences* (CASBS), Stanford University and a post-doctoral scholar on the African State Architecture Project at SOAS University of London. In her doctoral research, which she conducted at SOAS, she examined the sociopolitics of West African nation-building and citizenship through a study of the architecture of educational institutions.

4 Siobhan Lyons, ed., *Ruin Porn and the Obsession with Decay* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 10.

in perpetuity.”<sup>5</sup> Archives are intended to safeguard knowledge for eternity. So what does their deterioration reflect about the particular societies that allow archives to fall into ruins? Does the decay signal a change in ideologies and a transformation of what is considered as knowledge worth preserving? Drawing on the theories formulated by scholars like Hamilton, Stoler, and others, I will reflect on these questions in my analysis of Onyeka Igwe’s and Kuukuwa Manful’s projects in relation to the fire at the Jagger Library.

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### *Undoing the ‘Terror of the Archive’*

The destructive force of the fire at the Jagger Library has shown how the total transformation of a building can occur only within the stroke of a couple of hours. Ann Stoler’s thoughts on ruination are instructive to consider such transformations. With reference to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, she describes ‘to ruin’ as a “an active process, and a vibrantly violent verb”, which signifies: “to inflict or bring great and irretrievable disaster upon, to destroy agency, to reduce to a state of poverty, to demoralize completely.”<sup>6</sup> However, conditions, degrees, and temporalities of ruination can differ. Ruination also occurs slowly, over the span of centuries. Buildings may remain untouched by natural disasters or by wilful human destruction and only transform into ruins through mere neglect and abandonment, as nature slowly takes over. The same dictionary offers other broader definitions that encompass these nuances:

**Ruin, n.**  
(‘ru:ɪn)  
that which remains after decay and fall [...]  
the condition of being ruined, of having been reduces to an abject or hopeless state

5 Carolyn Hamilton, ‘Archive and Public Life’, in *Babel Unbound. Rage, Reason and Rethinking Public Life*, by Lesley Cowling and Carolyn Hamilton (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2020), 128, emphasis in original.

6 Ann Laura Stoler, *Imperial Debris: On Ruins and Ruination* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.

**Ruination, n.**

(ru:ɪ'neɪʃən)

the action of ruining; the fact or state of being ruined<sup>7</sup>

It also defines the now rare verb “to ruin” (‘ru:ɪn) which flags the potential of transformation through ruination and implies: “to overthrow, overturn, subvert utterly.”<sup>8</sup> Seeing Igwe’s films *a so-called archive* (2020) and *No Archive Can Restore You* (2020) made me think about this potential and the sensations that abandoned archives evoke. Her films retrace two deserted archives – one in Lagos and the other in Bristol – to question their presences to match the plurality of roles in today’s urban landscapes. They are visual reminders, or *remainders*, to use Ruth Sacks’ concept of the British Empire and of colonial administration, exploitation, propaganda, and extraction. Sacks conceives remainders as “stubborn, sticky and ambiguous objects.”<sup>9</sup> But they can also be monuments, buildings or architectural styles which exist in a “state of disobeying their human designers” while partially holding on to their initial forms and origins.<sup>10</sup> The remainders of colonialism that Igwe revisits present themselves in such an in-between state.

In the films, the camera wanders through the deserted rooms of the former Nigerian Film Unit in Lagos (which was established in the late 1940s and run roughly until 1979) and the archives of the former British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol (2002-2009). While *No Archive Can Restore You* solely focuses on the spaces and abandoned archival material in the former Nigerian Film Unit, *a so-called archive* juxtaposes that footage with scenes filmed in the halls, cellars, and storage rooms in Bristol. With a “forensic lens”, Igwe examines the signs of decay in these buildings:<sup>11</sup>

**In Lagos:** disorganised stacks of files are covered in cobwebs and layers of dust, the floors and shelves are packed with rusting celluloid films, ceilings are collapsing, and thin branches of plants are finding their way through their cracks and holes, reaching down the barren walls.

**In Bristol:** empty halls and damp stone walls are taken over by nature. Floors are covered with feathers and animal faeces; the corpse of a dead bird is lying in a corner. One room is packed with masses of archival material stacked in carton and plastic boxes. Order, randomness, and neglect seem to be in competition of the power over the place.

In both places there are also signs of a social presence that once was: fallen chairs, dusty desks, and the formerly organised archival material are remainders of employees who inhabited (and controlled) these spaces. They prompt us to ask for the causes of “the death of buildings” or to question, as Stoler does:<sup>12</sup>

“Under what conditions are those sites left to decompose, remanded, reconsigned, or disregarded? Some remains are ignored as innocuous leftovers, others petrify, some become toxic debris. Others are stubbornly inhabited to make a political point, or requisitioned for a newly refurbished commodity life for tourist consumption. What of those sites of decomposition that fall outside historical interest and preservation, of those places that are not honored as ruins of empire proper and go by other names? Some remains are rejected as ruins altogether. Much depends on who is doing the labelling.”<sup>13</sup>

The former British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in British Temple Meads closed in 2009 after accusations of illegal sale of items from the collection were raised.<sup>14</sup> The museum’s collection encompasses photographs,

7 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. “Ruin”, CD-ROM (v. 4.0.0.3).  
8 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. “Ruination”, CD-ROM (v. 4.0.0.3).  
9 Ruth Sacks, *The Remaindering* (Johannesburg: Garamond Press, 2022), n.pag.  
10 Sacks, *The Remaindering*. n.pag.  
11 ‘Onyeka Igwe, a so-called archive, 2020, 20m’, /KW Production Series/, 17 December 2020, <http://kw-productionseries.net/onyeka-igwe/>

12 Loose reference to the title of the book by Joel Smith, *The Life and Death of Buildings: On Photography and Time* (Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, 2011). .  
13 Stoler, ‘Imperial Debris: Reflections on Ruins and Ruination’, 197.  
14 ‘Onyeka Igwe. a so-called archive, 2020, 20m’, KW Production Series



films, and sound recordings as well as large numbers of ‘objects’ from various territories of the former British Empire. The material remained stored in a warehouse down the river from the Temple Meads station. Igwe explains how the collections were never given up fully. Due to a lack of money to cover the running costs or renovate the place, the building remains locked for now. But the repositories are still considered as valuable resources to be exploited in the future, if funding can be raised once more. Thus, while the archive and its holdings were left behind as that “which remains after fall” and in “a state of being ruined”, I wonder at what stage of negligence the label ‘ruin’ can be used.<sup>15</sup> Until today, despite its abandonment, access to the building requires permission. The archive remains an exclusive space that is controlled far beyond its official operations. The artist was only able to enter and shoot her videos due to established networks.<sup>16</sup>

The same applies to the building of the former Nigerian Film Unit. It was “one of the first self-directed outposts of the British visual propaganda engine, the Colonial Film Unit.”<sup>17</sup> The Colonial Film Unit (1932-1955) produced films targeted mainly to African audiences with the aim of “instructing and defining colonial citizens and legitimising the work of the colonial government.”<sup>18</sup> To decentralise the production of propaganda films, the Nigerian Film Unit was established in 1949, which continued screening in the same tradition as the Colonial Film Unit.<sup>19</sup> After the country’s independence, the Federal Ministry of Information was founded and the Federal Film Unit created (known as the ‘Film Unit’), which then administered the activities of the former units.<sup>20</sup> As Igwe explains, the new post-colonial state deployed the Film Unit in the same way as the British colonial power had used its predecessors: “as a

15 Oxford English Dictionary, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), s.v. “Ruin”, CD-ROM (v. 4.0.0.3).  
16 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.  
17 ‘Onyeka Igwe. a so-called archive, 2020, 20m’, KW Production Series  
18 Tom Rice, ‘British Empire’s Forgotten Propaganda Tool for “Primitive Peoples”: Mobile Cinema’, *The Conversation*, 24 August 2016, <http://theconversation.com/british-empires-forgotten-propaganda-tool-for-primitive-peo- ples-mobile-cinema-64275>  
19 “Nigerian Film Unit’, *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*, accessed 14 July 2022, <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/production-company/nigerian-film-unit>  
20 Onyeka Igwe, ‘Unbossed and Unbound: How Can Critical Proximity Transfigure British Colonial Moving Images?’ (London, University of the Arts London, 2021), 141.

vehicle for publicity and propaganda.”<sup>21</sup> In the 1980s, however, the work of the Film Unit became largely seen as unfit for purpose. Around the same time, the Nigerian Film Corporation (NFC) was established, which would eventually take over the work of the Film Unit.<sup>22</sup>

Today, the old archive of the Nigerian Film Unit in Lagos lies behind the building of the NFC, which is why it is not easily detectable at its location on Ikoyi Road, a busy road on Lagos Island. Access to the building is at the discretion of the NFC, and only after a lengthy process of reaching out to different actors was Igwe granted permission to enter. During her work in the area, the artist noticed a seemingly forgotten newspaper archive and other colonial buildings that seemed vacant, “left as empty husks of what they once were, they exist on the cityscape”, she observed.<sup>23</sup> Contemplating on this, the artist told me:

“Something I think about is how this architecture, how these buildings, represent a kind of absence of collective interest or thinking of the history of colonialism. Or maybe a kind of Nigerian cultural impulse to forget and not attend to what colonialism has wrought on culture of the place.”<sup>24</sup>

For Igwe, this was also reflected in the puzzled reactions and the incomprehension when Nigerians learned about her interest in the abandoned archive, leading her to wonder whether this interest came from “a particular Western space.”<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, however, after her film shoot, she heard about plans in the making to remove some of the material from the dilapidated building, to audit, relocate, and restore it in another archive. Regarding her own engagement with the concept of the archive, Igwe explained that she was prompted to explore the issue in her art when she

21 Igwe, ‘Unbossed and Unbound: How Can Critical Proximity Transfigure British Colonial Moving Images?’, 141–42.  
22 Igwe, ‘Unbossed and Unbound: How Can Critical Proximity Transfigure British Colonial Moving Images?’, 142.  
23 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.  
24 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.  
25 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.





*Film stills No Archive Can Restore You (2020)*

courtesy of Onyeka Igwe





Film stills *a so-called archive* (2020),

courtesy of Onyeka Igwe



began questioning her own reverence for the archive. She described: “If I go looking for myself in the archive, I come face to face with the colonial image”, reflecting on her experience of seeing early archival films of people and places in Africa that mirrored a certain colonial ideology and gaze.<sup>26</sup> In a public talk with Ariella Azoulay and Mason Leaver-Yap, she states further: “I feel as if we are taught to respect and even maybe fear archives as sources of knowledge [...] It’s a reverence that avoids questioning and disciplines society.”<sup>27</sup> Her films are a response to this. They unsettle the archive’s hegemonial status as “the source of knowledge about the [...] past”, as Anjali Arondekar writes.<sup>28</sup> Igwe argued:

“I am offering this idea: what if we just don’t perpetuate it? What if we just let it all decay and rot? What if we use other windows to the past? If we invested less in the colonial archive, maybe we invest more in other ways of accessing the past.”<sup>29</sup>

This idea struck me as in stark contrast to the dominant discourse around the Jagger Library, which seems to centre the issue of loss and the urgency of salvage. Of course, the repositories and the functions of both places cannot be equated or easily compared. However, this rather radical take on the notion of archival loss resonated with me as an instructive approach to reconsider the reverence of the archive as Igwe called it. In *a so-called archive* and *No Archive Can Restore You*, the abandoned building and the ongoing, unstopped process of ruination seem to symbolise a surrender to the forces of time and nature. Azoulay celebrates Igwe’s take on ruination which, for her, seems to suggest that a rescue is neither needed nor wanted. For Azoulay, the film’s success lies particularly in the fact that it is “not bringing us to this sentiment of what is in the images matters but rather the terror of the archive and how we can think beyond this terror.”<sup>30</sup>

The artist shifts the attention from the material alone to a level of critical reflection on the archive as the space “where knowledge comes from” by superimposing the footage shot in the ruined buildings with sound recordings from diverse repositories.<sup>31</sup> We do not hear the original sound from the decaying film cans in Lagos or Bristol. Instead, the artist turned to different archives in search for material that resonated with the titles, times, and topics that she encountered when studying the repositories in the two buildings. We hear snippets from political speeches in which speakers celebrate the potential of African resources for the British Empire, exclaiming “What then are we in Africa for? [...] What main purpose keeps us here? Commerce, gentlemen! Commerce brought us to Africa, commerce keeps us in Africa!”<sup>32</sup> Other seemingly more recent radio moderators, advertising spokesperson, or voice-overs from documentaries praise the vast cultural heritage associated with the British Empire and the Commonwealth, highlighting its diversity (and unity) while emphasising Britain’s claim to the territories, people, and cultures. The juxtaposition of these claims with images of decay challenges the ideology of empire and unsettles the archive’s grip on power.

However, spaces can be laden with various meanings and layers of history. The British Empire and Commonwealth Museum was housed in the Grade I listed building at Bristol’s historic Temple Meads Station, built in 1839 and designed by Isambard Kingdom Brunel, a British engineer considered as a technical pioneer of the age of the Industrial Revolution. The River Avon as well as a railway line connected this building with the bonded warehouse two miles further in the west, which also once functioned as an old tobacco warehouse. During the so-called transatlantic triangular trade, goods were transported via the trainline and along the river to the bonded warehouse. Until today, the museum’s archive continues to be kept in the 5-storey building, as seen in the deserted spaces in Igwe’s video.<sup>33</sup>

26 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.  
27 ‘Onyeka Igwe. a so-called archive, 2020, 20m’, KW Production Series  
28 Anjali R. Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India, Next Wave* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 6, emphasis in original  
29 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.  
30 ‘Online Talk: Onyeka Igwe and Ariella Aisha Azoulay, 17 December 2020’, /KW Production Series, 17 December 2020, <http://kwproductionseries.net/onyeka-igwe/>

31 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.  
32 Onyeka Igwe, */No Archive Can Restore You*, 2020, 2:10.  
33 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.



Reflecting on the warehouse’s function as an archive, Igwe notes how the place has always held on to the wealth that colonialism extracted and hoarded – far beyond the official end of the colonial era. For Igwe, it was the state of ruination of the archives in Bristol and Lagos that enabled her to artistically engage and envision an intervention with these places. Entering these decaying buildings allowed her to “access the reality of the archive” and break down its façade.<sup>34</sup> The artist shared how being in an archive always made her feel wrong, as if she was breaking rules or as if she was not supposed to be in that space at all. However, experiencing its ephemerality, she saw how “the power of the archive is somehow disabled by its ruination.”<sup>35</sup>

At the end of *a so-called archive*, we see the artist dancing in the vast, empty halls of the archive in Bristol. Bringing life into the ruinous, vacant building appears as an act to reclaim a space that has been unwelcoming, “terrorizing” before, to use Azoulay’s words.<sup>36</sup> This act of embodiment is also reflected in the title of *No Archive Can Restore You*, which is a reference to the book by the writer and scholar Julietta Singh.<sup>37</sup> Singh proposes to conceive the body as an archive, by rejecting conservative approaches to what constitutes an archive, what knowledge is and how it can be stored. Singh’s intimate, nonfictional excursion to visit and explore her bodily archive was evocative for Igwe to rethink her learned reverence of archives, advancing her changing relationship with them. In a way, with the title and the dancing scene, her films urge us to shift our focus: instead of a sense of loss, melancholia, or a nostalgia for the archive, we see life beyond ruins.

34 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.  
35 Igwe, pers. comm., 6 June 2022.  
36 KW Production Series, Online Talk: *Onyeka Igwe and Ariella Aisha Azoulay*.  
37 Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (Santa Barbara: Punctum Books, 2018).

## Architectural Reminders

*“Conventionally, ‘archives’ are understood as cloistered spaces, where stuff is packed away and safely stored. If not actively sealed off from public scrutiny, there their treasures wait, accumulating dust until, perchance, a lonely (and duly accredited) researcher arrives.”*<sup>38</sup>

—Carolyn Hamilton

I stumbled upon a short 2,5-minute feature on BBC World News Africa reporting on the project *Building Early Accra: Preserving Historical Building Permits in Ghana* (2020-2021) and was mesmerised. It showed scenes filmed in vacated office spaces in Jamestown, Accra, filled to the ceiling with stacks of old architectural files. As with Igwe’s footage from Lagos, we see shelves with archival material covered in dust and cobwebs, abandoned desks packed with convolutes of rotting papers, prints, letters – a ruin left behind in chaos and to the forces of nature, or so it seemed. The footage was superimposed with the voice of Manful, at the time a PhD candidate at SOAS University of London, who initiated the BEA-project to salvage, digitise and preserve the decomposing architectural permits, planning permissions, and blueprints. In the BBC clip, we see her with a group of colleagues in protective gear and with facemasks, carefully packing and removing the delicate material from the space. Manful speaks about her experiences working in the “dusty, dark and mouldy” rooms amongst rotting files, with “rats and cockroaches darting around.”<sup>39</sup> I wanted to learn more about her work in what to me clearly appeared as an archival ruin and reached out to her. Since Manful is a researcher in architecture, I was curious to hear about her perspective on the significance of archival ruins in the Accra cityscape and the future of the archive that she recovered.

Interestingly, right at the beginning of our Zoom conversation, she clarified: “The space or the building is not really thought of as an archive – or was not

38 Hamilton, ‘Archive and Public Life’, 127.  
39 ‘The Student Putting Ghana’s Lost Archives Online’, *BBC News Africa*, 30 April 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-africa-61272694>





© Charles Lawson and  
Kuukuwa Manful, Accra Archive



until I started this project [...] It is a room with a lot of old documents that a lot of people have forgotten.”<sup>40</sup> I was taken aback. But clearly, this was an archive of historical material – after all, the BBC labels it as such and so do many other reports on the project.<sup>41</sup> What is more, the BEA was creating a digital database – thus a digital archive of the files salvaged and scanned. I listened attentively. Maybe more context and background information on the history of the place would shed light on the matter.

In 2015, Manful was doing fieldwork in Accra as part of her research on the development of the architectural profession in Ghana. She was interested in the informal stream in the country’s history of architecture, of draughtsmen who came to architecture without a university degree. To follow this stream, she began reaching out to people involved in the sector in Accra. Through one of these contacts, Manful learned about this “almost forgotten room with all these documents” located close to the sea in Jamestown, which was called the City Engineer’s Department during colonial times. People had to write to the colonial administrators located in these offices if they had any plans relating to (their) land, building and constructing.<sup>42</sup> Today, the place belongs to the Ghana Metropolitan Assembly, which still uses some of the rooms in the disintegrating building for certain functions but mainly as a kind of storage facility. One of the employees who joined the Assembly as a young man had worked in the office with the historical documents and guided Manful to the hidden chambers. Although the material had long been untouched and seemed unclaimed, access to the place still needed authorisation, resonating with what Carolyn Hamilton defines as the “status quo” in archival politics, which implies “a myriad of archival restrictions of various kinds.”<sup>43</sup>

40 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
41 ‘The Student Putting Ghana’s Lost Archives Online’; Moshood, ‘Building Early Accra: Digitising A City’s Architectural Archive’, /People’s Stories Project/, 10 December 2020, <https://www.psp-culture.com/archi-tecture/building-early-accra-digitising-a-citys-architectural-archive/>; Kuukuwa Manful, ‘Preserving Ghanaian Architecture History’, /Accra Architecture Archive/, accessed 1 July 2022, <https://www.accraarchive.com/blog/blog-post-title-one-rjbtw>  
42 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
43 Hamilton, ‘Archive and Public Life’, 127.

Manful recalled a sensations of both sadness and excitement overwhelming her as she first entered the rooms: excitement for the abundance in historical material which seems largely untouched and forgotten, and sadness about the state that it was in and the environment in which it would decay further. Being in the “toxic space” would be challenging:<sup>44</sup> located nearby the sea, the building was damp and mouldy. The dust in the air made it hard to breath. On the ground, there was a “random rustling” of mice and cockroaches dashing through the space.<sup>45</sup> Despite these conditions, Manful soon felt the urge to look for ways to salvage the documents and designs: “It dawned on me that if not, I might be the first and last scholar to ever use this material, and that did not sit well with me.”<sup>46</sup> She applied to The British Library and the *Endangered Archives Programme* and received funding to build a digital archive.<sup>47</sup>

What struck me in our conversation was that, for Manful, the focus in her work seemed to lie particularly on the decaying architectural files. Unlike Igwe, it was not so much the importance of the space that captured her attention but the material that needed salvaging. The fragile historical files, permits, and designs which the team excavated, cleaned, and photographed fascinated her, as these materials allowed access to hidden and forgotten aspects of the architectural history of Ghana. Manful explained how the clues she found while studying the material unsettle dominant ideas about the origins of architecture, which are commonly understood as dating back to the arrival of Europeans in the country.<sup>48</sup> In educational institutions, earlier creative practices of untrained (or unconventionally trained) designers were merely dismissed as ‘traditional’. According to these prevalent narratives, the only African architects in the area had only started working after independence

44 ‘The Student Putting Ghana’s Lost Archives Online’.  
45 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
46 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
47 Interestingly, with the grant, the rights of ownership would not remain with the Metropolitan Assembly exclusively. Instead, three organisations will receive the copies of the digital archive: the British Library as the funder, the Accra Metropolitan Assembly as the ‘owner’ of the material and the Public Records and Archives Administration Department of Ghana who have publicly accessible archives in Ghana. (Moshood, ‘Building Early Accra: Digitising A City’s Architectural Archive’.)  
48 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.



in the 1960s.<sup>49</sup> The files in the old City Engineer’s Office tell a different story. As Manful explained:

“Seeing draughtsmen with African names in the archive signing their work is evidence of African peoples in the Gold Coast working in this increasingly colonised and formalised realm of building design.”<sup>50</sup>

What is more, while engaging with the material, Manful and her colleagues took note of how in the increasingly controlled, colonial, and patriarchal political systems of those times, Africans had to fight hard for their rights to build and to claim their land. In this respect, Manful was particularly amazed by the large number of women who applied for building permits:

“When we are hearing about land and property ownership, it is something that is presented as male-dominated. But then I am seeing this, and there are so many women in Accra owning and building their own homes.”<sup>51</sup>

Manful asserts: “Land-owning, house-building, home-owning women. In a city that they would like to tell belongs to men.”<sup>52</sup>

In many ways, the findings of the BEA-project resonate with what scholars in the broader field of archival studies emphasise as archives’ potential to “speak beyond the domain for which they were created”, as Anette Hoffmann stresses with regards to sound archives.<sup>53</sup> To access this potential and understand the archive’s politics of knowledge-making, it is necessary to study its repositories “along *and* against the grain”, as Stoler reminds us.<sup>54</sup>

49 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
50 Moshood, ‘Building Early Accra: Digitising A City’s Architectural Archive’.  
51 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
52 Moshood, ‘Building Early Accra: Digitising A City’s Architectural Archive’.  
53 Anette Hoffmann, ‘Introduction: Listening to Sound Archives’, */Social Dynamics/* 41, no. 1 (January 2015): 74–75.  
54 Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, */Archival Science/* 2, no. 1–2 (March 2022): 101.

But what happens when we name the space with these convoluted historical materials an archival ruin? More importantly, why was Manful reluctant to do so? When I posed this question to her, she explained that, during her research in Ghana, she rarely came across self-organised or institutionally organised archives but rather examples of random collections. Reflecting on these experiences, she states: “To be an archive, there has to be someone deliberately exercising the archiving right. And in most of the cases, there was nobody that anyone would remember deliberately collecting, cataloguing, keeping.”<sup>55</sup> With regard to the situation in Jamestown, Manful explains: “The documents are not arranged systematically [...] This is why I hesitate to call it an archive because for something to be an archive implies some care, selection, curation, cataloguing, and maintenance that is not really there.”<sup>56</sup> Her observation seems in line with Hamilton’s assertion that “to *call* some things archives, and to use them *as* archives, is not sufficient to gain for them the status of those things that are invested with a preservatory apparatus with posterity in mind.”<sup>57</sup> In a way, with receiving the funding and her work to build a digital archive, Manful brought about this new status for the salvaged material. But what is to happen with the building? Did its status change as well once the preservatory measures had been taken? Or – cleared of its holdings – is it nothing but an empty shell doomed to the forces of time and nature?

While the building today belongs to the Ghana Metropolitan Assembly, the place is still by and large associated with its former function as the City Engineer’s Department. During her work in the area, Manful built networks and friendships and learned how those living in the area mainly consider the place as “this administrative building from colonial times” – a visual reminder that many people do not wish to hold on to, as Manful explains: “For some this is a painful history, an undesired, shameful history of slave trading in Jamestown, of European conquest and domination in Jamestown.”<sup>58</sup> These considerations emphasise how “buildings embody time” – as Joel Smith

55 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
56 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
57 Hamilton, ‘Archive and Public Life’ 126, emphasis in original.  
58 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.



writes.<sup>59</sup> They are no neutral spaces but connect the past to the present, thereby reflecting certain values of the societies that inhabit(ed) them. Ruins “contain the traces of [these] former worlds”, and living with these traces “can be a reminder of disaster.”<sup>60</sup> There is an ambivalence to this with which Manful grapples. She asks: “Should we ‘waste’ our time and money to preserve these old buildings and the things held in them or do we build new ones for thinking of the new future for ourselves and our communities?”<sup>61</sup> Reflecting on colonial ruins in Commonwealth countries, novelist Chibundu Onuzo writes:

“What have countries such as Nigeria chosen to preserve from the often destructive effects of colonial contact with Britain? We’ve preserved our indigenous languages, our marriage customs, chieftaincy titles, monarchies and, in some parts, our communal way of life, despite attempts to destroy them. We haven’t preserved these things in their entirety and complexity, nor have they remained closed to outside influences; but any conservation efforts have been centred there, not on buffing imperial statues and whitewashing colonial secretariats.”<sup>62</sup>

Onuzo continues: “Perhaps this is the befitting legacy for all empires: ruins”, arguing further:

59 Smith, *The Life and Death of Buildings*, 13.  
60 Charles Merewether, ‘Traces of Loss’, in *Irresistible Decay: Ruins Reclaimed*, by Michael S. Roth, Claire L. Lyons, and Charles Merewether (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1997), 28.  
61 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
62 Chibundu Onuzo, ‘Colonial Ruins Are a Fitting Epitaph for the British Empire’, *The Guardian*, 2 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/02/colonial-ruins-epitaph-british-empire-commonwealth>.

“As a historian, I sympathise with the case for the conservation of colonial monuments – not because they are the building blocks of the ‘modern world’ but because nations should confront painful parts of their history. [...] Perhaps some colonial monuments must be toppled. Either way, it is for the people of the former empire to decide how they will commemorate their connection to Britain: with ruins or with plaques. The ruins of the Commonwealth are a warning for all would-be empire builders. Remember Ozymandias, “king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”<sup>63</sup>

Similar to Onuzo’s stance, Manful also does not believe in a general rule on how to reckon with colonial ruins. For her, mixed feelings remain:

“I have the intellectual curiosity to see historical buildings conserved [...] I do believe in learning from the past [...] but I also understand that some of these things hold unpleasant memories for the people who have claim to these places and to this land and if they don’t want it there, who am I to tell them this is a thing that you should preserve?”<sup>64</sup>

It seems as if the doomed fate of the space is soon to be sealed and ‘the death of the building’ is imminent – it has been listed for demolition.<sup>65</sup> The site in Jamestown has been targeted for urban transformation plans since the 1930s which have never materialised to this day. However, currently, new designs are being made to turn the area into a recreational commercial centre as part of the government’s endeavour to modernise the city. Its transformation continues – from an archival ruin to debris and to a new spatial formation of the present and for the future.

63 Onuzo, ‘Colonial Ruins Are a Fitting Epitaph for the British Empire’.  
64 Manful, pers. comm., 27 June 2022.  
65 Loose reference to Smith, *The Life and Death of Buildings*.







Conclusion:

In “Traces of Loss”, Chris Merewether writes: “Ruins collapse temporalities. Landscapes and buildings in ruination, reduced to abandoned sites, are traces that embody a sense of loss.”<sup>66</sup> Perhaps he is right about the sensation that many ruins exude by evoking a sense of history that seems graspable yet ephemeral. That feeling of loss can be painful, as we have seen in many of the public reactions to the destruction of the archival repositories stored in the Jagger Library. A similar sense of sadness has been troubling Kuukuwa Manful upon her first look at the decaying historical material in the Jamestown offices. However, as Onyeka Igwe’s films *No Archive Can Restore You* and *a so-called archive* suggest, *not* every engagement with archives prompts a restorative impulse. These examples of ‘archival ruins’ call on us to (re)consider these spaces as colonial rem(a)inders in the cities and landscape that tell us something about the past and pose questions about the future.

Another question remains: what is gained when we direct our attention to archival ruins – these “empty husks of what they once were”, to use Igwe’s words? And how is the oxymoron of ‘archival ruins’ meaningful? Grappling with lost and found places that once functioned for the storage of knowledge is complicated. Manful’s reflections on her work in the Jamestown offices elucidate how labelling certain spaces as archives is not a straight-forward matter, as their original intentions and present significances are often unclear and in disaccord. In this respect, Arondekar draws our attention to the “figurative flexibility of the concept”, and Stoler proposes to conceive ‘the archive’ as a “metaphor for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections.”<sup>67</sup> Such broader approaches to what constitutes an archive are increasingly popular in cultural theory (and in art – as Onyeka’s approach to embodying the archive has shown). Many of these approaches share the

premise that every archive “is shot through with questions of power.”<sup>68</sup> Here, Hamilton reminds us: “The act of naming something as an archive confers a certain status on the material concerned, drawing attention to its potential to attest to, or at least to show something about or from the past.”<sup>69</sup>

To unravel the power dynamics implied in this act, we need to question who is doing the labelling and with which claims that labelling is connected. More important for these considerations is the need to contextualise factors such as time, space, and the process of transforming an archive in decay. The examples of the abandoned spaces in Lagos, Bristol, and Accra that Igwe and Manful revisit illustrate how the buildings’ surrender to natural forces and time signals a kind of break with the projects they once were and the aspirations they stood for. Yet, with plans in sight for the preservation, digitisation, or later usage of the historical material stored in these spaces, there might be a future beyond ruins for the repositories that they hold. And the ruins? Merewether conceives their presence as a sign of loss “and of the impossibility of overcoming it.”<sup>70</sup> He continues explaining how they “remind us of finitude as both disruption and continuity, of the necessity of living on among ruins.”<sup>71</sup> Here, Igwe’s artistic intervention and the new plans designed for the space Manful discovered reveal that a more radical disruption of the symbolic power of ruins is possible. Much depends on who decides to care for the decaying remainders and which new purposes and visions for their reappropriation can be conceived.

68 Hamilton, ‘Archive and Public Life’, 126.  
69 Hamilton, ‘Archive and Public Life’, 126.  
70 Merewether, ‘Traces of Loss’, 25.  
71 Merewether, ‘Traces of Loss’, 25.

66 Merewether, ‘Traces of Loss’, 25.  
67 Arondekar, *For the Record*, 2; Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, 94.



# Archival Panic\*

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

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Portia Malatjie

After a recent fire at the University of Cape Town’s library destroyed irreplaceable books and archival documents, South African artists consider how to redefine the meaning of the archive.

The fires that ravaged the University of Cape Town’s Upper Campus in April – most notably the Jagger Reading Room, a library that housed the priceless and irreplaceable African Studies Collection – have inspired debate about the preservation of history and the protection of archives in the Global South. The loss of the African Studies Collection saw the destruction of centuries of knowledge, history and heritage from across the continent, including films, documents, and manuscripts that provided different historical perspectives from the oft one-sided colonial accounts. The importance of the African Studies Collection as a space that offered physical and material-based accounts of a rich and bountiful history can never be overstated: its loss will be felt for generations to come.

Yet, it is also worth acknowledging that these imperative archives existed alongside other valid and diverse ways of producing, preserving, and accessing knowledge, theory, and history. A look at some South African artistic practices indicates that, while it is useful to think about the archive through materiality and possession, there is an opportunity to account for different forms of knowledge-production, conservation, and dissemination. It becomes generative to employ radical imagination and speculative forms of archival practice to assist us in centring different ways of knowing. If, as Siseko Kumalo writes in ‘Curriculating from the Archive – Marginality as Novelty’, “decolonization facilitates epistemic access”<sup>1</sup>, where epistemic access is the way in which we encounter and absorb knowledge and information, then radical imagination can do the same.

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This essay was originally published by *frieze* with the title, ‘South African Artists Keep Histories Alive Without Bricks and Mortar’, 1 November 2021, <https://www.frieze.com/article/south-african-artists-keep-histories-alive-without-bricks-and-mortar>

1

Siseko Kumalo, ‘Curriculating from the Black Archive – Marginality as Novelty’, *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning* 8, no. 1 (2020): 120.





Santu Mofokeng, *Chief More's Funeral, GaMogopa* (1989).



In ‘The Power of the Archive and its Limits’, Achille Mbembe offers a candid understanding of the concept of the archive: “The term ‘archives’ first refers to a building, a symbol of a public institution, which is one of the organs of a constituted state. However, by ‘archives’ is also understood a collection of documents – normally written documents – kept in this building.”<sup>2</sup> In other words: the brick-and-mortar archive involves a particular approach to codification and cataloguing that is driven by canonical forms of knowledge. These canons are in danger of disallowing key Black and Indigenous practices from being read as forming an integral part of how knowledge is preserved. By paying attention to alternative insights through speculative and imaginative engagement, we begin to discern what is left out of the more ‘formal’ archival process.

Insisting only on physical archives risks the erasure of spiritual and cosmological archival processes. In *Dwala Lam’ (My Rock, 2021)*, South African artist Sethembile Msezane considers spiritual and ancestral archival engagements by drawing attention to the omnipresence of ancestors who guide us through life with the assistance of centuries of information stored in the spiritual realm. In the video, Msezane is seen and heard reflecting on her existence while being reassured, by a bold and captivating voice, that her ancestors are equipped with centuries of data that can help her navigate difficulties she encounters in life. At the crux of Msezane’s proposition is the insistence that we are often unaware there is information to be received from the spiritual realm, and what its uses might be. Ancestors communicate this spiritual archival material in the form of whispers or dreams, giving us access to that which we did not even consider knowing. By enlisting the services of dingaka or izangoma – spiritual/traditional healers or herbalists who act as archival interpreters – we are able to decode this cosmic information.

Msezane devised *Dwala Lam’* soon after learning that she was named after her great-grandmother, Sethembile, to ruminate proudly on the legacy she carries as someone who was entrusted with the name – and therefore being – of an ancestor. By this naming process, Msezane becomes a vessel

<sup>2</sup> Achille Mbembe, ‘The Power of the Archive and Its Limits’, in *Refiguring the Archive*, by Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Science+Business Media, 2002), 19.

through which family history and information is relayed from generation to generation, which in the video is signified through a doubling, tripling, then quadrupling effect, wherein Msezane’s body separates, departs, and returns, astutely attesting to the cyclical nature of spiritual and ancestral processing of data.

In *Falling* (2017), a short film based on country-wide student protests that erupted in 2015 with a call to remove the Cecil John Rhodes sculpture from UCT’s Upper Campus, Msezane uses archival news footage to report on the Rhodes Must Fall and Fees Must Fall movements. Reflecting on the sacred Zimbabwean Chapungu stone statue that can still be found at Rhodes’ residence in Cape Town, the artist looks at the political history of Southern Africa and the impact of failing to repatriate spiritual objects of national significance. Msezane compels us to think critically about how national archives are sometimes built on objects that have been stolen from other places. This theft leaves a spiritual debt and void at the site of the looting: unrest prevails until the objects are returned. By signalling to these moments, Msezane forces us to face the harsh realities of some dubious archival practices.

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Igshaan Adams, *Die Grot en die Goue Vensters* (The Cave and the Golden Windows), 2021  
 Courtesy: The Shah Garg Collection; photograph: Jason Wyche

Ostensibly inconsequential, yet existing in the same spiritual, ancestral, and cosmological forms of producing, disseminating, and accessing what we might refer to as archival material, is the material of dust. South African artist Igshaan Adams mobilises dust as a container of history and meditates on its form as an archive capable of holding memory and narrating stories. In exhibitions such as ‘When Dust Settles’ (2018) at Johannesburg’s Standard Bank Gallery, and, recently, ‘Kicking Dust’ (2021) at London’s Hayward Gallery, Adams evokes his longstanding tradition of seeking histories and heritage in obscure territories of information.

The immediate association of dust that is kicked and later settles might be one of disruption and discontent, with particles stirred into the air as a result of turmoil. Here, the Southern African toyi-toyi dance – often used in South Africa during protest, where feet methodically and synchronously stomp the colonised ground that was violently looted from those who are protesting – comes vividly to mind. However, Adams’ contemplation of the relationship between dance and dust brings with it a completely different tone, where the artist propositions the disruption of dust as a generative act.

Adams conjures the awakening of dust through the indigenous riel dance of the Nama people of Southern Africa. The artist’s grandparents are Nama, and he recalls the dance typically being performed after a hunt. When we spoke this summer, he described it as “storytelling through dance and movement”. The riel dance is characterised by the act of energetically kicking dust as a form of celebration or courtship. The act and its resulting effects of dust clouds amidst laughter inspire ecstasy. In ‘Kicking Dust’, Adams’ use of the dance and of dust as metaphor becomes that which connects him to his history, and that with which he remembers and preserves heritage.

Kumalo makes a proposition for accessing and disseminating different forms of information – specifically, Black/Indigenous knowledge systems. He reminds us that, in order to arrive at justice – for the systemic erasure of pre-colonial information – we need to recall and employ abstract knowledge systems that have suffered obliteration.



Adams' recurring proposal of dust as archive is, however, not only rooted in the abstract, speculative, and imaginative. It is also rooted in some semblance of what would be classified as scientific evidence. As the artist told me:

“Dust is about residue. It is about what gets left behind after time has passed [...] And one imagines that, within the dust itself, if you were to have a forensic examination of the particles, what kind of stories would it tell, what kind of information does it hold? And so, it is a little bit of an archive, too.”

In the eponymous instillation *Kicking Dust* (2021) – which is made with beads, rope, cotton twine, wire, and fabric and takes over most of the gallery floor – Adams leaves a void in the middle of the piece, allowing viewers to walk through the space unencumbered and experience the emotive nature of the work as though from inside it. This pathway, which presents like a void or an absence of material, is itself a container of symbolism and meaning, reflecting Adams' interest in desire lines or desire paths: informal routes created through perpetual and insistent erosion by people or animals. The desire line represented in *Kicking Dust* is imbued with socio-political tension as a consequence of segregation imposed by the apartheid regime: Jakes Gerwel Drive serves as a physical barrier between Cape Town's Coloured community of Bonteheuwel and the Black community of Langa. Adams renders *Kicking Dust* yet more powerful with his reference to what he calls domestic pathways that are created within a home as archives in and of themselves: these domestic pathways include areas that wear down and deteriorate from constant use. This is a continuation of Adams' practice of borrowing objects – including repurposed prayer mats and vinyl flooring in works such as *69* (2013) and *Antie se voorkamer tapyt* (*My Auntie's Living Room Carpet*, 2010) – from the homes of the many people he has engaged with throughout his life, and then incorporating them into his art.

The floor piece is accompanied by beaded wires suspended in the space above. This symbolises the dust that has been disrupted through the continuous and insistent movement of people between Langa and Bonteheuwel, as well as the energetic awakening of the dust during the riel dance. The history and memories that the dust contains have not yet settled onto the ground, as if to suggest that more information and history remains to be recorded and decoded.



Igshaan Adams, *Kicking Dust*, 2021, exhibition view, Hayward Gallery. © Igshaan Adams and Hayward Gallery, London; photograph: Mark Blower

Like Adams, who visits homes from his childhood neighbourhood in search of material to work with, Santu Mofokeng's *Black Photo Album: Look at Me, 1890–1950* (1997) also relies on objects – specifically photographs – found in homes in Soweto, a Black township in South Africa. Mofokeng leans in on the Black archive as a form of participation and usage. He engages with the Black archive as a form of participation and usage, facilitating new modes of knowledge production. The work brings back the notion of the archive of bricks, mortar, and documents – albeit not in the conventional manner.





Santu Mofokeng, *Shebeen, White City, Soweto* (1986). © Santu Mofokeng Foundation. Courtesy of Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg.

Mofokeng went to the homes of a number of families in Soweto, searching through albums, cupboards, and cardboard boxes – often harbouring mouldy and damaged objects – to excavate a curious form of self-fashioning and self-determination. The artist unearthed images of working- and middle-class men, women, and children clad in ‘European’ clothes in poses reminiscent of Victorian photography. What was compelling was how these depictions stood in opposition to the then-customary ethnographic and anthropological photographs of Black subjects. In the images discovered by Mofokeng, the subjects seemed to sit for the photographer uncoerced, according to their own rules, as the artist indicated in an article published in the Spring 1996 issue of *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*.



Santu Mofokeng, *The Black Photo Album Look at Me: 1890-1950*, (1997). © Santu Mofokeng Foundation. Courtesy of Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg.



Mofokeng's engagement with the Black archives that were found in the homes of these families indicates an archival interest that, while reliant on some form of codification and cataloguing – the items were stored according to carefully thought-out systems – also exists outside of it. He meticulously compiled and curated these works – sometimes incorporating an element of speculation as a result of the families no longer knowing the identities' subjects – into a comprehensive slide show that reveals magnitudes about the political climate in which the images were made, the nature of Black photography at that time, and the conditions and aspirations of Blackness in South Africa.

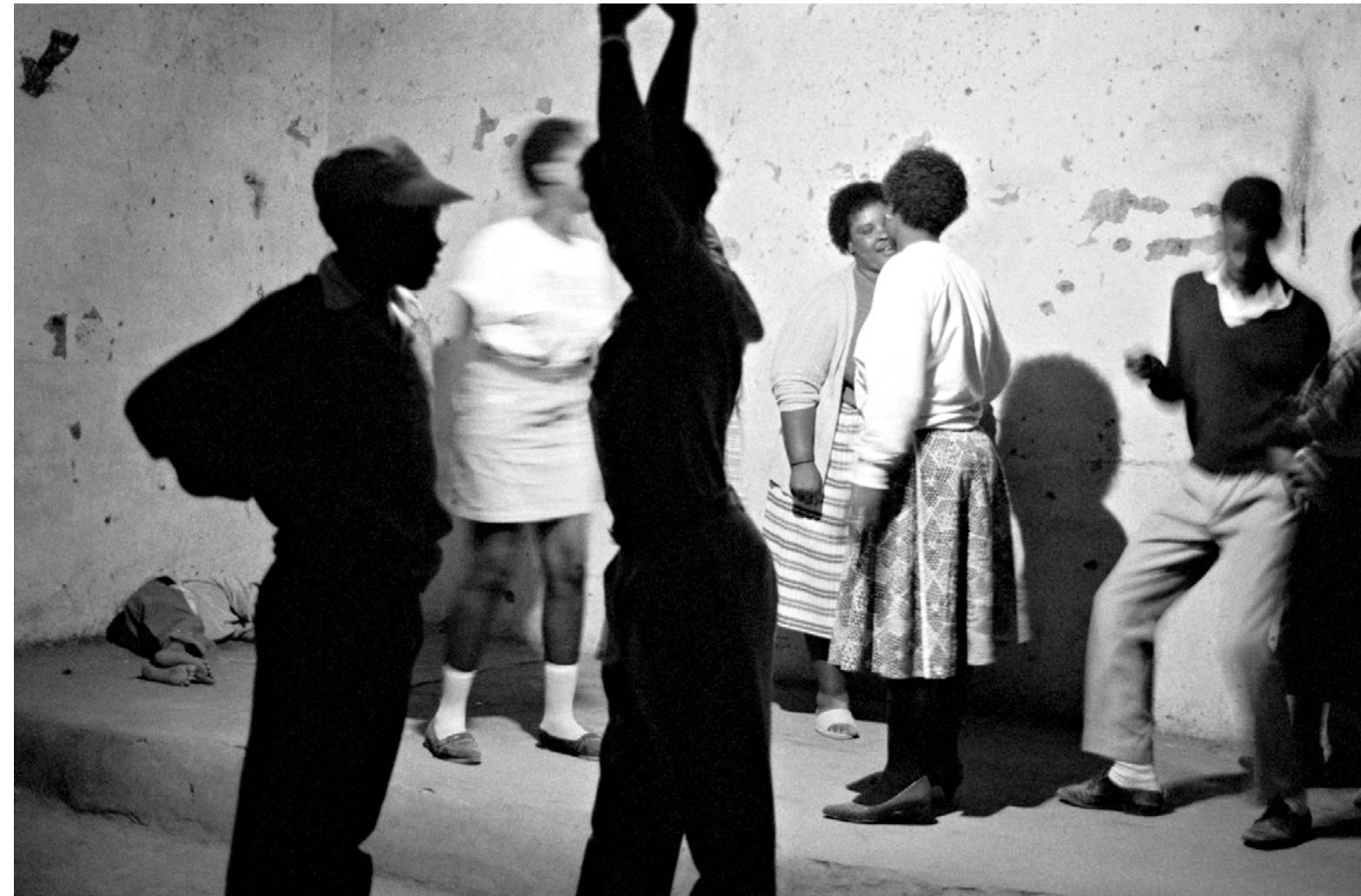
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If we return to Mbembe's assertion that there cannot "be a definition of 'archives' that does not encompass both the building itself and the documents stored in there",<sup>3</sup> are we to abandon the conception of the history that dust carries or the imagining of the land as that which remembers? Are we to call these different forms of archival documentation, storage, and dissemination, which are sustained by speculation and imagination, by a different name altogether?

The methodologies employed by Msezane, Adams, and Mofokeng in considering generative mobilisations of archives help us arrive at the land that which remembers and tells stories, as we begin to think about spiritual practices as forms of archival production and distribution. This proposition is not meant to discount the object-based, bricks-and-mortar archives that we rely on so heavily. Rather, it makes us think differently about how other forms of knowledge can work in tandem with these practices to help record histories that we might not consider worthy of preserving. To rely solely on the archive of brick, mortar, and paper can be limiting, requiring all forms of archival practice to fit neatly into a canonical framework. When abstract forms are also accepted, "the inescapable materiality of the archive"<sup>4</sup> that Mbembe references is open to reimagination. As such, in the event that an archival building, hosting irreplaceable documents and objects, devastatingly burns down, we should not think of this as a complete loss of history and heritage.

3 Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and Its Limits', 19.

4 Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and Its Limits', 19.



Santu Mofokeng, *Concert at Sewefontein*, (1988). © Santu Mofokeng Foundation. Courtesy of Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg.



# Unstable Ground

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Eugene van der Merwe* is a photographer, artist, and educator living and working in Cape Town. His artistic practice reflects on the indeterminacy and constructed nature of the photographic image. His work explores experimental approaches to analogue and hybrid modes of photography to reflect on, among other things, intersections between place, history, and positionality. He is Head of School at the Orms Cape Town School of Photography, where he teaches photographic technique and its practical application. He holds a Master's of Fine Art, with distinction, from the Michaelis School of Fine Art at UCT.

The Jagger Library was destroyed by a fire that started just above the highway skirting the edge of Devil's Peak on the morning of 18 April. It reached UCT's Upper Campus within hours and continued to burn until midday on 20 April consuming over 600 hectares of vegetation.<sup>1</sup> While the Jagger Library fire was burning, I was in the midst of a photographic project reflecting on the landscape of Table Mountain, investigating the ways in which it has been shaped, represented, and perceived to mirror social and historical realities in the surrounding landscape.<sup>2</sup> The fire offered a new lens through which to view this particular place. Situated on the slopes below the east face of the mountain, UCT Upper Campus stands on what used to be known as Groote Schuur Estate. Owned by Cecil John Rhodes, it was bequeathed to the nation on his death in 1902 under strict conditions that it should not be developed.<sup>3</sup>

The place where the fire started is notable: the area has burnt many times. In March 2009, another severe fire swept through this area, killing dozens of cluster pines, remnants of old timber plantations, which were subsequently cut down and the wood left in piles. This wood then provided fuel for the 2021 fire, adding to its initial severity and frustrating efforts to contain it. This link between two events separated by more than a decade suggests the Jagger Library fire not as an isolated event, but part of a larger environmental and historical context of Table Mountain.

The history of the mountain shows parallels between how it has been formed by both human actions and larger ecological narratives. The way in which the mountain has been shaped and the disregard for indigenous biodiversity implicit in these interventions were rooted in attitudes similar to those that have given rise to anthropogenic climate change and biodiversity collapse. These twin crises have roots in conceptions of human relationships to nature that emerged from the scientific revolution and enlightenment periods. During this time, increasing control over natural forces and resources became instrumental in and was facilitated by the building of increasingly complex, secure societies.<sup>4</sup>

1 'Cape Town Fire, Which Damaged UCT Buildings, Likely Started as a Malicious Act', *IOL Cape Argus*, 24 June 2021, <https://www.iol.co.za/capeargus/news/cape-town-fire-which-damaged-uct-buildings-likely-started-as-a-malicious-act-87cfd35-70c5-4f48-bfee-c7fe3200ddbd>

2 This essay was developed from my dissertation "Unstable Ground: A Photographic Reflection on the Landscape of Table Mountain", submitted as part of my MFA studies at the Michaelis School of Fine Art at UCT in 2021.

3 Exceptions to these conditions have included the building of the University of Cape Town, Groote Schuur Hospital, and the freeways along the edge of the mountain.

4 Nathaniel Wolloch, "The Civilizing Process, Nature, and Stadial Theory", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44, no. 2 (Winter 2011): 245–259.

Eugene van der Merwe



Over time, the ever-increasing scale of human impact on the Earth has ushered in a new geological epoch, the Anthropocene, where human actions are the dominant geological force shaping the planet.<sup>5</sup> Today this manifests, among other things, in the global prevalence of destructive events such as wildfires, flooding, and droughts linked to climate change. While the fire cannot simply be chalked up to climate change alone, the destruction it caused can still be seen as a signifier of the unintended consequence of alterations to the environment.

The specific area, and Table Mountain in general, have been subject to human alteration for millennia with a significant shift in the scope of alterations coinciding with the arrival of European settlers in 1652, when human intervention grew from that required to support the pastoralist existence of the indigenous Khoena people to that necessitated by the establishment of larger settlements. While practical interventions, such as timber plantations and the building of dams, facilitated the establishment and growth of the city, others served a more subtle purpose. Europeans settling here also introduced many alien species such as poplars, oaks, tahrs (Himalayan mountain goats), fallow deer, grey squirrels, and others, and these species served to soften and familiarise the landscape previously viewed as wild and alien by settlers. Plantations established along the lower slopes of Table Mountain and Devil's Peak, for instance, were lauded for their beautifying effect, greening a prospect considered by some to be a barren eyesore.<sup>6</sup> Over time, these interventions have changed the landscape to such an extent that large tracts of the land resemble European woodlands and certain areas seem more a simulacra of the Lake District or the New Forest than one might expect to find on a mountain in Africa.

Fire has been an important force in this landscape for millennia, with many fynbos species needing fire to reproduce. Similarly, the purposeful burning of veld to encourage new growth was a well-established practice before the arrival of Europeans.<sup>7</sup> More recently, the introduction of alien trees from the late 17th century onward, urban and agricultural encroachment along the periphery of Table Mountain, and fire suppression measures to protect these areas have significantly altered the impacts of fire in the area. Notably alien

5 Suzaan Boettger, 'Whispers and Cries: Photographic Evocations of the Anthropocene', /Depth of Field. 7, no. 1 (December 2015). <https://depthoffield.universiteitileiden.nl/>

6 Lance van Sittert. 'The Bourgeois Eye Aloft: Table Mountain in the Anglo Urban Middle-Class Imagination, c. 1891-1952', *Kronos* 29 (November 2003): 161-190.

7 Simon Pooley, 'Histories of Fire on South Africa's Cape Peninsula', in *Common Ground: Integrating the Social and Environmental in History*, by Genevieve Massard-Guilbaud and Stephen Mosley, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 2.

trees, such as the stone pines and cluster pines that surrounded UCT before the fire, increase the fuel load as much as fivefold compared to fynbos and are thought to have significantly contributed to the severity of the fire.<sup>8</sup>

Table Mountain has also been marked by contestation over land from the early days of settlement. The remnants of Van Riebeeck's hedge of bitter almonds (*Brabejum stellatifolium*) in the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens on the eastern slopes of Table Mountain are some of the earliest European interventions in the landscape still visible today. The hedge, planted circa 1659, formed part of a barrier around the Dutch settlement and, in claiming territory for Europeans and excluding indigenous people, can be seen as the first marker of segregationist practices in South Africa that culminated in apartheid.<sup>9</sup> In the 20th century, the Group Areas Act reserved areas close to the mountain for white people and forcibly relocated people of colour to areas more distant from the mountain.

Today, physical separation from Table Mountain is still a marker of the socio-economic realities of communities in Cape Town, with property values typically diminishing further from the mountain, while affluent areas closer to the mountain are still largely home to white people.<sup>10</sup> The mountain is thus entangled not only with concerns about the environment, but also with the social and economic realities of Cape Town. Much like the mountain's physical composition of layers of sandstone, granite, and shale, its cultural history is composed of the sedimented layers of meaning brought to it by all those who have interacted with it over time. Similarly, its physical construction through human intervention over the centuries can be read as a palimpsest, where human interventions imposed on the landscape by older generations have erased and replaced what was there before. Each place encountered on the mountain represents multiple stories, multiple opinions, multiple histories, and multiple points of view. Situated as it is on the lower slopes below the east face of Table Mountain, UCT is but one of these layers, and the fire represents yet another erasure from the palimpsest.

8 Brian van Wilgen and Nicola van Wilgen Bredenkamp, 'The Table Mountain fire: what we can learn from the main drivers of wildfires', *Stellenbosch University*, 28 April 2021, <http://www.sun.ac.za/english/Lists/news/DispForm.aspx?ID=8195>

9 Kim M. Reynolds, 'Cape Town's Garden of Good and Evil', *New Frame*, 11 June 2020, <https://www.newframe.com/long-read-cape-towns-garden-of-good-and-evil/>

10 Ronnie Donaldson, Sanette Ferreira, Sophie Didier, Esstienne Rodary, and Janie Swanepoel, 'Access to the Urban National Park in Cape Town: Where Urban and Natural Environment Meet', *Habitat International* 57 (October 2016): 137.



As a way of visualising and thinking about these layers of history, I made photographs of the library, projecting images of the fire and its immediate aftermath, as well as views of the mountain from surrounding residential areas onto the walls of the Jagger Library.<sup>11</sup> In *Untitled (Reading room East wall with burnt stone pines and smoke, Rhodes Estate)* is a photograph depicting burnt and smouldering stone pines overlaid on the Jagger building. The scenes blend in strange ways with smoke further discolouring the damaged surfaces of the building and its structure distorting the photograph. This and other photographs in this series were made in this way to draw together the site's past and present and position it in the larger landscape of Table Mountain.

I chose this approach to surface both the entanglement between this site and the surrounding landscape and suggest a conception of historical time suffused with contingency and interrelation, where the past can be seen in the conditions of the present and the present suggests the shape of the future. My aim is to point to the accumulation of countless moments that have contributed to shaping this place; hence, these photographs are not intended as a snapshots of a particular time but instead represent a lamination of time. Similarly, the idea of projection as an act of layering, as well as the selected photographs which were also made using a layering method (three colour photography), reference the physical layers of the mountain itself, its layered histories, and the erasures and replacements that I encountered there.

Working in the cavernous hulk of the library stood in stark contrast to the experience of making the photographs projected into the space, with the tension between the landscape amid a moment of change and the building still and deserted in the aftermath of that moment giving the experience an eerie dissonance. The continuous cycle of layering and erasure in this landscape destabilises what is known and understood about it, so that, as much as their physical stature might suggest otherwise, Table Mountain and Jagger Library occupy unstable ground. These photographs are thus not the product of a search for clarity, but rather point to the shaky, the in-between, the indistinct in my own understanding of this place.

All photographs by Eugene van der Merwe

<sup>11</sup> These photographs were taken from the body of work made for my MFA project entitled *Unstable Ground: A photographic reflection on the Landscape of Table Mountain*. See <https://open.uct.ac.za/handle/11427/36592> for more detail.













# Lamentations of Fire

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

**Atiyyah Khan** is an arts journalist, researcher, DJ, archivist, record collector, and events-curator from Johannesburg, based in Cape Town. Since 2007, she has documented arts and culture in South Africa, and her work has featured in major publications in South Africa and abroad. She is also the co-founder of music and art collective Future Nostalgia, which has been running since 2013 and hosts listening sessions and gigs around South Africa. Between 2017 and 2022, she worked with Zimbabwean dancer and choreographer Nora Chipaumire on sound for a work titled *100% POP*, performing in theaters around the world. She has created several podcasts, radio shows, and sound works, delivered sonic lectures and also ran a monthly radio show on Worldwide FM between 2020 and 2022. Currently, she works for various publications documenting South African arts and culture.

Atiyyah Khan

How do we lament the loss of knowledge, and how do we interpret that loss through sound? These were the questions I faced when considering the fires of 18 April 2021 that destroyed large parts of the Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town.

Seeing remnants of the destruction salvaged from the library at *Of Smoke and Ash: Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition* in April 2022, one year to the date of the fires, was devastating. As a writer and lover of print, paper, and the tangibility of books, the loss felt was immense. This was especially true in the case of the charred Rare Books collection, many of which were produced in or about Africa.

Engaging with the exhibition and then visiting the library was both disconcerting and helpful in terms of understanding both the architecture and the sheer scale of books, maps, documents, videos, and sound recordings that were destroyed in the blaze, many of them never to be recovered.

Though my experience as a journalist has been predominantly through writing, I found the most immediate response to the fire to be a sonic one, not one in words. This is due to my work dabbling in sound over the past decade, in the form of DJ sets, sonic lectures, experimental performances in theatre spaces, radio shows, podcasts, and as a sound archivist working with libraries. Through this work, music was another way for me to interpret the questions of archival loss and commemoration unearthed by the fire at the Jagger Library. Sound is the medium and space that allows me to explore my interests in how the past lives on in the present,

In 2013, I co-founded a music and art collective, called Future Nostalgia, with five other members. The collective’s joint philosophy was to listen together and share sounds specifically through vinyl or records as an analogue media. We found the perfect home at The Mahogany Room, a jazz club in Cape Town. It was through this collective that I learnt and developed my own practice as a DJ, where the focus is less on technique and more on curating a story, journey, or sonic experience. Even though I had been a music journalist for five years before this time, my real music education only started through the collection of records, the practice of crate-digging, and learning through listening and reading liner notes.



## *New ways of listening*

Most recently, my music interests have focused on learning more about South African and African music, in particular, digging back into history and listening to Library Records and field recordings – ethnic music often recorded by outsiders who had access to recording devices.

I approach all my records as library books because of the huge amounts of knowledge I have learnt from there. I find ways to extract information from them, in the same way I would with reading a book. And here, digging takes on two meanings: metaphorically unearthing fragments from the past, and literally as crate digging, the art of sniffing out records, usually in the most unlikely of places. For those unfamiliar with this practice, it demands real dedication to spend all of your spare time digging through dusty boxes of records and often means countless visits to flea markets, charity shops, and record stores, as well as trips to other towns and cities, always with an eye out for that one special record to add to the collection.

This is where my work as a DJ scholar coincided with my work as a journalist, when it comes to thinking about a response to the fire. Inspired by the tour of the husk of the Jagger Library and the *Of Smoke and Ash: Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition*, I conceived of a performative sonic lecture that would incorporate elements of ‘deep listening’, a mode that had started naturally as a process during my early gigs with Future Nostalgia. Simply put, this implies taking the space and time to listen and engage with sound on a deeper level.

Before you continue reading, please follow this QR code to listen to ‘*Lamentations of Fire*’, a recording of the set played during the workshop held immediately after the library and exhibition visit in April 2022. In the remainder of this text, I refer to the experience of delivering this sonic lecture as well as both the track list and record covers displayed during the set.



The date of the set on 25 April 2022 coincided with Ramadan – a special month for fasting on the Islamic calendar – which includes abstinence of all food and water from before sunrise to sunset. During this period, I usually take a break from all DJ gigs and spaces in order to practice more silence and mindfulness.

However, for this occasion, it was different. Playing while fasting felt unusual, in a good way, in the sense that it felt like a kind of meditation and, while playing, an unfamiliar focus was reached. The set also took place just before Iftar time, which is at sunset when the fast is broken with an evening meal. This is the time in the day when hunger is at its peak, which meant that it took a lot of focus to think meaningfully about the selection of records and how the tracks would follow. The entire session was approached from a perspective of intense feeling and improvisation. Thinking then about what the African Studies collections lost to the fire while bringing together lesser known African sounds: the set served as a mirror of the lost library, including both field recordings and library records and sounds incorporating jazz, ghoema, mbira, and more.

As mentioned, my records are my library books, so the set explored the idea of sound as another way to learn about the world. Sometimes, records are the only ways in which history is documented. And so, navigating both the sonic experience and the album cover as a text can reveal so much more in terms of access to the past knowledge that may have been lost through the years. The set also questioned another important issue: that of the land on which the library rests, its colonial architecture and heritage, and to whom it belonged. In doing so, the set laments not just that which was lost but also those who could not, and never will, gain access to the Jagger Library.

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Ntsikana’s ‘Bell’ was the set opener, from a library record from the Music of Africa Series: South Africa focusing on sounds from the Garden Route area through the Transkei, Zululand, Swaziland, and the Kruger National Park. Ntsikana was a Xhosa prophet and evangelist who composed the hymn which he sang to call people to worship, as he did not have a bell. This continued through another beautiful spiritual interpretation of the same song by Abdullah Ibrahim and Johnny Dyani.





DOLLAR BRAND DUO  
GOOD NEWS FROM





# Cassock Billowing

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

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Sindi-Leigh McBride

Frieda followed Clive’s funeral on YouTube; she found the link on St. George’s Facebook page. Her daughters think she spends too much time on there, but that’s how she knew he died, even before Beryl phoned to tell her. It’s how she keeps up with birthdays, weddings, funerals, and where she finds the duas that she distributes daily on WhatsApp. Or as she calls them, *my Whatsupp prayers*.

She thought long and hard about going to the funeral.

After all, it was at *her* old church. Michael Weeder probably organised it; she remembered Clive mentoring him after he was ordained in the 1980s. Beryl offered to go with her to the service, but Frieda curtly replied:

“You know me, Beryl. I would go just for the viewing, just to see him dead as a doornail. But the thought of pretending to be sad makes me naar.”

Frieda expected to feel relief at Clive’s passing. At peace. But when the priest picked up the *Book of Common Prayer* and announced that it was to be a requiem mass, she was surprised by a sudden surge of fury. A requiem mass meant no eulogy. Of course. Trust Clive to be so austere, right to the end. Just as the organ started the introit hymn, her doorbell rang. Outside, her grandson Ismail stood blowing into his hands and stamping his feet impatiently.

“What took you so long Ma, I was about to catch double pneumonia outside here!”

“You’ll catch a klap, talking to your ouma like that. And don’t roll your eyes at me Ismail, they’ll get stuck behind your head.”

Frieda peered up at her grandson, trying to be stern, but since all she could see was grinning teeth, she couldn’t help grinning back. As he stepped inside, he pulled her into a one-armed hug, the other lugging a black Woolworths bag. Mid-hug, she remembered the funeral and, at that exact moment, Ismail caught wind of the choir starting what sounded like ‘Abide by Me’. His eyebrows shot up, but he knew better than to say anything and headed straight for the kitchen to unpack the groceries and start the tea. He had a method for this, his fortnightly duty, and took pride in preparing for their Friday afternoon dates. On his way from his mother’s house in Claremont to Frieda in Kensington, sometimes he’d pass by Belgravia to pick up pies and samoosas from her eldest daughter, Mariam. Sometimes he’d go to Mariam on his way back home to join his cousins for the Maghrib prayer. Her other grandchildren usually visited on Sunday mornings, to collect koesisters, Frieda’s only contribution to the family’s collective sweet tooth.



Ismail joined her in the lounge with their tea (sweet Rooibos for him, milky Five Roses for her, butter cookies for a small army) and whistled in appreciation as he caught sight of the pomp of the clergy in their vestments, slowly making their way along the nave of the cathedral. Watching it after all these years, Frieda couldn't help but be impressed too.

The gold altar glittered in its apse as multicoloured lights from the stained-glass panels danced on the sandstone walls of Sir Herbert Baker's crown jewel. Following the censer's hypnotic swing across the screen added to the spectacle and, for a second, Frieda thought that she could feel swirls of incense tickling her nose, but it was just steam curling up from her cup. Her ornery mood had evaporated, and she found herself humming happily along, the long-forgotten lyrics returning surprisingly swiftly.

"Hey Ma, since when do you watch the Vatican Live during Jumu'ah?"

Frieda snorted, spurring tea through her nostrils. This bladdy child. She laughingly explained that it was a funeral on the screen and Ismail sobered immediately, as unfamiliar with death as with Christian funeral rites, and clumsily tried to offer condolences, like someone who hasn't lived long enough for sympathy to roll off his tongue.

"You don't need to console me, Ismail. Don't worry, boy. Clive lived to eighty-eight, a long, lucky life. And besides, he was my enemy."

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I met Clive at the University of Cape Town, at the Jagger Library, in 1968.

I had seen him before that, but who hadn't; he was impossible to miss, striding across the campus in his black robes or speeding down De Waal Drive on his red Vespa, cassock billowing behind him. That's what the Christian priests wear; it looks like a kurta.

He was a very handsome man. Just ask Auntie Beryl the next time you see her; she'll tell you. She used to call him 'Bybel-kop' because he would plaster his hair down with Brylcreem with such a straight middle-path that his head looked like an open Bible. We giggled about him behind his back but would never, ever do it in person. He was very intimidating. My first impression was that the man's spirit was made of steel. Straight, straight posture and a very serious face. And he was so tall; you always got the feeling that he was glowering down at you from that lofty height.

As for me, you wouldn't believe it now but, back then, everything about me was mousy. I had thin, thin legs and an even thinner voice. You know, as a child, I was always hiding behind my father's legs and, as a young woman, I hid behind the pillars of the library, tucked away upstairs and out of sight. My father had begged and wheedled my way into that job, did I ever tell you about it? It was my first job. Shame, your great-grandfather was a brave man, in his own way. He pulled strings across the whole of Stellenbosch to get me that job. And you know what his bargaining tool was? Boxes and boxes of books that he had found in the attic of a soon to be auctioned house.

What happened was, he had a piece-job cleaning the house and, in the dead of the night, carted all those boxes from Mostertdrift which was a very wealthy, very exclusive white suburb in Stellenbosch back then. It's probably still like that now, you know how Stellenbosch is. Anyway, he stored the boxes in the basement of the MoederKerk; that's the main, main NG Kerk. He worked there as a groundsman after he lost his shop. He didn't know what to do with the books, but he knew he could hide them there. And even though he couldn't read very well, after opening the boxes and seeing Bible after Bible in what looked like suiwer Afrikaans, he said that he just had a feeling that they would be valuable to someone in the Christian community.

The most obvious route was to donate it to the church itself; the NG Kerk has a long history of parishioner donations. In fact, that's how the first 'public' library started.

A book collector, von Dessin or von Dessim something, who worked for the Dutch East India Company, donated his personal collection of thousands of first edition books, paintings, and astrological instruments to the church when he died. His instruction was that the collection was to be used by everyone. At the time, 'everyone' meant whites only, but still. Before him, libraries in South Africa were all privately owned and used. Now, he had a special advantage as a book collector, because he worked for the Company's orphan chamber: his job was to look after the assets of Dutch orphans in the Cape, so he would go through deceased estates and organise public auctions from what he found.

You can just imagine what an impressive donation the church received from him. I didn't know any of this library history; Clive found it all out from the university librarian, Mr Immelman, after I told him about the books that my father had discovered. They had been categorised in the Jagger Library as part of the Cape Clergyman Library. Can you believe, my father kept those boxes secret for nearly three years? He was



waiting for someone with the right connections and contacts. Later, when he died and I too was orphaned, I thought about that book collector and wondered what he would have made of my father's collection, had he held onto it for me to inherit.

I left Stellenbosch when I was seventeen, the same year I met Clive. There were rumours that UCT was admitting more coloured students, and my father wanted me to become a teacher, lawyer, doctor, anything that would get me out of Stellenbosch. He wasn't a very political man, until his fruit and veg shop in Die Vlakte, near the university, was destroyed. We were forced out of the shop, and our home behind it. Soon there were thousands of us crammed into Cloetesville, an area meant for maybe one, two hundred people.

Before that, my father had dreamed of me going to university in Stellenbosch. He was saving for it. But he lost all hope in Stellenbosch after that. Our homes were demolished to make way for townhouses for white families and university buildings for their white children. And mind you, he was one of the lucky ones, to get that job at the church so quickly after he lost the shop. His uncle worked there for many years and got him in.

A new rector came in who was sympathetic to my father's ambitions for me, but also very strategic. He must have recognised the value of the books. My father transferred me and the books into his care, and the first thing that rector did was organise a room at a Christian women's hostel in town. I will always be grateful to that man because that's where I met Beryl; she was already studying when I arrived, and she inspired me right from the start.

One of the other girls at the hostel was from Kimberly: Joanna. She took me with her to St George's Cathedral, which was close to the hostel. Joanna went to all the services, convinced that it was better to attend mass delivered in the Queen's English, instead of the kombuistaal that we were used to. We all wanted to go to UCT, and good English improved your chances of a study permit from the Department of Coloured Affairs.

The rector also arranged the sale of the books to the university library through the head librarian, Mr Immelman, on condition that I could work there to improve my English. The proceeds went to the church; my father pocketed the prospect of my future, and I started cleaning.

At the library, I was Mr Immelman's charge, but the books that brought me there became mine. I used to sit in a little hoekie next to his office in the upper reaches of the library and scrape pigeon shit off mouldy books day after day. It didn't feel like a future

at all. I hated those bladdy books. All I saw was the vrot ones, full of fungi or droppings. Mr Immelman whisked the good ones away from the blight of those boxes, many of which were still stacked around me, four months after we had arrived. The valuable books made it into the vitrine into his office; I knew they were important because he only opened it for special people.

And that's how I got to know Clive.

One morning, two coloured men arrived at Mr Immelman's office. There was no radio allowed in the library, so all my entertainment came from picking up stompies; I knew everything that happened in that library from eavesdropping.

The men were in his office to see the pride of the Cape Clergyman Library: a copy of the 1535 Dutch Bible, the oldest in the country.

Mr Immelman loved to talk about what he had squirrelled away and immediately began singing the Bible's praises, telling them how the original copies were burnt and how the printer was executed for publishing them.

I had to strain over my mouldy books to catch everything, but I picked up that the first man was Dicky van der Ross, editor of the *Cape Herald*, a weekly community newspaper about coloureds, for coloureds. Dicky was writing a feature on coloured priests, and one of the priests he was interviewing had suggested that they visit the library. His name was Clive, but I didn't catch his surname; Dicky kept calling him Father Clive.

According to Dicky, Clive was always going on about his research in the library archives and his interest in Cape slave histories; Clive had convinced the journalist to include some of this research in his news article. You see, Clive worked in a coloured parish where many of his neighbours were Muslim, leading to a curiosity about how both his ancestors and those of his 'Moslem brethren', as he said, had come from the East, yet somehow their religious histories were so different.

From what I could hear, Clive seemed disappointed when Mr Immelman laughed and asked him what sense it made to include Muslims in a Christian library collection, dismissing any further inquiry into slave history and religion. On their way out, Dicky didn't notice me, and Mr Immelman ignored me as usual, but Clive nodded his head in greeting.

When I took my lunchbreak, I saw Clive stretched out on one of the lawns near the university's endless steps. He was leaning back on his elbows and staring up at Jameson



Hall, Devil's Peak majestically looming behind. He seemed relaxed, but as formidable as the mountain in his cassock and white collar. He waved me over with a smile when he noticed me exiting the library and, before I could say anything, immediately asked what I thought about the university continuing to honour colonialists like Jameson and Rhodes. I stammered something stupid, but he must not have heard or just ignored me, because he continued, declaring: "We'll soon need new names for our institutions if we want them to transform." I had no idea what he meant but soon learnt that this was his usual style, a riddle wrapped in a lecture inside a sermon. Shame, he was a stern orator but also patient with me and my halting English. I was so grateful when he offered to switch to Afrikaans but didn't insist when I insisted on continuing in English.

After that, we would eat together outside the library, usually once a week, but always on a Monday before he went to Valkenberg, the psychiatric hospital in Obs. He was the chaplain there, which means he was the priest responsible for spiritually counselling patients and their families.

Over a few months, we became firm friends, and he was a good friend to me for many years, despite our age difference. I think he felt sorry for me with my dry peanut butter toebroodjie from the women's hostel and often shared his lunch with me. Sometimes he brought koesisters that his wife, Marie, had made the day before, or tomato bredie that I would warm up in the library kitchen. But he also shared his life. I learnt that he had moved from Johannesburg to Cape Town because the bishop there said that there was no room for coloured priests in his diocese, that Marie was pregnant with their fourth child, that they had three sons.

There was one time when he was furious for weeks on end because he had tried to enrol his two eldest sons at Bishops, but they were refused entry. I listened sympathetically to him venting about the racists – he pronounced it like this 'ray-shist' like fascist and spat the word out every time – but I was secretly in awe. Not that an Anglican school wouldn't let an Anglican priest enrol his children because of their skin colour, but that a coloured man dared to demand to send his children to a white school. My own father had dreamt about me getting the kind of education that we all knew was reserved for white people only, but he dreamed carefully, quietly.

Compared to him, Clive seemed ready to shout from the rooftops.

When my father got sick, Clive drove me back to Cloetesville to see him, and when he passed, Clive and Marie both came to the funeral, even though it was very close to her delivery date. That meant a lot to me. You know that my mother died when I was very young; my father was my whole world.

Those weekly conversations with Clive improved my English and – maybe more importantly – my confidence. Remember, I was a shy, young woman alone in a new town. One day, I plucked up the nerve to ask him what exactly he was doing in the library. He wasn't enrolled for any studies, so was he writing something? He explained, that since clergy were allowed to use the university's resources, he was using the opportunity to investigate his own history. Before he started asking questions about shared ancestry between Muslims and Christians, no one around him had even mentioned slavery, never mind mapped out the contours of the Cape as a full-fledged slave society. Encouraged, I pressed on, remembering Mr Immelman's dismissal of his interests, and asked if he planned to publish this research to add to the Cape Clergyman Library.

I will never forget his reply:

"Frieda, I am Black. There are no people like us on the shelves of this library."

He did not raise his voice, but I was stunned by the anger in it. I had never heard a coloured person call themselves Black before. I had never even spoken to a Black person before. Clive must have seen my shock because, after that, he made more effort to introduce me to writings by and about Black South Africans. He would sneak pamphlets into whatever book he was carrying, and I would slip them out before returning the book to the library for him. That was how I started learning about the struggle. Remember, I was sheltered in my father's shop in Stellenbosch and even more sheltered at the women's hostel in Cape Town. Before meeting Clive, I was politically clueless.

After the new baby arrived, I saw less of him than before, but Marie would sometimes phone at the hostel to check in. By the time Clive came to the library again, it had been nearly two years since I began working there. The boxes of books that I arrived with had long since been cleared, but I was still a glorified maid, still in my hoekie next to Mr Immelman, who would soon retire. I had applied for a study permit twice and been rejected on both occasions. Despair was settling into the marrow of my bones.

It was Clive's suggestion to enrol at the University of the Western Cape. Initially, I was sceptical. Back then, everyone looked down on the bush colleges; that's what we called the coloureds-only colleges. UCT was the place to be if you wanted to be more than a typist. Besides, I was still mourning my father, and I didn't want to let down his dream for me.



But somehow, Clive convinced me, and I enrolled for my Bachelor's degree in Library Science in the same year that Desmond Demas was expelled for not wearing a tie. I dove headlong into all the student politics; I was so dizzy with it that it's a miracle that I even finished my studies, never mind continued studying. I had no idea what I had been missing, shuffling back and forth from the Jagger Library to what I soon realised was a bona fide nunnery. Even though I had swapped working in one library to study how libraries worked, I was radiant with freedom, and those miserable two years cleaning and cataloguing books must have come in handy, because I was always top of my class. In my free time, I would go to all the student meetings with Johnny Issel and them.

In my second year, I helped organise for Clive to give a talk to SASO members on campus. I was so proud, and he was proud too, since he had basically started my political career. By that time, the South African Students' Organisation was a big deal on campus. SASO had branches at universities all around the country, and the UWC branch was the main channel for Black Consciousness ideology in the city. Clive wasn't involved in any branch-level activism, but he would champion SASO and Black Consciousness anywhere and everywhere, from the pulpit to the Flats, in the news, on the streets, everywhere. And he was always firing on all cylinders.

Let me show you something: I took this box out when I learnt that he passed. I kept all of the pamphlets Clive gave me; the ones by the poets were my favourite. Pascal Gwala wrote this one; there's another by Oswald Mtshali somewhere here too. Here's a first edition copy of *Cry Rage!*, James Matthews' first collection with Gladys Thomas, the first book of poetry banned by the apartheid government. I was first introduced to him in a pamphlet from Clive. Here's the article I was looking for: it was in *The Washington Post* in 1972. People all around the world were starting to pay attention to Black resistance, and here's Clive criticising the synod of the diocese of Cape Town, the annual meeting of all the priests in the city. Listen to this:

"I foster black power unblushingly because I am a Christian, but at the same time, I believe only through Black power can I fight the cruel merciless white power which attacks us even here in this diocese."

Now isn't that beautiful? So what went wrong?

Well, Clive started hosting these Saturday sessions for young people at his house. You know, it's actually close by, next to the sports field. No, not Factreton Avenue, on the opposite street, Maryland Avenue. Like you going towards the Spar on 12th Avenue.

The aim of the meetings was to raise the political consciousness of young people; the main focus was what it meant to be part of the struggle as a Christian. Many of the young activists who attended those meetings at his house went on to join the Christian Leadership Centre, where they underwent intensive training that included lessons in political history and things like visiting a different Christian church every Sunday to learn more about parishes across the city in different communities. Since I was on track to becoming a librarian, Clive thought I should also get involved, to help coordinate the literature.

The problem is, I had stopped going to church.

There wasn't even any real reason. At first, my excuse was that the UWC campus in Bellville was far from town, but I could have gone to one of the churches nearby. The truth is, I had tasted blood, living unsupervised with no family to go home to on weekends, and I had simply fallen out of my religion. I was busy with my new comrades, organising protests and marches, dreaming about the future and what not. But I was still too afraid to admit to Clive that I wasn't attending mass and, instead, stopped attending the Saturday meetings too. So that was the first thing to provoke Clive's ire, that I didn't want to join the Centre and that I stopped attending the Saturday meetings. He didn't say anything, but I knew he was disappointed.

Then I met Fatima Meer and, soon after, my future husband.

We had organised some events to protest the expulsion of several UWC students; Fatima and Mangosuthu were the main speakers. There was a door-to-door campaign to raise support for the expelled students and mass meetings at Athlone Stadium and Turfhall Sports Ground. Fatima was there the whole time, doing the pamphleteering and what not with us. She was the first Black woman to be appointed as a lecturer at a white university, so we were all in awe of her, scampering around to impress her.

And it was through this work that she then introduced me to some people from the Muslim community who were organising a boycott against bus segregation. We printed hundreds of pamphlets; Allie Parker let us do it at night in his shop. He would send the key to the shop with his nephew, Suleiman; everyone called him Solly.



Solly started loitering around instead of just dropping the key, dilly-dallying before leaving to stare at me across the printer and, next thing he had joined us at in the campaign, attending marches like he was born to do it. Now, Clive was part of the team organising the bus boycott; remember, he was very connected to the Muslim community in Kensington. And on the day of the march, when he saw me arm-in-arm with Solly, pumping our free hands in the air as we moved with the crowd, he was a bit off. Not rude, but definitely not as warm as usual.

When Solly and I decided to get married, I phoned Clive and Marie to tell them. Marie immediately congratulated me, but all Clive said was;

“Well, Frieda, as the gospel of Paul teaches us, it is indeed better to marry than to burn.”

Even though I was preparing to convert to Islam, I still had my Bible, so I went and looked up that verse. It says that it's better for women to marry if they cannot control their burning passions. I was highly irritated, but I still invited them to the nikah; Solly insisted.

They didn't come. Marie sent me a cookbook though; I still have it.

I was hurt by that. I mean, Clive used to let Muslims use his church hall for Madrassah; that's how involved he was with his 'Moslem brethren.' And yet, he had no respect for me or my marriage once I converted.

After that, I ran into Clive a few times, at protests or speeches, but I kept my distance. Solly and I got married in December 1975, just before my final year of university, the year that changed everything in this country. Of course, I was sad. The loss of a good friendship can break your heart, but I had to let sleeping dogs lie. At that time, there were many, many reasons for heartbreak.

Then many, many years later, Mariam graduated in the same year as one of Clive's sons. It was such a wonderful, wonderful occasion for me. I was the first person to study in my family, and here was my firstborn graduating from the same university. Somebody had pressed a glass of champagne into my hand to toast for a photograph. In my jubilation, I spotted Clive in the crowd and without hesitation made my way over to him, glass still in hand. And you won't believe it; before even saying hello or acknowledging our children's success, he said to me:

“I am somewhat unsurprised that you turned out to be a waterslams, Frieda.”

I just gaped at him in shock. Then, spun on my heel and went back to the celebrations without saying a word back. I even remember the heels that I was wearing that day; I had just bought them from Truworths, specifically for the occasion. That was the last time we spoke.

I will never get over the nerve of the man.

First, giving me the shoulder because I converted from Christianity to Islam, then accusing me like that? Even if I was a drinking alcohol, even if I was in fact a watered-down Muslim, what gave him the right to judge me? After that, I wanted nothing to do with Clive.

His name would come up in conversation in my old activist circles, people now working at NGOs or in the new government, and they would say things like they didn't expect that he would become such a Bible-basher, or that the fire of the Holy Spirit seemed to have doused his revolutionary zeal.

Me, I kept quiet.

You know what I like to say: it's safer to pause when you feel strongly.

And I really did feel strongly; I seethed for many years.

You know I found out from strangers that Marie had passed? I was angry all over again. Now that is a funeral I would have bent over backwards to go to, and Clive *knew* that we kept in contact. We used to write each other letters, updating each other about our children, passing recipes back and forth, and what have you. And he didn't even have let me know when she got sick, never mind when she died.

And so there you have it.

Not an explosive enmity. Just an accumulation of small, small hurts that snowballed over the years.

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Frieda sprinkled copious amounts of desiccated coconut onto a baking tray, as she did every Sunday morning, and set it aside so that the coconut would be a little crunchy by the time she was ready to use it. In a large bowl, she mixed cake flour with baking powder, instant yeast, castor sugar, and a tiny pinch of salt before folding in the spices:



aniseed, cinnamon, ground cardamom, and mixed spice. In a separate bowl, she mixed melted butter and soft mashed potatoes, naartjie zest, and freshly grated ginger. She added lukewarm water and one large egg, then combined the wet and dry ingredients. As she kneaded the dough, she thought about Marie. This was her recipe.

Frieda smiled at the memory of Marie's immaculate handwriting, how all her recipes included pro tips. Like, keeping a small bowl of oil on hand to dip fingers into while kneading, to avoid the dough getting too sticky. She covered the bowl with cling wrap and put it in the oven, to rise for an hour during Fajr.

When she was done with the morning prayer, she knocked down the dough and, this time, she thought about Clive as she pounded it for one last knead before shaping. It was hard to be angry after the morning salah, when the world was sleeping, and she felt closest to God. Besides, talking to Ismail had taken the sting out of the story.

The child was right. It wasn't healthy to harbour anger.

And yes, maybe Clive had been the best friend he could be. Maybe he had simply burnt out from being such a fire-brand in his heyday.

'The fighting priest' they used to call him.

Maybe acting as chaplain to Black Consciousness luminaries had had more impact on him than she had ever really thought about. Barney Pityana and Steve Biko were in and out of his house on Maryland Avenue; there must have been all sorts of eyes and spies on Clive and his family. No wonder he turned so zealously to the Bible. She knew from experience, it wasn't easy to be a person of faith, especially when burning with indignation at injustice.

She dipped her fingers into the bowl of oil while deftly shaping the dough into little oblongs and plopping them into a deep saucepan of hot oil. Once the fried dough was cooling down on a paper towel, she put a small saucepan of water on to boil with cinnamon sticks for the syrup but couldn't find the sugar. Ismail had brought the whole tin to the lounge and forgotten to return it with the tray of empty teacups. Next to the sugar tin on the lounge table was the box of clippings and keepsakes that she had shown to Ismail. She brought both the sugar and the box back with her to the kitchen and finished the syrup.

As she dunked the koesisters, now crispy and golden brown, into the bubbling syrup, she turned them with a slotted spoon to make sure that the syrup was being absorbed. With each syrup-soak, her eyes drifted to the box of memories beside her on the countertop. She had many others like it, stacks and stacks of boxes in her basement, much like the priceless collection that her father had found in Stellenbosch, but free from fungi and droppings.

She had begun her collection by carefully storing all of the political pamphlets Clive had snuck to her, unaware of the danger that they held, a naivete that soon grew into a brazen, meticulous documentation of her years as a UWC student organiser, her work with the African Library Association of South Africa and subsequent library associations. Her life's work was in those boxes, a record of the years fighting more than one oppressive system. From apartheid to the white science of librarianship, fixated on information technology to keep up with international colleagues, instead of braving the wicked problem of providing library services to Black South Africans, a problem that still kept her up at night, though she had been retired for more than five years.

Ever since Frieda had helped Beryl find a home for her husband Russel's papers – the archive of the Beyers Naude Centre for Public Theology, fitting for the sermons and speeches of the first Black rector of Stellenbosch University – Frieda had been wondering if her own collection would be of interest to others. Seeing Ismail's rapt attention and wonder at the assortment of poems and press clippings in just one of her many boxes was affirmation enough. Maybe the fiery memory of Clive was the motivation she needed.

As she rolled the syruped koesisters in the now crunchy coconut, Frieda was returned to Mondays at the Jagger library where Marie's koesisters always miraculously retained their juiciness and Clive's company was a godsend during those lonely first months in Cape Town. And she thought to herself;

*Maybe, just maybe, after the fire, there was a way to get Clive onto the shelves after all.*



# Fire and Physical Energy on the Slopes of Devil’s Peak

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

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Nicola Brandt

I was photographing in the vicinity of the Rhodes Memorial site the Sunday morning when the fires on Table Mountain broke out in April 2021. I could see a plume of smoke starting to rise above the trees in the near distance. With my tripod and camera slung over my shoulder, I walked along the Southern exit road flanking Groote Schuur Estate – formerly owned by the Dutch East India Company and, later, the controversial British imperialist Cecil Rhodes (1853-1902) – towards the campus of the University of Cape Town (UCT). The fire was quickly spreading through old pine trees and brushwood, generating its own wind towards the university and the city. The air was beginning to fill with particles of smoke and ash. By the time I had reached the southwestern fringe of the campus, the flames were already at the boundaries of the university, and no firefighter was in sight. All I could hear were the humming propellers of the heavy lift helicopters circling above. They were carrying thousands of litres of water, trying to extinguish the growing fire, but by nightfall the mountain appeared apocalyptic.<sup>1</sup>

The reason I happened to be there that morning was a project that I was working on, looking at the broader symbolism of a specific monument known as *Physical Energy*. I had discovered that the British imperial statue of a horse and rider exists in three different locations: London, Cape Town, and Harare. The monument provided an entry point for me from which to explore an entangled history between the diverse locations in which the casts can be found, and to glean an understanding of the value systems in each of these contexts from around the time of the monument’s construction at the beginning of the 20th century to the postcolonial present. The fire that day added another layer of complexity and symbolism to this already fraught history.<sup>2</sup> My photographs at the time and in the aftermath of the devastating fire, as well as this accompanying text, are a small contribution to a larger project of attempting to envision a reparative eco-politics anchored in methodologies of care, that aims for more nuance and intentionality in intersectional decolonial and ecological memory work. Before continuing to build on these ideas, it was important for me to try to try to understand some of the origins of the problem, of which *Physical Energy* provided a tangible starting point.<sup>3</sup>

1

All the photographs in this essay were taken by me in 2020 and 2021.

2

A version of this essay has been published before in 2021; however, a new layer of complexity emerged for me between issues of social justice and environmentalism after experiencing the fire at Devil’s Peak in April 2021. It was important for me to address these new insights related to the monument *Physical Energy* in this iteration of a longer-term project. See Nicola Brandt, ‘Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism’, in *Conversations across Place: Reckoning with an Entangled World*, by Nicola Brandt and Frances Whorrall-Campbell, Vol. One (Berlin: The Green Box, 2021).

3

See my chapter: Nicola Brandt, ‘Imagined Geographies and New Practices of Self’, in *Landscapes between Then and Now: Recent Histories in Southern African Photography, Performance and Video Art* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 197–204.





Devil's Peak and Table Mountain on Fire. 18 April 2021



## Rhodes' Racial Capitalist Legacy

The Cape Town version of the bronze cast monument is a focal point on the Rhodes Memorial complex built in 1912 on Devil's Peak, only a few hundred metres above the historical university campus founded in 1829. The story of how the cast of *Physical Energy* ended up in South Africa began with a chance encounter in London between the renowned Victorian painter and sculptor George Frederic Watts (1817–1904) and the British mining magnate Cecil Rhodes at the end of the 19th century. After Rhodes' unexpected death in early 1902, his colleagues at the British South Africa Company (BSAC) – a corporation initially founded in 1889 by Rhodes and his partners – sought to memorialise his legacy. *Physical Energy* was thus intended to symbolise the concepts of 'progress' and 'betterment' as represented in the person of Rhodes.<sup>4</sup> Inscribed into the stone base of the Cape Town cast are the following words: *Energy - The Work of GF Watts RA, And By Him Given To The Genius Of Cecil Rhodes*.

Why did Rhodes warrant such brazen recognition at the time? As a mining magnate, he accumulated profit by controlling processes of production and exploiting Black African labour. The abusive systems set up during Rhodes' lifetime would continue for decades after his death via the instruments and offshoots of his company. He was also a co-founder of the De Beers diamond mining company, which continues to operate today as the daughter company of Anglo-American. The structure and economic basis of the extractive industries of gold and diamond mining would lead to extreme economic and social inequalities for generations in Southern Africa.<sup>5</sup> The environmental devastation left behind by these industries also substantially contributed to ecocide in the region, as well as climate change beyond these physical territories.<sup>6</sup> Further, the oppressive racial laws passed under Rhodes' tenure as Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890 to 1896 had devastating consequences, laying the blueprint for apartheid and the migrant labour system.

4 Brandt, 'Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism', 32.

5 Brandt, 22-23.

6 In *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*, the geographer Kathryn Yusoff explores these grammars of capture, extraction, and displacement, locating the origins of climate change in the Atlantic Slave Trade. The cheap, exploitative labour of African miners contracted by the BSAC can be seen in many ways as a corollary of this global trade of Black life that the book explores. Yusoff describes how "[t]he biopolitical category of nonbeing is established through slaves being exchanged for and as gold. Slavery was a geologic axiom of the inhuman in which nonbeing was made, reproduced, and circulated as flesh" – words that have a chilling resonance with the conditions of gold and diamond miners in Southern Africa. See Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 5.

How might emerging socio-cultural practices offer possibilities in a time that radically asks for socio-political engagement and environmental adaptation? How might one learn to be more self-reflexive and embodied in place but, in the same instance, decentre and critique one's specific situatedness and viewpoints?

In March 2015, South African activist Chumani Maxwele smeared excrement on a statue portraying a seated depiction of Cecil Rhodes at UCT. Maxwele's radical protest, which catalysed the Rhodes Must Fall movement against the university's purported institutional racism, was also an objection to longer histories of Black oppression at the hands of white supremacy in South Africa, of which physical structures and symbols remain a constant reminder.<sup>7</sup> The campaign, which formed part of the Fallist movements in South Africa,<sup>8</sup> resulted in the removal of the statue. The removal of the Rhodes monument from the UCT campus represented a powerful symbolic moment of transformation in the country's history. And yet, above the campus, only a few hundred metres away, a seemingly indestructible monument dedicated to Rhodes still looms. Built from bronze and granite on the grounds of the Rhodes Estate, the design of the memorial was inspired by Rhodes' appreciation for classical architecture, whilst the eight flanking, bronze lions were inspired by those at the base of Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square in London. At the foot of forty-nine stone steps – each step marking one year in the life of the man – *Physical Energy* is raised on a tall plinth. The rider scans the horizon to the north-east along the planned route of Rhodes' trans-African railroad.

Meanwhile, in London, the first cast of the horse and rider is not embedded in a wider memorial complex but stands alone on a stone plinth. This posthumous six-ton cast was unveiled in Kensington Gardens adjacent to Hyde Park in 1907. The monument was deliberately intended to face a late 19th century statue of Queen Victoria and Kensington Palace. The plaque beneath the monument was updated as recently as 2007, and yet, the updated plaque makes no mention of the fraught histories associated with the statue. Other than describing the abstract symbolism of "physical energy" and the diverse locations of the statue's exact replicas, no direct reference is made to the imperial and colonial legacies embedded in this (in)famous work.<sup>9</sup> Instead, the description reads as follows:

7 Brandt, 'Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism', 36.

8 "The Fallist movement" is used to collectively refer to the Rhodes Must Fall and #FeesMustFall student movements that started in 2015 in South Africa.

9 Brandt, 'Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism', 22.





Sections of Uis tin mine filled with water, near Uis, 6 February 2020. Digital photograph.



*Physical Energy* is G F Watts's sculptural masterpiece, a universal embodiment of the dynamic force of ambition. The artist himself described it as 'a symbol of that restless physical impulse to seek the still unachieved in the domain of material things.'<sup>10</sup> Kensington Gardens, the vast park in which the monument is situated, was used for royal hunting.<sup>11</sup> To this day, the Gardens continues to be a showcase for 18th century English ideas of how to control nature.

Later in the same year, I travelled to find the monument's third cast erected in Harare, Zimbabwe. In 1959, half a century after Rhodes' death, amid independence struggles across the continent, *Physical Energy* was given a new lease of life by BSAC. A third full-size cast was made in London and sent to be placed in front of the High Court building in Lusaka in Zambia.<sup>12</sup> The construction of this further cast was meant to commemorate the history of the Company and the legacy of Rhodes in the region. Instead, it represented a direct refutation of the liberation struggle and resistance by Africans to the company's continued denial of their rights to land and resources.<sup>13</sup> The statue was moved when public pressure mounted because of its 'colonial associations.'<sup>14</sup> It then stood ignominiously in the grounds of a racecourse on the outskirts of Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia (Salisbury became Harare after Zimbabwe's Independence in 1980), before being moved again in 1981.

The statue now stands on the grounds of the National Archives in Harare – a redundant white elephant. The institution's archivist Kudakwashe Tonhodzai described *Physical Energy* as 'the racial, capitalist system which Rhodes helped put in place.'<sup>15</sup> In comparison to the other two casts, it is in this humble context, behind the National Zimbabwean archives and out of public view, that *Physical Energy* has possibly found its most appropriate location to date. The monument has not been destroyed but removed from its raised plinth and placed on the floor. In this context, the monument has largely been emptied out of its overbearing, ideological power. Furthermore, the racist history

<sup>10</sup> Brandt, 'Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism', 22.

<sup>11</sup> 'Landscape History', The Royal Parks, <https://www.royalparks.org.uk/parks/hyde-park/about-hyde-park/landscape-history>

<sup>12</sup> Patience Rusare, 'Of Colonial Statues and Monuments | Celebrating Being Zimbabwean', *The Patriot*, 21 January 2016, [https://www.thepatriot.co.zw/old\\_posts/of-colonial-statues-and-monuments/](https://www.thepatriot.co.zw/old_posts/of-colonial-statues-and-monuments/)

<sup>13</sup> Brandt, 'Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism', 33–35.

<sup>14</sup> Drawn directly from the typed description next to the statue of *Physical Energy* now standing in the National Archives in Harare. The statue stands incongruously next to another statue of Cecil Rhodes by the Scottish sculptor in 1928.

<sup>15</sup> Kudakwashe Tonhodzai, pers. comm., 21 April 2021.



Nicola Brandt, Protesting at Rhodes Memorial, Cape Town, South Africa. 4 April 2021  
Digital photograph.



Nicola Brandt, Physical Energy, A Monument to the Legacy of Cecil Rhodes and Imperial Capitalism, Harare, Zimbabwe, 21 April 2021.  
Digital photograph.





Nicola Brandt, Physical Energy, Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park,  
13 July 2020  
Digital photograph.



Nicola Brandt, Abandoned monument of Lord Alfred Beit, an Anglo-German  
gold and diamond magnate and financier of Cecil Rhodes in South Africa,  
National Archives of Zimbabwe, Harare, 21 April 2021.  
Digital photograph.

of the cast and the reasons for its relocation are documented on a faded, but extensive description next to the statue, which is not the case in the other two contexts. A part of the longer description reads as follows:

‘The statue was associated with the worst sort of racism following the unfortunate remarks made by the then Federal Prime Minister Godfrey Huggins when he equated the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland’s policy of racial partnership with the Statue: the blacks being the horse and the rider, the whites.’<sup>16</sup>

### *Non-indigenous Flora and Fauna and What Burnt in the Fire*

To revisit the site of Rhodes’s Memorial Complex in Cape Town, one cannot overlook the deep irony in the fact that the non-indigenous pines encircling the monument and the university contributed to the destructive fire on 18 April 2021. The artist and ecologist Zayaan Khan, in an Instagram post, comments on the well-known fact that non-indigenous pines ignite easily due to the oil substances in their bark. They also burn at unusually high temperatures. Fire jumps quickly from tree to tree and area to area and travels underground through the trees’ root systems and through burning duff. In conjunction with the strong winds of the Cape, burning tinder and ash travel many kilometres.<sup>17</sup>

Stone pines were introduced into the region in the late 1700s. In the 1800s, Dutch settlers cultivated the pines on the lower slopes of Table Mountain chiefly for supplying firewood to the city, as well as scaffolding and structural timber.<sup>18</sup> Rhodes ordered for another round of pine tree planting on his estate in the 1890s. It is well known that he introduced several alien species to the Cape, “some of which have become invasive, wreaking ecological havoc.”<sup>19</sup>

- 16 From the information board next to the monument, Zimbabwe National Archives, Harare, Zimbabwe.
- 17 Zayaan Khan (@byzayaankhan), ‘UCT burning wafts of Rhodes falling, as if the land called for it’, Instagram, 19 April 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CN1bqzdJGdF>
- 18 ‘Heritage Trees of Cape Town: Beacons of Local History and Culture’, Current Conservation, 1 March 2014, <https://www.currentconservation.org/heritage-trees-of-cape-town-beacons-of-local-history-and-culture/>
- 19 “He augmented the diverse stock of African animals kept on Groote Schuur Estate, with llama from Peru and emu, wallaby, and kangaroo from Australia. This resulted in overgrazing and land degradation. However, he has also been rightly credited for preventing this expanse of prime land from being consumed by urbanisation.” ‘Heritage Trees of Cape Town’.



The fire destroyed large sections of the Rhodes Estate and beyond: the historic Tea Room next to the Rhodes Memorial, several buildings on the main campus including the Fuller Hall residence and the Jagger Library. Also badly damaged were Mostert's Mill, the 17th century historical windmill and the only restored working windmill in the country and a historical house, Cadboll, which served as student accommodation.<sup>20</sup> The Jagger Library, which contained a collection of tens of thousands of historical archival documents and books – a resource of incommunicable value – was also severely destroyed.<sup>21</sup>

On that day that the fire raged, it also engulfed the monument complex, which somehow remained almost perfectly intact. Only a thin layer of blackened ash covered the surfaces of the monument. Khan describes the burnt and bruised land beneath and around the Rhodes complex as yet another example of “burial sites carrying stolen and silent stories.”<sup>22</sup> The colossal memorial stands in sharp contrast to these submerged and seemingly invisible histories. The original inhabitants of the area, when the first Dutch arrived in the late 17th century, were the Khoe-San / Khoisan who were forced to move further into the interior as the European colonialists began to settle.<sup>23</sup> These communities subsequently underwent a sharp decline in population, largely due to warfare and diseases such as smallpox transmitted by the early European settlers. They had no natural immunity to these imported diseases and were hit hard by these imported epidemics. In 1713, an estimated 90 percent of the populations are thought to have been wiped out by smallpox.<sup>24</sup>

20 Ashraf Hendricks, James Stent, and Nathan Geffen, 'In Photos: The Grim Aftermath of Cape Town's Fire', *GroundUp News*, 19 April 2021, <https://www.groundup.org.za/article/photos-cape-town-fire-de-stroys-ex-quisite-buildings-and-knowledge/>

21 Several manuscripts from Primary Collections that “were in the Reading Room and were either digitised and awaiting return to the place of storage, being prepared for digitisation, or new donations being processed for inclusion in the relevant archival records system”. Natalie Simon, *UCT Libraries Report: 2021* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town, 2021), [https://lib.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/media/documents/lib\\_uct\\_ac\\_za/74/UCT%20Libraries%20Report%202021.pdf](https://lib.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/media/documents/lib_uct_ac_za/74/UCT%20Libraries%20Report%202021.pdf) (accessed 03 October 2022).

22 Zayaan Khan (@byzayaankhan), 'UCT burning wafts of Rhodes falling, as if the land called for it', Instagram, 19 April 2021. <https://www.instagram.com/p/CN1bqzdJGdF>

23 “Collectively, the various African indigenous communities in South Africa are known as the Khoe-San Khoisan, which comprises the San and the Khoekhoe. The main San groups include the San Khomani who reside mainly in the Kalahari region, and the Khwe and Xun, who reside primarily in Platfontein, Kimberley.” ‘Indigenous Peoples in South Africa’, IWGIA (International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs), accessed 14 January 2023, <https://www.iwgia.org/en/south-africa.html>

24 ‘Smallpox Epidemic Strikes at the Cape’, *South African History Online*, accessed 27 September 2022, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/dated-event/smallpox-epidemic-strikes-cape>

## Protesting Racial Capitalism's Global Entanglements

Although each geographical context influences a different reading of the statue, the value systems that it represents belong to what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has described as “white, Judeo-Christian, heterosexual men of property as the ethical universal.”<sup>25</sup> The values associated with monuments such as *Physical Energy* – and the Rhodes Memorial – have contributed to the oppression and disregard of indigenous persons, more-than-human species, and the environment. Reactions against monuments that perpetuate these colonial and white supremacist narratives have escalated in recent years. In July 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 lockdown in South Africa, an unnamed activist sneaked into the closed National Park with an angle grinder and severed the 176-pound bronze head of Rhodes's bust in a defiant act of anger and quest for retribution.<sup>26</sup> The severed head was quickly replaced as if the event never occurred, and yet photographic evidence remains circulating online. To cite from my earlier essay on *Physical Energy*:

“...the Namibian activist Hildegard Titus spearheaded the campaign ‘A Curt Farewell’, which demanded the removal of a German colonial monument in the country's capital, Windhoek. The movement quickly grew to include multisite protests calling to end gender-based violence, racism, and police brutality. And in Britain, the Rhodes Must Fall movement gained further momentum, centred on another statue of Rhodes which had been standing for over a century above an entrance to Oxford University's Oriel College, towards which the mining magnate had donated £100 000 in his will.”<sup>27</sup>

Self-serving, power-hungry individuals – and the justifications and ideologies which they cling to – thrive in contemporary capitalism. Max Weber's prophetic remark that capitalism would continue “until the day when the last ton of fossil fuel has been consumed” remains the basic underlying threat to the continued existence of our society and environment.<sup>28</sup> Weber understood that the unrestrained expansion of capitalism across the planet should not always be taken as a sign of social betterment or historical

25 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 21–22; “Rhodes never married and he did not have any known children and there is some suggestion that he was homosexual. This suggestion is based on the care and concern he showed to some men, but it is not enough to offer any solid truth.” ‘Cecil John Rhodes’, /South African History Online/, accessed 8 January 2021, <https://www.sahistory.org.za/people/cecil-john-rhodes>

26 Brandt, ‘Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism’.

27 Brandt, ‘Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism’, 36.

28 Max Weber quoted in Brandt, ‘Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism’, 24–25.



‘progress’, He could not, however, have anticipated the extent of the unfolding catastrophe of gross inequality along racial lines – not to mention the accompanying environmental destruction.<sup>29</sup>

We continue to see examples of neo-imperialist activities in the region where BSAC once eagerly pursued its interests. In an area encompassing 35,000 square kilometres in the Kavango Basin in northern Namibia and Botswana, Recon, an oil and gas exploration company headquartered in Vancouver, Canada, has begun drilling. This might be with the approval of the Namibian and Botswanan governments, but the basin is close to an oasis that supplies the Okavango Delta with fresh water in a largely arid region. It is one of the most pristine ecosystems in the world.<sup>30</sup>

Communities living in the region have voiced their concern. Representatives of the San First People of Southern Africa have compiled an official report objecting to the drilling:

“We note that as the custodians of this land for thousands of years [...] we have never been consulted, nor have we given the go ahead to any entities to prospect for oil and gas in our lands.”<sup>31</sup>

The objectification of nature stems from the same intellectual history and capitalist patriarchal control which historically justified extreme forms of racism. In fact, Recon’s investor brochure unambiguously states: “Recon controls the entire Kavango Basin.”<sup>32</sup> Does this ‘complete control’ mean they also have the right to influence the lives and destinies of those who live there?<sup>33</sup> In my earlier essay on the *Physical Energy* monument, I asked:

29 Brandt, ‘Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism’, 24–25.  
30 Brandt, ‘Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism’, 40.  
31 ‘SAN Petition to Namibia and Botswana Governments\_2021public’, Google Docs, accessed 1 February 2021, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xDnT3gmn8PWJdoos6jX-1dyEvNE5fUri4ujUB-wNDYSk/edit?usp=drive\\_web&ouid=113135877644734711634&usp=embed\\_facebook](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1xDnT3gmn8PWJdoos6jX-1dyEvNE5fUri4ujUB-wNDYSk/edit?usp=drive_web&ouid=113135877644734711634&usp=embed_facebook).  
32 ‘ReconAfrica’, ReconAfrica, accessed 23 September 2022, <https://recon africa.com/>  
33 Brandt, ‘Physical Energy, A Monument to Imperial Capitalism’, 40.

“In what ways could this ‘physical energy’ contained in people such as Rhodes and his cohorts – or those involved in the Recon initiative – be transformed and redirected into more constructive means? How might present day archetypes of ambitious individuals in pursuit of ‘progress’ through profit be incentivised to do ‘better’ for others and the planet?”<sup>34</sup>

What is clear is that this instinct is deeply lodged in the psyche of many, and the neoliberal, capitalist systems that we live in continue to simultaneously promote these attributes. The demands of social and environmental justice are often extremely at odds with the realities of political administration. In this sense, good governance and rigorous legislation are key to helping to bridge this divide.

*Possibilities of Resilience in Colonial, Capitalist Ruins*<sup>35</sup>

Let me return to the charred slopes of Devil’s Peak, where the fire exposed burnt fragments of materials that one might never have sought out or known about, which only heightens the weight of what has been obliterated and can never be retrieved. This written and photographic reflection is part of my personal process of acknowledging the tremendous loss of both memory and archives that resulted from the fire. The stretch of seared earth below the escarpment of Devil’s Peak illustrates Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing’s call: “To know the world that progress has left to us, we must track shifting patches of ruination.”<sup>36</sup> In how many ways can these archives and landscapes that remain in the aftermath be read “against the grain”?<sup>37</sup> How will scholars, artists, activists, writers, and environmentalists use them to recover and ‘write’ new histories – and importantly, how might these histories reach a broader public?

I believe that my contribution, and the collective effort of this book, is part of that process. Perhaps an indigenous South African flora, fynbos, offers a fitting metaphor for the zeitgeist that we find ourselves in – where experiences of fire offer an opportunity to regenerate, albeit in dangerous conditions. Much like humanity, fynbos belongs to a very delicate self-regulating ecosystem; unlike humanity, it often makes use of fire

34 For example, for governments to incentivise large-scale projects invested in renewables such as hydrogen or wind, rather than fossil fuel and mineral extraction.  
35 *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).  
36 Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 206.  
37 Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).





In the Aftermath of the Fire, Devil's Peak, Cape Town, 28 April 2021.



Fynbos in the Aftermath of the Fire, Devil's Peak, Cape Town, 28 April 2021.



to revive itself. But when the temperatures are too high, rejuvenation is challenging, and indigenous flora species are often destroyed. Environmentalism cannot exist in isolation, and it should not be seen as a deviation from social justice but rather as an extension of this movement. To understand some of the origins of the problem and to envision a reparative eco-politics also means thinking at greater scales, both temporally and spatially. As I have demonstrated in this essay, choices made by the imperial and colonial elite primarily from the Global North, and the systems they instituted more than a century ago have had a dramatic impact on human and more-than-human lives and environments both in Southern Africa, but also further afield. Not only have they affected ecologies and the climate, but they have also influenced political stability in these regions.<sup>38</sup>

According to the Carbon Majors Report, just 100 companies have been the source of more than 70% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988.<sup>39</sup> While the business sector – especially in the Global North – continues to play a huge role in driving the causes of climate change, several companies are often not motivated to do much about it: “[T]he barrier is the ‘absolute tension’ between short-term profitability and the urgent need to reduce emissions and environmental protection”.<sup>40</sup> In a globalised market, colonial capitalist legacies continue to thrive. Companies such as Recon seek out weaker links in governments in the Global South to make profit-driven deals that primarily benefit themselves and local elites.

The challenge is how to harness and transform the capitalist-driven ‘physical energy’ that propelled people like Rhodes and his cohorts and still drive entities like Recon Africa, so that this may be redirected towards more constructive means. Capitalism’s inherent contradiction is infinite growth – any discussion about what is needed to imagine an anti-imperialist, post-capitalist, green transition thus also needs to confront this contradiction in order to repair the gross power imbalances of extractive capitalist

38 See recent publications on related themes such as: Gaia Vince, *Nomad Century: How to Survive the Climate Upheaval* (London: Allen Lane, 2022); Harsha Walia, *Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism*, (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2021); Kim Stanley Robinson, *The Ministry for the Future* (London: Orbit, 2021).  
39 Riley.  
40 Riley, ‘Just 100 Companies Responsible for 71% of Global Emissions, Study Says’.

processes.<sup>41</sup> In this sense, international policies and domestic legal frameworks that engage more meaningfully with local communities are key. There are attempts to address this, such as in the newly drafted European Union Supply Chain Law, yet these are complex forms of legislation that need further development before they can be implemented.<sup>42</sup>

Addressing North-South inequalities centres on efforts to insist that transnational companies working in Africa not only comply with human rights and ecological standards, but also adhere to mechanisms such as increased corporate tax, fairer wages, improved governance, and education and training that allows more value to remain in productive local cycles. Countries in Africa have been, and continue to be, key sites for the extraction of important raw materials and, given the race between the United States, Europe, China, and Russia to be global leaders in the ‘green revolution’, governments and industries on the continent will have to be vigilant to avoid continued and further exploitation. This demands cultures of integrity and accountability both at a societal and governmental level.

Artists, writers, and researchers can assist with activating these struggles and interconnections. This requires breaking away from the anthropocentric–humankind as the most important element of existence – displacing the centrality and hierarchy of heteronormative knowledge creation and widening the net of inclusion in the process. There are important and committed indigenous eco-activists and queer-eco feminists on the ground who speak from a place of embodied knowledge, and these perspectives and practices need to be amplified, especially if exploitative patriarchal capitalism is to be dismantled.

41 Della Z Duncan and Robert Ramin Raymond, ‘Ep. 15: The Green Transition – A Green Deal for the People Part 2’, *Upstream*, October 2022, <https://open.spotify.com/episode/4FPQIWYITbhngZSmUCwchq?si=ad8af96518684351>  
42 Kai Leisering, ‘EU Supply Chain Law Obliges Companies to Operate in a Fair and Sustainable Manner’, /EQS Group/, accessed 1 November 2022, <https://www.eqs.com/compliance-blog/eu-supply-chain-law/>



# As is verbrande hout en kole\*

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Carine Zaayman* is an artist, curator, and scholar committed to critical engagement with colonial archives and collections, specifically those holding strands of Khoekhoe pasts in South Africa. She is a researcher at the Research Center for Material Culture (NMvWC) in the Netherlands. The main focus of her curatorial work is the project Under Cover of Darkness (<http://undercoverofdarkness.co.za/>), which included an exhibition staged at the Iziko Slave Lodge in Cape Town that explored the lives of women in servitude, especially slavery, in the early Cape Colony.

Carine Zaayman

I have a box of ash stashed in my parents' garage. It was given to me by someone who volunteered at the salvage operation of the Jagger Reading Room after the fire of 18 April 2021. They rescued some of this ash as it was being loaded onto trucks for dumping. The ash hauled away in this manner was all that remained of various sections from the African Studies collection of the library. Looking at the photographs that emerged on various media platforms after the fire, I was most powerfully struck by images of rectangular books transformed into amorphous shapes as they twisted in the heat of the blaze, at times melting into one another, depositing grey-black flakes and dust onto the floor in their disintegration. The ash got everywhere: it moved on the air and fell lightly onto the landscape surrounding the university campus, residue from different books comingled together in the gutted building and, as the clean-up operation proceeded, ash was being transported to places designated for the collection of 'junk'. Once afforded the status of archival objects, these ashen remains were now deemed worthless and needed to be discarded.

For the community of people connected in various ways to the University of Cape Town, the images of the fire and its aftermath elicited conflicting feelings. Indeed, we feared how much material would be left in ruins. Though, while the shock of this loss resonates with us to this day, many of us were at the same time prompted by the fire to reflect on how the collection was constituted in the first instance and, due to the conditions of its formation, what kinds of knowledge it allowed us to generate. As the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements recently made plain, the institution is still replete with colonial inheritances, both in its curricula and its institutional dynamics. How complicit was the library collection in this coloniality? The answer to this question is of course endlessly complicated by the robust engagement that scholars, artists, and activists have had with it over decades, as well as the fact that it also held (and holds) material generated by African writers, photographers, and filmmakers. If understood in terms of entangled strands, the collection can be seen as evidence of decades of struggle with the frictions and durabilities of colonialism.

I thought about the collection's entanglement with coloniality when I looked at the box of ash and wondered, what really was destroyed? Was it the past? No, the past is not lodged in the material that survive into the present. Was it the future? Perhaps some version of the future was lost, since work that might have emerged from research on material devastated in the fire can now not be produced. But other potentialities

\* An Afrikaans saying that translates in a literal sense as 'Ash is burnt wood and coals'.



emerged, work that was made possible by the destruction itself, as for example the conversations and reflections collected in this volume. There is thus still a future for the material, albeit along an altered course. In the end, I mused that maybe the collection was *already* a form of ash, even before the first flame started licking a corner of the wooden panelling inside the building. Ash yields to reconstruction only partially: one might be able to determine what an object was made of – in other words, its materiality – but its contents, the words on the pages, the images captured by the celluloid, can never be fully reconstituted. The problem of reconstruction is, however, one that already troubles all archival work, since archives and collections are irreversibly haunted by countless silences and absences that also preclude comprehensive reconstruction. When we rely on sources such as those that were in the collection of the Jagger Reading Room in the production of historical narration, we bump up against the limits of what archives can contain. Is ash then not a more fully realised version of the archive, a more embodied form where the quality of opacity is undeniable, and usage is marked as a challenge from the outset?

As we mourn those losses of library material we can enumerate and those we cannot, we can simultaneously recognise that we have gained an opportunity to fundamentally rethink the usage of archives, as well as the roles universities could play in framing knowledge and memory work as it is practised in Cape Town, South Africa and the rest of the African continent. If we recognise the potential yield of ash as a conceptual figure, it can aid us in grappling with the opacity of archival material *and* all that it occludes from our view. I am disappointed that the ash from the library was deemed junk and moved off-site. Instead of grasping the opportunities presented by the heaps of ash, the reconstructive drive asserted itself promptly as replicas and reproductions of archival material were requested. The privileging of the seemingly legible document or object reminds us of the hierarchies instantiated by archives. Presences are valued, absences are not. Yet when it comes to archives in Africa, is it not precisely the absences to which we need to attend? Do we not need to heed those voices rendered silent by colonialism and apartheid?

There is an Afrikaans saying that goes, *as is verbrande hout en kole*, spoken as retort when someone utters a statement of regret, *as ek maar net...*<sup>1</sup> It is a nonsensical reply playing on the homonyms of *as* meaning ‘if’, and *as* meaning ‘ash.’ Someone would say it to suggest that it is no use pondering what might have been, or the undesirable consequences of

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1 ‘If only I...’

a seemingly insignificant (in)action. Nevertheless, I like to think that secreted in this rather dismissive stock response lies a recognition of the unrealised potentiality of ash – its ‘what if’. This potentiality is not a promise to reverse time and return the ‘original’ to us. Rather, it is the potential to identify other forms in which the past lives with us, how we connect with it, and develop more imaginative ways to narrate the vastness of lives, of humanities, of worlds that never found their way into the Jagger Library’s Special Collections.

All photographs by Hettie Zaayman



# Restoration or Recycling?

## Uncertainties of a Burnt Library

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

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Lorena Rizzo

On 3 June 2022, Duane Jethro and Jade Nair were invited to the University of Basel to share their experiences as co-curators of *Of Smoke and Ash: Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition*, which commemorated the loss of parts of the collections held at the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) Jagger Library to a fire in April 2021. The guest lecture, hosted at eikones Center for the Theory and History of the Image, took place in the context of a collaboration between Jethro, research fellow in the Centre for Curating the Archive at Michaelis School of Fine Arts, and Nair, curator at Michaelis School of Fine Arts, both at UCT, and Sindi-Leigh McBride and Julia Rensing at the University of Basel. Since I could not attend the event in person, I watched a video recording generously shared with me by the organisers.

News of the fire at UCT and subsequent efforts in response to it had been followed across South Africa and internationally, including in Switzerland. But the guest lecture was the first occasion on which the fire received more careful attention at the University of Basel. Thus, the main focus was, first, on familiarising the audience with the salvage and recovery process and, second, reflecting on the ways in which UCT’s faculty and staff, librarians and archivists, and the numerous volunteers who had joined the salvage effort remembered what constituted yet another major rupture in UCT’s troubled history. To some members of the audience in Basel, including myself, the conversation about the fire at the Jagger Library was of special interest, since it resonated with a similar (albeit smaller) destructive event at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, an archive and library specialised on Namibia and Southern Africa, two decades earlier.

Furthermore, the public lecture spoke to a particular contemporary moment, in which institutional archives, both in the Global North and South, increasingly found themselves in need to defend their holdings from multiple vantage points: decolonisation, decay, defunding, declining public interest, and – as was the case here – destruction through fire.<sup>1</sup> While watching the video recording and learning about the remarkable service and commitment of the UCT community to rescuing books and archival materials from the ruins of what had once been an elegant and valued library, I was reminded of the language used in news media coverage, where words like loss, tragedy, and ruination described the fire as an event, while grief, remembrance, and memorialisation delineated the epistemological and performative framework within which the mourners – and the event’s chroniclers – processed the horrid experience. In an article published in 2021, Jethro had already provided a critical reflection on the lexicon and politics of heritage and memorialisation that accompanied the salvage process at UCT, importantly situating the fire within a broader South African landscape of ruination

<sup>1</sup> See ‘After Decolonization? A new WISER project’, *Wiser (Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research)*, accessed 8 August 2022, <https://wiser.wits.ac.za/page/after-decolonization-new-wiser-project-13791>



and disaster.<sup>2</sup> And yet, once the video recording ended, a troubling incertitude returned: clearly, the narrative of memorialisation paid tribute to the accomplishments and concerns of those who had most immediately been affected by the fire – and, as such, it fostered a process if not of reconstruction and healing, then of solace and reorientation. But what if the very same narrative was foreclosing – unintentionally perhaps – ways of responding to the fire other than those prescribed by (institutional) remembrance and memorialisation? Following my encounter with the Jagger Library salvage project through the Basel public lecture, I turned to UCT's blog documenting responses to the fire (<http://blog.uct.ac.za/memory/2021>) to ascertain if the platform would provide a less concerted narration. In a nutshell, it didn't, and while there were, as is well known, different, critical, and at times biting responses to the fire – and I'll turn to some of them later – the blog was not their home. However, some of the blog's entries turned out to be utterly fascinating and thought-provoking.

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To draw nearer to what I intend to explore in this essay, I wish to pay closer attention to one particular contribution to the blog posted in late November 2021 entitled 'One Book's Conservation Journey' by Laura Kemp Reusch.<sup>3</sup> Reusch, a senior book conservator, was tasked with restoring the surviving Rare Books Collection and, in her post, she introduced readers to her team's restoration work at UCT by way of providing a detailed account of the repair and conservation of one particular book: Volume II of Sir Sibbald David Scott's *The British Army: its Origin, Progress, and Equipment*, published in 1868. Tellingly, perhaps, this copy was among the many water-damaged books, reminding readers that, in addition to fire, water had caused devastation at the Jagger Library as well.

The blog post provided an intriguing and textured image of what it means to do restoration work: numerous individuals, among them again many volunteers, would spend hours if not days preventing the mould from spreading further, dry cleaning every single page, and then documenting and photographing the damaged object at hand before the restoration work would be determined and performed. It is important, I believe, to ask why a text and object that pertains to British imperial and military history and is, hence, inevitably reminiscent of violent conquest of people and lands and of destruction, was chosen to describe a craft as delicate, quiet, meticulous, and reconstructive as book restoration. Although the toxicity

2 Duane Jethro, 'Ash: Memorializing the 2021 University of Cape Town Library Fire', *Material Religion* 17, no. 5, (2021): 671-677.

3 Laura Kemp Reusch, 'One Book's Conservation Journey', *University of Cape Town*, 24 November 2021, <https://blogs.uct.ac.za/memory/2021/11/one-books-conservation-journey/>

shared by restoration work and colonial conquest and war seemed to raise unlikely questions about material and epistemological intersections of empire that link domains that we usually prefer to keep apart, my tentative search for a possible military origin of chemicals used in restoration work did not bear fruit.



"Jessye Seaford, one of our flat paper conservators, dry cleaning our book. She is wearing a respirator mask, protective eyewear, latex gloves and a lab coat to protect her from the toxic mould spores."<sup>4</sup>

4 Image and caption sourced from Laura Kemp Reusch, 'One Book's Conservation Journey'.



Be that as it may, my main interest here is to reflect, in an admittedly polemical way, on how restoration participates in constituting the book as a particular object, in fact a fetishised commodity, whose material integrity and unity is essential to what makes a library (UCT's library?) what it wants to be.<sup>5</sup>

'One Book's Conservation Journey' reads like – to put it bluntly – as if we are witnessing the careful transformation of a damaged relic into both a valued property asset (unfortunately the blog remains silent on the pecuniary side of restoration) and a sacred artefact. A clarification is needed here, perhaps: placing the focus on the material integrity of the book as an object, and by all means appreciating its worth for the market and the metaphysics of empire, seems sensible in the world of libraries. My deliberations are by no means intended as a fundamental questioning of the value of books. But I do wish to put up for discussion the sense of purpose in restoring this particular book-object (and maybe a few others rescued from the fire). Shouldn't we ask why *The British Army* made it into the restoration process in the first place – a book that remains available in libraries across South Africa (such as Wits University Library or the South African National Library in Cape Town) and the former British colonies? Asking so does in no way signal the desire to initiate what would be a highly problematic and historically charged differential sorting of texts worth preserving or not. It instead results from wondering at the actual triage process after the fire at the Jagger Library – and several posts to the UCT blog elaborated on this – which seems to have been exclusively based on the extent of damage done to the materiality of books (and anyone understands the sense of urgency and pragmatic approach that informed the immediate aftermath of the disaster). Following this line of thought, if the object acquires such a fundamental status, and restoration is merely conceived as re-establishing the material status quo ante, then what are the implications – not for the market, nor the sacred – but for knowledge, and its reorientation in a moment of pause imposed on us by the fire? Does the fire not invite us to think about restoration as a process that extends far beyond the repair of single books and, instead, involves a critical and difficult conversation about criteria, priorities, resources, value, and meaning?

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Some of these concerns about restoration and the material grounds of knowledge have been addressed before, especially on online media. I wish to take a closer look at two of them written by Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, a PhD candidate at UCT, and Wanelisa Xaba, a former MA student at UCT and now a PhD candidate at UWC, both of whom have an

5 For more on the bourgeois notion of library and the focus on books as commodities, see Joseph D. Lewandowski, 'Walter Benjamin and His Library' *Libraries & Culture* 34, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 151-157.

intimate relationship with UCT, yet voice much more ambiguous and critical responses to the fire at the Jagger Library.<sup>6</sup> Mushaandja and Xaba approach the blaze carefully and begin by raising the question of how it is read and understood as an event in the first place. Also, the site and location of the fire – not just a fire – matters to them. Both experience UCT and its libraries (especially the African Studies Library) as problematic institutional spaces, which essentially continue to reproduce inequalities and silences along the lines of race, gender, class, and – importantly – colonial epistemology.<sup>7</sup> While not central to their arguments, both seem to view the Jagger Library fire not as an isolated event of disaster, but as part of a series of fires that have characterised institutional life at UCT in the past few years.<sup>8</sup> As such, they call for an understanding of the fire contextualised within the problematic and conflictual relationship that the university maintains with its political, social, and natural environments. Situated against the backdrop of this broader incendiary and inflamed history, assessing the most recent fire naturally proves ambiguous for Mushaandja and Xaba.

Mushaandja in particular draws from his practice as a performance artist to reflect on the complexities and potentials of fire as it is conceptualised and invoked across African history, philosophy, culture, and the arts.<sup>9</sup> His artistic research and practice, among them a performance entitled *Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime (Dance of the Rubber Tree)*, have shown an explicit interest in fire as it enables “literal and metaphorical burning up” and thus constitutes an important “gesture of cleansing, disruption, and potentially restorative justice.”<sup>10</sup>

6 Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, 'There is fire on the mountain, : an eco-speculative dream', Google Drive, September 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1786OCKWgAONFkeoLLNEGmltAC-QKJ1wp/view?usp=sharing>; Wanelisa Xaba, 'An Awkward Dance with the Black Middle Class: On Decolonial Scholarship, Grief, Anthro- pologised Ancestry and the Cleansing Role of Fire', *Imbiza Journal for African Writing* 1, no. 2 (2021): 84-88.

7 See Michele R. Santamaria, 'Concealing White Supremacy through Fantasies of the Library: Economies of Affect at Work', *Library Trends* 68, no. 3 (Winter 2020): 431-449.

8 See Njabulo S. Ndebele, 'They Are Burning Memory', *Njabulo Ndebele*, 17 September 2016, <https://www.njabulondebele.co.za/2016/09/they-are-burning-memo-ry/>

9 See Kerry Ryan Chance, 'Where there is Fire, there is Politics: Ungovernability and Material Life in Urban South Africa', *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (May 2015): 394-423; Simon Pooley, *Burning Table Mountain. An Environmental History of Fire on the Cape Peninsula*. (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2014); Lena Dallywater, "'Black Fire': Conceptualisations of Black Liberation and Engaged Views of African and Black Aesthetics in the United States and South Africa', *Third Text* 34, no. 4-5 (July-September, 2020): 551-567.

10 Mushaandja, 'There is fire on the mountain, : an eco-speculative dream'; for an art historical discussion of *Ondaanisa yo pOmudhime (Dance of the Rubber Tree)*, see also Naemi Meier, 'Narrative dekolonialer Kunstpraxen in Archival Art. Besprochen an der beiden künstlerischen zeitgenössischen Positionen Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja und Vitjitua Ndijharine', unpublished MA Thesis, University of Basel, June 2022.





“Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja spent several months in Basel in 2019 and performed his *‘Ondaanisa yo Pomudhime’* (*Dance of the Rubber Tree*), a reflection on colonial archival and historical practises and spaces, at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien”



Xaba's deliberations resonate with these concerns, and she quotes Mathe with S. Mathe to read the fire at the Jagger Library as an enunciation of "the colonial violence associated with the archive" (archive used here in the broader discursive sense and less in terms of a technical distinction between archive and library). Xaba asserts:

"I am also convinced that the violent combination of our ancestors' bones buried in mass graves under the law faculty at UCT and their stories imprisoned in that library created a combustion."<sup>12</sup>

Combative in her desire to undo what she considers institutional forms of gatekeeping and elitism, Xaba questions the legitimacy of storing stories – ancestral stories, acquired through colonial knowledge production or theft – in an institution like UCT. Here, this particular university, and the mountain on which it was built, essentially become a site of unresolved dying and illegitimate captivity, where the remains of bodies (mass graves) and knowledge (archives) remain withdrawn, out of sight and inaccessible for most who wish to recover them.

While Mushaandja's and Xaba's reflections differ in tone and outlook, they both seem to suggest that, once a fire consumes a library, it becomes an act of transformation and, hence, turns books and archival documents into something else.<sup>13</sup> But what are we to make of this something else, especially if – returning to an earlier point – restoration might not be the primary path we wish to pursue?

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I have found Susan Stanford Friedman's reading of multimedia artist Kabe Wilson's *Of One Woman or So* by Olivia N'Gowfri (2014), a novela-cum-installation based on the artist's remixing and rearrangement of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* published in 1929, very inspiring and useful in relation to the question just raised.<sup>14</sup>

12 S. Mathe quoted in Xaba, 'An Awkward Dance with the Black Middle Class: On Decolonial Scholarship, Grief, Anthropologised Ancestry and the Cleansing Role of Fire', 87

13 A similar argument was made by Jethro during the public lecture held in Basel on 3 June 2022.

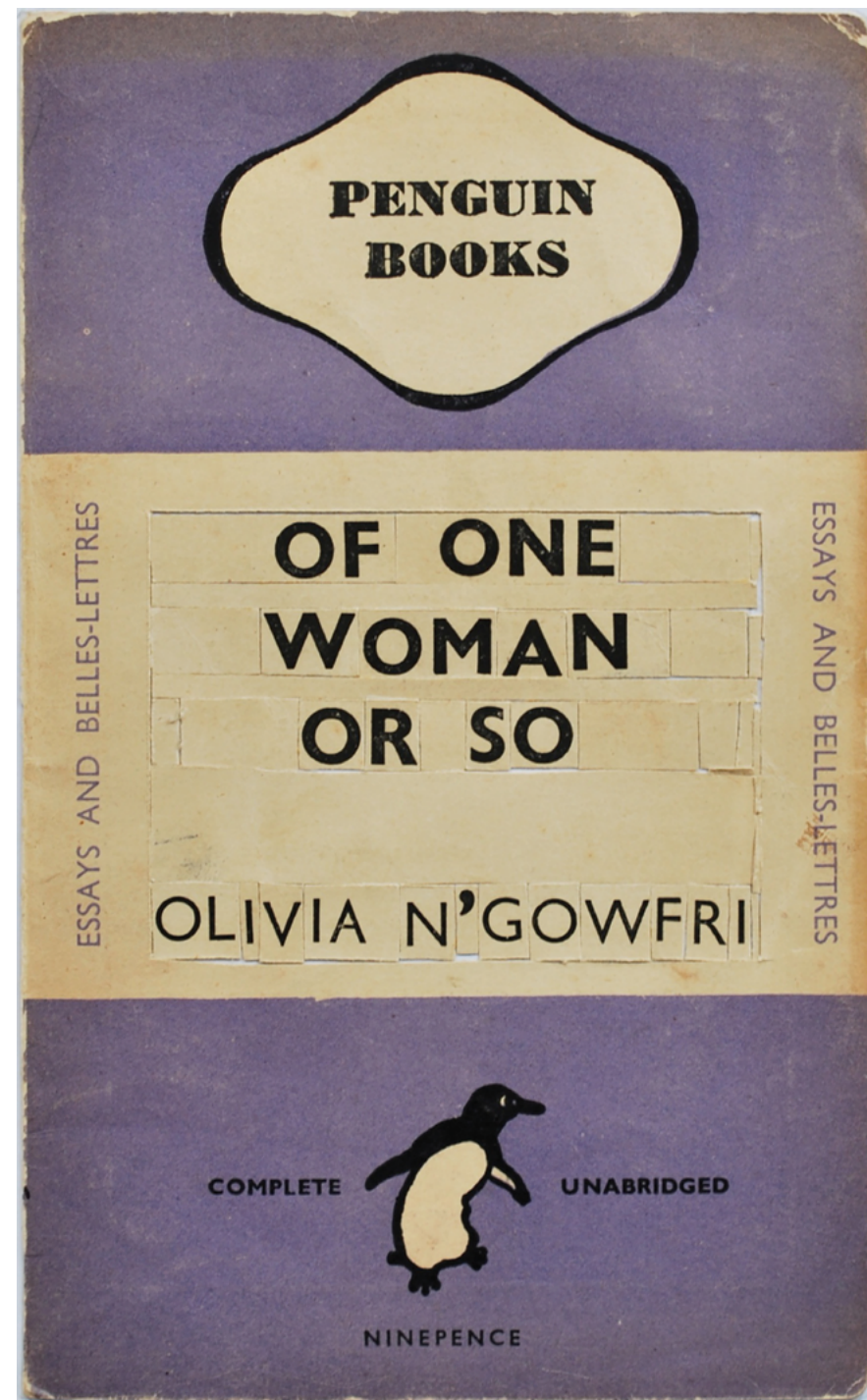
14 For the novel, see Wilson, 'OLIVIA N'GOWFRI - OF ONE WOMAN OR SO', *the dreadlock hoax*, accessed 26 September 2022, <http://www.dreadlockhoax.co.uk/of-one-woman-or-so>; for a video recording of a related performance, see Wilson, 'THE DREADLOCK HOAX', *the dreadlock hoax*, accessed 26 September 2022, <http://www.dreadlockhoax.co.uk/the-dreadlock-hoax>; Susan Stanford Friedman, 'Recycling Revolution: Re-mixing /A Room of One's Own/ and Black Power in Kabe Wilson's Performance, Installation, and Narrative Art', in Susan Stanford Friedman (ed.), *Contemporary Revolutions: Turning Back to the Future in 21st-Century Literature and Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 21-48. I closely follow Friedman's arguments here.

At the beginning of Wilson's project there is, however, another question, albeit linked to the broader concern of this essay. Wilson is interested in the old living alongside the new and, more specifically in what the present can teach us about the future by recourse to texts from a remote past. This inquiry is situated against the backdrop of a problematic British imperial past, which the artist of British-Ethiopian descent sounds out in complex ways. *Of One Woman or So* is the result of a several years-long, complicated process of cutting-out, reordering, and recycling every word in Virginia Woolf's 1929 essay – a strategy that, in her analysis, Friedman traces back to Dadaist poetry of the 1920s – and remaking them into something new, a new narrative. We encounter Olivia N'Gowfri, the main protagonist in the novela, and witness her troubled experience at the University of Cambridge. Given Olivia's complex positionality as a mixed-race, queer student, who only makes it into the elite institution thanks to a scholarship, Cambridge's impenetrable and unfriendly (read: sexist, racist, and classist) environment arouses strong feelings of loneliness, alienation, and anger in her. Just as much perturbed by the limitations of a problematic English intellectual and literary canon, and yet inspired by the writings of Black revolutionaries, Olivia decides to burn down Cambridge's libraries – up until she encounters the original manuscript of Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. As we shall see in a moment, at that point, Olivia pauses and reconsiders her plan to burn it all down.

I first wish to return to Friedman's intriguing discussion of Wilson's artistic practice. She investigates how his narrative strategy is grounded in the practices of recycling and remixing; these practices are connected to the revolutionary challenges to the material and intellectual structures which shape the lives of both Wilson and his fictional character Olivia.

Friedman carefully situates the critical concepts of recycling and revolution: originally used in the 1920s to describe the reuse of material in the industrial process, **recycling** proliferates throughout the 20th century and is today mostly associated with environmentalism and climate change. Here, it can describe different processes: of repetition – when for example, old paper is reused – or metamorphosis – when one thing is made from another – and essentially qualifies creative acts that imply a transformation and establish a transactional relationship between the old and the new. Recycling, Friedman concludes, repeats a circle (a cycle), but does so *with a difference*. Here the concept resonates with **remixing**, which is mostly used in music, but also in the visual arts and in literature, and is based on the reworking, sampling, and rearrangement of pre-existing forms. Not unexpectedly, the term **revolution** is akin to the circular facets of recycling, at least in its original meaning in Latin, when it described rotation, or turnaround, and moved into medieval French and English to signify turning back and returning – as in the revolution of planets, stars, and moons. Only in the



Kabe Wilson, *Of One Woman or So* (2014), cover and page from installation.

matters that appear to show a lack of proper respect for English history were the most vocal, due in part, one might suppose, to how foreign the name of the suspect sounded. In light of this they were even able to disregard class enmity (a big ask for some, considering the intense criticism that had been aimed at the Oxbridge educated suits of Parliament and the banks for so many months). No longer 'old snobs' the deans and dons were written of with sympathy; these were the wounded soldiers of a war declared on our great history. Their remarks were therefore repeated with a reverence that seemed to Miss the ludicrous affectation (and, often, gown) on show. One professor, constantly quoted afterwards gave the grave assertion that 'On this day, thousands of books have lost their lives. On this day, knowledge has died.'

Though prouder Fellows of five colleges are still claiming that they were the most affected people generally agree that the University library came off worst. This, as you will see, is because it was thought to be the most at fault, and to the one who passed judgement upon it 'the sentence could only be death.' The massive structure, itself in a year of celebration, suffered such serious damage in some parts that they had to immediately close almost a quarter of its open access shelves. These remain closed even Now. I am told they do not expect them to be opened again, with the millions of pages restored, for at least four years, in time, they hope, for the shelves to turn the modest old age of eighty. I later discovered that the great Germaine herself had been writing a piece on her 'favourite library' for *The Guardian* at the time, referring to it as 'heaven on earth'. It must be assumed that her notes went the same way as those pitiable books that hellish night when she saw the brilliant crimson sky and realized the observation was no longer relevant. Her brick heaven was about to go from being the subject of free comments that very few would read to the front page of every paper in Europe and many beyond.

As yet no one has been caught in relation to what happened. This is not through lack of effort or information, those in charge of the case know precisely who they are looking for as only one student was caught on camera running away the moment that magnificent building became, in the words of one reporter, 'the longest candle on six very costly cakes'. Everything found suggests she was acting alone, though they were unable to discern a motive. No sign was left as to where she was going and there was nothing to suggest a plan for other such activities (though all Oxbridge colleges were told to be aware). The whole business has not been easy to investigate, and considering the significance of what happened it is not surprising that



17th century would the term's meaning shift towards what we understand it to imply today: change, overthrow, rupture, and radical breakaway from the past. It is, Friedman tells us, the double meaning of revolution to which recycling as artistic strategy and politics responds.

But what of Olivia and her intention to burn Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*? How do recycling, remixing, and revolution cluster in Wilson's fictional narrative, and to what end? Olivia first encounters Woolf's essay as a reader and, while she sympathises with the writer's bemoaning of Oxbridge's patriarchy and chauvinism, she's inevitably frustrated with Woolf's silence on matters of race and empire. In fact, white women's literature becomes the first target of Olivia's play with fire, after which she turns to the more militant writings of C. L. R. James, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown (later known as Jamil Al-Amin) for inspiration. Remixing and recycling their ideas and experiences enables Olivia to find the way back to herself and re-emerge as a Black, queer revolutionary. Be there no doubt, militancy's expected response to racist, sexist, and epistemic violence is more violence, epitomised in the act of burning. And yet, Olivia eventually decides not to surrender *A Room of One's Own* to the flames. Here, Wilson's artistic practice and Olivia's emancipatory politics merge in renouncing destruction and instead choosing the act of recycling: remixing Woolf's words and reordering them, so that they can begin to speak to the present, Olivia's present. In Friedman's reasoning, the key moment at which *revolution as rupture* becomes *revolution as turning back* is – tellingly – when Olivia holds the original manuscript in her hands (the fetish of the book as object). I'd prefer to give Wilson and Olivia N'Gowfri the benefit of the doubt and posit: it might not have been the aura of the original that made the difference, but the wild and playful muddling of words!

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What does Wilson's project offer for thinking about the fire at the Jagger Library? In most accounts the destructive event was classified as an uncontrolled wildfire that spread from Devil's Peak to the university campus. The fire was, hence, situated in a particular history of natural disaster engendered by the specificities of vegetation, winds, and possibly an obscure element of human intervention.<sup>15</sup> While such discursive placement makes perfect sense, it nevertheless runs the risk of obscuring a more complicatedly inflamed terrain and – unintentionally perhaps – reproducing a narrative that understands UCT's location on the mountain as an expression of its claim to exclusiveness, inaccessibility, and distance from the troubles and tribulations of the city (in line with Cecil Rhodes' vision for his estate, which lay the grounds for UCT's campus in the late 1920s). The interventions of Mushaandja and Xaba, however, make it clear that there is need to attend to the continuity of fires at UCT and adopt a perspective that integrates the natural and human environments.

<sup>15</sup> For more, see Simon Pooley, *Burning Table Mountain: an environmental history of fire on the Cape Peninsula* (Cape Town: University of Cape Town Press, 2014).

Olivia N'Gowfri's plans to burn down Cambridge's libraries clearly speak to the ambiguities released by the Jagger Library fire, especially once she turns to revolutionary writings and retraces a genealogy of political arson across the Black Atlantic. As is well known, South Africa's history of militancy and resistance is as familiar with fire, as are its counterparts in the USA and UK.<sup>16</sup> And thus, Mushaandja, Xaba and N'Gowfri (Wilson) seem to share experiences of alienation, anger, and the desire to use fire's literal and metaphorical potential to destroy, transform, and renew.

Let me return, therefore, to the question asked earlier on: what are we to make of the burned books and archival documents that the fire at the Jagger Library left us with, especially if restoration might not be the primary path we wish to pursue? What does recycling, instead, offer for the representational practices, aesthetic forms, and knowledge cultures that the UCT community might want to nurture in order to respond to the growing demands of decolonisation, transformation, and renewal? What would the triage process look like if all we needed was material for muddling words, remixing, reordering, and renewing?

During the public lecture and conversation in Basel in June this year, Jethro mentioned that oddly the salvage process included 13 copies of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Obviously, this was said to everyone's amusement. But isn't Alice precisely the character known to us for playing with words and constantly turning one thing into another? Wilson makes Olivia admire Carmichael's recourse to Carroll once he reflects on what it means to have the power over words and language in Carmichael's seminal *Black Power*.<sup>17</sup> Is it fate, irony, or simply a wonderful serendipity that, once it burned, the Jagger Library disgorged an insistent call for linking militancy to the adventurous spirit and creative playfulness of language and imagination? Recycling allows Olivia N'Gowfri to read her name anew: "Olivia N'Gowfri – the anagram of Virginia Woolf – becomes 'I-live-here, an' go free'".<sup>18</sup> Would a little recycling provide an opening for those intimate with UCT to inhabit it in a way that makes them 'go free'?

<sup>16</sup> Chance, 'Where there is Fire, there is Politics: Ungovernability and Material Life in Urban South Africa'; for political arson in US history, see Nicholas Buccola, *The Fire is Upon Us. James Baldwin, William F. Buckley Jr., and the Debate over Race in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); for UK history, see John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions: Food Riots, Moral Economy, and Market Transition in England, ca. 1550-1850* (London: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Friedman, 'Recycling Revolution: Re-mixing *A Room of One's Own* and Black Power in Kabe Wilson's Performance, Installation, and Narrative Art', 37.

<sup>18</sup> Friedman, 'Recycling Revolution: Re-mixing *A Room of One's Own* and Black Power in Kabe Wilson's Performance, Installation, and Narrative Art', 40.



# Notes on USamson II

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

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Masande Ntshanga

I.

I remember thinking about Lungsta when I first heard about the fire. I was at home and waiting for an email from my agent when I saw the flames on the news: how the blaze had curtained the walls of the Jagger Reading Room, creating a furnace that immolated thousands of documents, periodicals, and microfilm – and, in the end, incinerated the tables I’d once sat at to pore over scholarship on S.E.K Mqhayi, John Tengo Jabavu and A.C. Jordan – before blackening the columns up to the rafters and above. I remember looking at it, this monument to destruction, and thinking of him, Lungile Mthobeni, and what was left of him there.

2.

The first time I met Lungile – or Lungsta, as I knew him – he’d written five fantasy novels in isiXhosa. The first one, *iNkwenkwe neeNkwenkwezi*, or *A Boy and His Stars*, had been published as a serial in *Pace Magazine*, the chapters of which were later assembled into a paperback by an aging historian at Lovedale Press in 1996. Bishop Luthuli, a former history teacher, was known to preside over the printing press like a high priest, often dozing off to the hypnotic churn of the machines before flinching awake to bark orders at his apprentices. Lungsta’s other four novels were unpublished and piled inside a drawer in a small one-room house he shared with his mother in Bisho. He kept them under her Xhosa Bible and her learner’s license manual, on top of which also sat her copy of *Iqhina Lomtshato* (1995), a marriage novel by Nomlamli Mayosi, as well as Lungsta’s favourite collection at the time, *UMakhwekhwe: Xhosa Detective Stories* (1990) by Rayman F. Mcimeli. Upon learning of his unpublished work, Luthuli took further interest in Lungsta, appointing himself his de facto editor and agent. Later, Lungsta would tell me that Bishop had worked as a gardener before enrolling for his degree in historical studies, serving white families in Johannesburg to save up for his tuition at Lovedale, and was standing on one of their porches with a muddied rake when he first saw *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977), a film that had seeped into him, he’d later tell Lungsta, possessing a spiritual kinship, he thought, to the loneliness he’d discovered in *iNkwenkwe neeNkwenkwezi* (1996). I never met Luthuli and could never probe him about his allusion to Spielberg, but I knew about him because Lungsta had turned him into a sorcerer in several of his manuscripts: a sage that recurred in his plots to lavish his heroes with charms, guidance, and powerful potions.



“His work is impeccable,” Lungsta said to me, once, during break. The two of us were enrolled at Bisho High and still virgins, sitting on the edge of the school’s soccer pitch and biting into amagwinya stuffed with mince as we gazed over our setwork in isiXhosa, neither of us needing to open it.

Like Lungsta, I’d known about S.E.K. Mqhayi’s second novel since I was a child: the television adaptation of *Ityala Lamaewe* (1914) had been a ritual observed with almost religious fervour at my house, its thunder even louder than the adaptation of A.C. Jordan’s *Ingqumbo Yeminyanya* (1940), from which I’d been taught how to read.

I looked at Mqhayi’s paperback, lying on the grass between us, and resigned myself to Lungsta’s mind having settled on Luthuli. He went on about him.

“He’s a real wizard,” he sighed, before letting a moment pass. Then he told me about how he’d first met him.

Luthuli had tracked him down through an editor at *Pace Magazine*, one summer, after which Lungsta had harangued his mother into driving him to eDikeni in his favourite white t-shirt and red shorts – knock-kneed, diffident, and a month from sixteen – hefting all four of his moulding manuscripts with him. Lungsta had continued to send his chapters to *Pace Magazine* and a number of newspapers in isiXhosa, but the further he’d written into his fantasy series, the more complicated his plots and language had become – he half-remembered idioms and beings from his grandmother’s stories and often stared at Bisho’s skyline for hours, imagining it crawling with ancient armies – earning him the disapproval of his editors and reducing his audience to Bishop.

His mother – hesitant, but nonetheless also his reader – had followed him onto the grounds that afternoon, looking out for the strange man who’d summoned him into the counsel of adults.

Upon sighting them, Luthuli was gregarious. He kissed her hand, winked at her son, and sat them in a corner of the printing press with steaming cups of tea as the machines churned behind him, narrating their functions and pouring awe into both mother and son as he did so. Then, over the noise, he’d smiled and bellowed his greeting to Lungsta, spreading his arms to receive the little author.

3.

It was midday and I felt ill. I was getting rid of my recycling, latticed under the shadow of the communal clothing line at my apartment complex, smelling the fabric softener in my neighbours’ clothes and looking out over the cemetery that shouldered our block, still waiting to hear back from my agent, when I clicked off the news about the library and walked home, my thoughts filling up with Lungsta.

4.

The old man was dead and Lungsta was twenty years old when he revised his sixth novel – which also went unpublished. He wouldn’t be printed again after Luthuli’s death in 2001.

The two of us had drifted apart after high school, having gone to different universities, but had met up again at the Department of African Languages at the University of the Western Cape, both of us doctoral candidates with our scholarship honing in on Mqhayi.

Lungsta was nursing the recent loss of a partner, then, feeling his personhood diminished, he told me, and over beers, he’d confessed that he’d spent most of his twenties evading his ancestral calling, the source of his personal disasters, he now understood.

“That’s it,” he’d said to me, ordering us another round of beer at a dim student bar in Bellville. “My misfortunes with women come as no surprise to me.”

I’d laughed, but even as we’d knocked back our second draughts and ordered more, I’d wondered if it wasn’t the same with me and writing. Later, I’d drop out of my doctoral degree and move to Norwich for a writing program in English, returning half a decade later with the novel I’d written there, but not the woman I’d lived with.

“I won’t answer the calling, now,” Lungsta said over the grime on the counter, the two of us soaked on lager. “I’m saving it for my last novel.”

I turned to look at him, and he drew closer; his tone lowered, and he told me that, in the meantime, he would recast his calamities as plots in his novels and, through practice, he would learn all of the notes that sat between one word and another, mastering the language Mqhayi had written in. Then he would go home, heed his calling, and write his last book. I listened to him, unable to gauge his seriousness.



Embracing him, that night, I could feel his grief coursing through the strength of his clutch around my triceps, and it wasn't the last time I'd think of him as losing his mind.

The second would be the last time I saw him, although I didn't know that then. It would arrive a decade after I'd returned from Norwich with a novel in English that earned me a prize and a million rand, a triumph which both elated and poisoned me, I thought, resulting in a wave of shame that persisted at having abandoned isiXhosa.

The language Mqhayi had written in, Lungsta would've said.

He did congratulate me, after the prize was announced, and I wrote back to him, too, out of politeness, before I abandoned what was left of me to what success had to offer, a time from which I'd emerge to find the charmed life I thought I had in urgent need of mending.

5.

It was evening, and I was still thinking of Lungsta when I finally heard back from my agent. I was in my flat, again, and thinking about the fire when I opened the mail she'd written me from Barcelona. It had a photograph of her smiling in a sun hat under bright skies: a good enough omen, I thought, before it was. The first paragraph detailed a request for the Spanish rights of my second novel, which I consented to without thinking, and the second was an offer she'd brokered for an adaptation of the first book I'd ever published, a figure that made me sit back and sigh with relief. Here was help, I thought. I was in my late twenties when the book, *Brownian Motion* (2014), had come out – it was the novel I'd laboured over during the five winters I'd endured with Leah, my ex-fiancé, in a ground floor bedsit in Norwich – and a month after it was published, I'd been announced the voice of a generation at home. It was in the summer catalogue of a corporate book retailer, sure, but it was still a laurel I wore with both relish and self-reproach, knowing all the while I couldn't be half the writer Lungsta was. That he didn't see the poison I'd discovered in the world in Norwich.

6.

The last time I saw him was in 2020. He'd invited us to his home in Rondebosch, us being his old friends who still wrote, informing us that he'd printed and bound Mqhayi's famous lost manuscript, *USamson* (1907), otherwise known as the first novel in isiXhosa. The book, Mqhayi's debut, had been lost since its release at the beginning of the 20th century, confounding scholars with a lacuna in our canon for over a hundred years.

Now he'd found it, he told us.

I didn't believe him, of course, but I was intrigued enough to take the flight down and was surprised to discover, when I did, that Lungsta had aged into a remarkable host, a rare trait even amongst the most successful of novelists. Middle-aged and resigned into a comfort in his own skin, he spoke with humour about how he'd survived his childhood with writing and his adulthood with teaching, both of which had granted him his freedoms. His stomach had once felt like a minefield, he said, its lining flooded with torrents of acid. The disastrous events of his childhood had seeped into his marrow without him knowing, resulting in waves of fear that had unsettled his stomach whenever he wasn't writing. Now the minefield had been disarmed and watered into a verdant meadow.

Lungsta felt grateful to be alive.

Rounding us up in his kitchen, he quipped about our age, attending to the last touches of the vegan feast he'd prepared for us. The sunset flowed over his tiles, imbuing the room with a glow that bent orange against his windows, and I took a tray of baked aubergine off the countertop and followed him out with the others.

Lungsta looked the picture of peace. He was dressed in his red healer's garments, walking barefoot with his ankles adorned, and there, in the presence of his towering bookstacks, he crossed his legs and told us about what he'd found.

"*USamson*," he said, "the first novel in isiXhosa, isn't what the scholars think."

He gave us a moment to load our plates before he went on.

"It's stranger," he added, cutting into a slice of eggplant. "It's genius, in fact: a fevered, intertextual masterpiece. Mqhayi submitted it to the missionaries that had educated him and it appalled them. They even pretended to throw it out – planning to ship it to phrenologists in London – but fortune favoured us and it never left the continent."

Lungsta lowered his fork and tapped his left temple. "I have it here." He uncorked a bottle of wine. "Mqhayi was devastated, of course," he said. "He was a young writer and this was his first novel. He wallowed for a month, contracted a fever, and suffered from nightmares. Then he got up, one morning, and printed and distributed *USamson* himself." I reached for my wine.



“The missionaries bought the copies back for twice the price and burned them,” Lungsta said. “Defeated, Mqhayi returned to the church and yielded. Having been appointed to the Xhosa Bible Revision Board two years prior, he narrowed the scope of his work to what the mission could digest, embedding his insurgence. During this time, he wrote *Ityala Lamaꝛwele*, his legal drama, as well as a book on the minister and hymnist, John Knox Bokwe.”

Noticing we hadn’t touched our food, Lungsta waved us on.

“It took him fourteen years to break out of the spell and return to *USamson*,” he said. “In 1930, after spending a breathless night reading Sol T. Plaatje’s debut, *Mhudi* – in his journals, Mqhayi likened it to having been *awoken from a deep slumber* – he felt stupefied with relief. He wrote to the novelist the next morning, expressing his enthusiasm for the work – in particular pointing out a paragraph in which Plaatje had written about two villagers who had taken a strong medicine in order to watch the sun travel to the east, in the end witnessing a giant red ball tearing the world in half.”

I forced myself to swallow. Lungsta’s wine was exquisite.

“It was then that the 57-year-old novelist told Plaatje that, prior to reading his masterpiece – *It is, sir, the book of my life* – he had thought that he’d dreamt of this strong medicine, but since then, had realised the dream was a recollection.”

“Did Plaatje write back?” I asked him, not knowing how else to interrupt.

“Plaatje was surprised to hear from him,” Lungsta said. “Mqhayi was a writer he held in higher regard. He read his letter on his feet and wrote back to him as soon as he sat. In his missive, Plaatje thanked his colleague, but confessed shock at his revelation. He’d thought the paragraph had been an act of imagination, that he’d thought it all up: the medicine, the giant red ball, the heavens tearing in half. Mqhayi read Plaatje’s letter standing, too, and then paced inside his quarters all night. He felt his thoughts clear as he recalled the structure of his first novel, *USamson*: how he’d weaved together the biblical tales of the mission as well as the Xhosa folklore he’d grown up on in Gqumahashe, knitting them and then pulling them apart, creating a complicated lattice that was bordered with his childhood, his father, and the songs of his ancestral village.

“Mqhayi sat down and packed his pipe, his mind filling up with the rivers of his youth, where the water had pulled apart like the tongue of a giant serpent, washing through marshes dense with the laughter of mermaids. He remembered lying on his back in a meadow of sourgrass, watching the knitted arms of an ancient forest at dusk, its limbs dense with the weight of sleeping bats.

“The following morning, he wrote to Plaatje and told him that, when he was a child in the late 1800s, he’d consumed the medicine in his novel. He described to the novelist how he’d been travelling with his grandfather when the two of them encountered a camp of nomads in a wood outside Gqumahashe. *In lieu of a chief, these nomads followed a seer; he wrote to Plaatje, a woman whose spirit was as old as the world, and she offered us the medicine.*

“In the correspondence that follows, the two writers agree to embark on a mission to the parish of Gqumahashe to recover Mqhayi’s lost manuscript, *USamson* (1907), written during what Mqhayi now understands to have been a late effect of the medicine him and his father had taken from the seer – a vision of the beginning of the world.”

“Did they find it?”

“No, but during their journey, the pages of *USamson* returned to Mqhayi in full, and with Plaatje watching over his shoulder, he completed the book on the trip.”  
It was the one he’d found, I assumed.

Lungsta swallowed the last of his wine, and I couldn’t help it this time. I asked him about the letters. There were no records of Mqhayi and Plaatje’s correspondence.

“For obvious reasons, they couldn’t disclose their mission,” he said. “Not after what the missionaries had done. Nor print Mqhayi’s revision. It was the 1930s, and they were natives. Instead, the two writers buried it inside a chest at Mount Glory, Mqhayi’s place of birth, leaving behind directions to the village healers but, over time, those faded into legend and were lost.”

It was then that I decided to ask him the obvious: how he’d found the novel.

“I did the unthinkable,” he said. “I went home and took counsel with my ancestors.”



Lungsta lowered his plate and raised a hand towards a window behind him. “For an entire night,” he said, “I heard all of this from Mqhayi and Plaatje themselves. Instead of thinking, of imagining, of recollecting, I could feel my spirit exiting my body and meeting them. Even though I was still alive, it travelled from one image in my head to another and, in each idea, in each dream, in each imagining, I was there, in the flesh.”

I scanned the room, looking for the novel he’d printed, but I couldn’t find it. Lungsta, who was watching me, smiled and tapped his left temple again.

“Like I said, I have it here.”

I didn’t understand and told him as much.

“It was revealed to me, and I’m still holding it,” he said.

Revealed, I thought.

He was referring to authorities I knew nothing of, his ancestors, but there was evidence of the divine in how well he looked. I’d never seen a writer in better health.

“I know what I’m saying runs in opposition to what we’ve been taught about Mqhayi,” he said. “That’s the point: our understanding of the text, as it’s been gathered from historians and scholars, has been inaccurate.”

Lungsta told us how *USamson* had been thought of as a linear retelling of the biblical tale, while, in fact, it was nothing of the sort. “However, that’s what survives about it,” he said. Here, Lungsta paused and sighed. “But also consider this,” he said. “Mqhayi had to publish and distribute *USamson* himself, the historians are all agreed on that, and I don’t contradict it, either. He had no help from the missionaries, which raises questions, doesn’t it?”

For once, I was following him, I thought.

“If indeed it was a biblical retelling,” Lungsta said, “an artefact of indoctrination from a leading native intellectual, the mission would’ve reprinted it and released it amongst the natives themselves, its ideas seeping into their villages, no? Instead, what happened is that Mqhayi was commissioned to write about Samson, that much is true, but the deeper he got into the work, the more heated his imagination became. *It began melting in both directions*, he’d later write to Plaatje, *as if my cradle were being interred inside my grave.*”

The four of us were silent.

The book had been written during Mqhayi’s calling, Lungsta meant.

“It’s common knowledge that Mqhayi had a spiritual gift,” he said. “The result was the manuscript the missionaries rejected: *USamson: A Book of the Beginning of the World.*”

The sun had set, turning the orange light purple against the Rondebosch horizon.

I shifted in my seat and asked him for the bathroom. He directed me, and I walked out to the hall, where he’d lined the walls with photographs of writers, artists, parents, siblings, and himself, placing all of them in the same universe – a feat I could never manage. I found the bathroom and looked into the mirror above his basin, thinking of the poem I was struggling to write. In the next century, I will no longer feel my insides harden like a maze of ice. In the next century, I will be owned and insured by an ethical corporation.

It had taken me months, but I found shelter in verse.

I washed my hands and walked back through the hall.

“There he is,” Lungsta said.

He got up from the lounge and led me out the door, again, closing it behind him.

“I asked them about you, too,” he said.

“Mqhayi and Plaatje?”

He smiled. “No, those who led me to them.”

His ancestors, again, I thought, and Lungsta nodded as if he’d heard me.

“I’ve followed your work,” he said, “and I contest its conclusions on trauma.”

That was clear enough.

“In your first novel, you described a character as being comprised of electrons running in random trajectories, right?”

I nodded. I had.

“That’s closer to the truth,” he said. “It isn’t trauma that initiates and dictates our trajectories. Instead, what happens with human lives is what happens with what constitutes us, but on a grander scale. From tissue, to bio-chemical reactions, to molecules, to atoms, to electrons. For a human life, one knows at the end alone what it was meant to be, and all of it has to occur,” he said. “Including its agonies. That’s the portrait of all existence.”

Lungsta’s words sunk into me that night and would remain with me even as I flew home to my apartment complex in Joburg.

He opened the door to the living room, again. Then, led us into his office, a dim room littered with even more books than his lounge and, standing behind his desk, he told us to take a seat



on a broad black couch. I looked out of his window as I did. For an unpublished novelist, he'd done well for himself, I thought.

“For the rest of the evening, I'll be narrating the novel to you,” he said.

I asked him about the volume he'd printed and bound, that he'd mentioned in his email, and Lungsta smiled. “Do you remember Bishop Luthuli?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“He was an angel,” he said. “Days before his death, he said that he'd printed and bound every page I'd sent to him. That he had a friend who worked at the library at the University of Cape Town, and that this friend had shelved my unpublished works in the Jagger Reading Room. Likewise, with *USamson II*,” he quipped, before the four of us laughed, unable to decide if it was from nerves or exhilaration. “That's where I've sent the manuscript,” he said.

Then Lungsta began to narrate, which lasted until sunrise, and when he was done, he told us that it was his final work, his last act of labour in our society. That he would follow his calling out of the world we knew.

The morning light cut into his office and a silence fell over us, the world having taken on a different hue, I felt. Lungsta got up to make us espresso, and I leaned back on his couch as the sun came up, thinking that he was right. It was a masterpiece.

7.

Now, it was lost again. I never made it to the Jagger Reading Room to see the printed novel. I'd thought I had time and had wanted someone with Lungsta's gift to mediate. My emails to him bounced and, from friends, I heard that he'd sold his house and possessions and was known alone to those with the calling. Turning off the news, I thought of using the option fee from the adaptation on a bigger flat, all of a sudden feeling caged and alone, mortal, and full of mourning for what we'd never know. Lungsta had left our terrestrial existence, I thought, as I wrote back to my agent, and now he drifted above us like smoke from the fire that had claimed his work, liberated from the tangle of language and closer to all of existence.



# A book, a reader, a letter, & a fire\*

## Jeremiah Majikijela reading Krune Mqhayi

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

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Dag Henrichsen

As I write, I still don't know anything about Jeremiah Majikijela. I encountered him for the first time during the summer of 1997 in the Africana Rare Book Collection of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien (BAB) in Basel, Switzerland. While leafing through the 3rd edition of *Ityala Lama Wêle* (1917) by the influential Xhosa writer, poet, and scholar S.E. Rune Mqayi<sup>1</sup> (commonly known as Krune Mqhayi), a loose letter surfaced between its pages. This letter was written by Jeremiah Majikijela in May 1921 and addressed to Rev Walther Bourquin.

Three years later, in late October 2000, the Africana Rare Book Collection at the BAB burned down. Over 1 000 books, pamphlets, and accompanying documents were ravaged by a fire inside the medieval Tschegggenbürlins Hus Hus building at Klosterberg 21, where the collection was still housed. The BAB's main Namibian and Southern African library and archives had just been moved to the adjacent new premises at Klosterberg 23 and had, therefore, remained untouched. While many works survived, several hundreds of the RARA (as the BAB curators call the collection) were burned to ashes. A significant number of those which survived were eventually carefully restored. Among the RARA lost was *Ityala Lama Wêle*, and with it, Majikijela's letter.

Amid the shock of the fire, the loss of this letter was the most serious one for me. Around the time that we had found the letter, during the summer of 1997, I submitted my PhD thesis on pre- and early colonial central Namibian societal transformations, grounded in many ways in pre-colonial African writing cultures of the 19th century which emerged as part of the dynamic constructions of modernity by a first generation of African Christians. In the thesis, I wrote in detail about the first Ovaherero letter and manuscript writers, both men and women, analysing their writings and situating them as avid writers, readers, and intellectuals who also formed personal libraries and archives. The tragedy of Majikijela's lost letter, thus, hurt and troubled me for many reasons. I felt responsible, not only in a general but also in a very particular way.

A few weeks after the catastrophe, I decided to write up what was left of the traces of Majikijela in Basel: the brief story of the life of his letter, as I knew it. I dedicated the piece and presented it to Carl Schlettwein, the founder of the BAB as Namibia Resource Centre and Southern African Library, and his wife Daniela Schlettwein-Gsell, archiving my own copy. Twenty-one years later, the fire at the University of Cape Town's Jagger Library instantly

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1

The title and author's name given here are spelled as in the third edition of *Ityala Lama Wêle* (1917).



brought back memories of our experiences in Basel and made me revisit my writings from that time. I now sensed more clearly that writing about Majikijela’s letter at that specific moment stemmed from emotional necessity of a troubled historian and curator, aggravated at the time by an unexpected letter from Rev Bourquin’s son, Sighart, also in October 2000.

The importance of working with letters, manuscripts, and libraries in African languages has remained with me ever since. In what follows, I amend the 2000 text with a few reflections about a reader and an author, both of whom continue to stay with us in Basel, despite a fire.

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*Jeremiah Majikijela*<sup>2</sup>

All we know of Jeremiah Majikijela is that he was an avid reader and a letter writer. Specifically, a reader of of *Ityala Lama Wele*, written by Rune Mqayi.

A reader. In a library, authors and their works are often the main focus. They usually get more attention than their readers who come and go. Once read, their works return to the shelves, where they are safeguarded, at times in the truest sense of the word. Some readers, of course, do return. At times, they return by bringing their own book or a review of a book they had read in the library. At other times, the bibliography in their own subsequent works would indicate that they were, once upon a time, a reader of a particular book in a particular library.

Majikijela came to us as a reader and stayed. This, too, is not necessarily unusual. There are more readers hiding amongst the bookshelves of a library than is usually assumed. Think only about those who leave traces of themselves in the books that they return: handwritten scribbles and annotations in the margins, loose notes on scraps of paper, newspaper cuttings in-between pages or bookmarks, pressed flowers or leaves, empty envelopes, a letter or manuscript page, postcards, photographs, and much more. These are often anonymous traces but, sometimes, there are traces that can be linked to a particular reader, as in Ex Libris cases – where a label pasted to the inside front cover of a book shows the name of the book’s owner.

2 The following paragraphs have been translated and partly rephrased from my German manuscript of December 2000. Since then, a rich body of work on Mqayi has emerged. Additionally, local and/or missionary histories from Mdeni in the Eastern Cape published after 2000 would likely provide more and, perhaps, more accurate, information.

Jeremiah Majikijela came to us in the summer of 1997. He stayed amongst the RARA by means of a letter he had written on 4 May 1921 in Mdeni in the Eastern Cape to the missionary Reverend Walther Bourquin (1879-1974) who kept the letter inside his copy of *Ityala*. From the letter, we learn that Bourquin had lent Majikijela the book and that it was returned to him with a letter of thanks. A trace of Majikijela. The book subsequently remained in the library of Bourquin’s son, Sighart, until he gifted it to the Basel theology student Katrin Kusmierz in 1996/1997 during her studies in Pietermaritzburg. She, in turn, gave it as a present to us when she became a staff member at the BAB. It was then that we discovered Majikijela’s letter.

The fire erased his trace in our rare book collection: not just as a letter writer, but also his reader’s history (*Lesergeschichte*) and his reading thoughts (*Lesegedanken*). And it destroyed a particular book and the book’s history (*Buchgeschichte*). When a library burns, not only the works and their authors are lost to flames but the engagements of their readers, too.

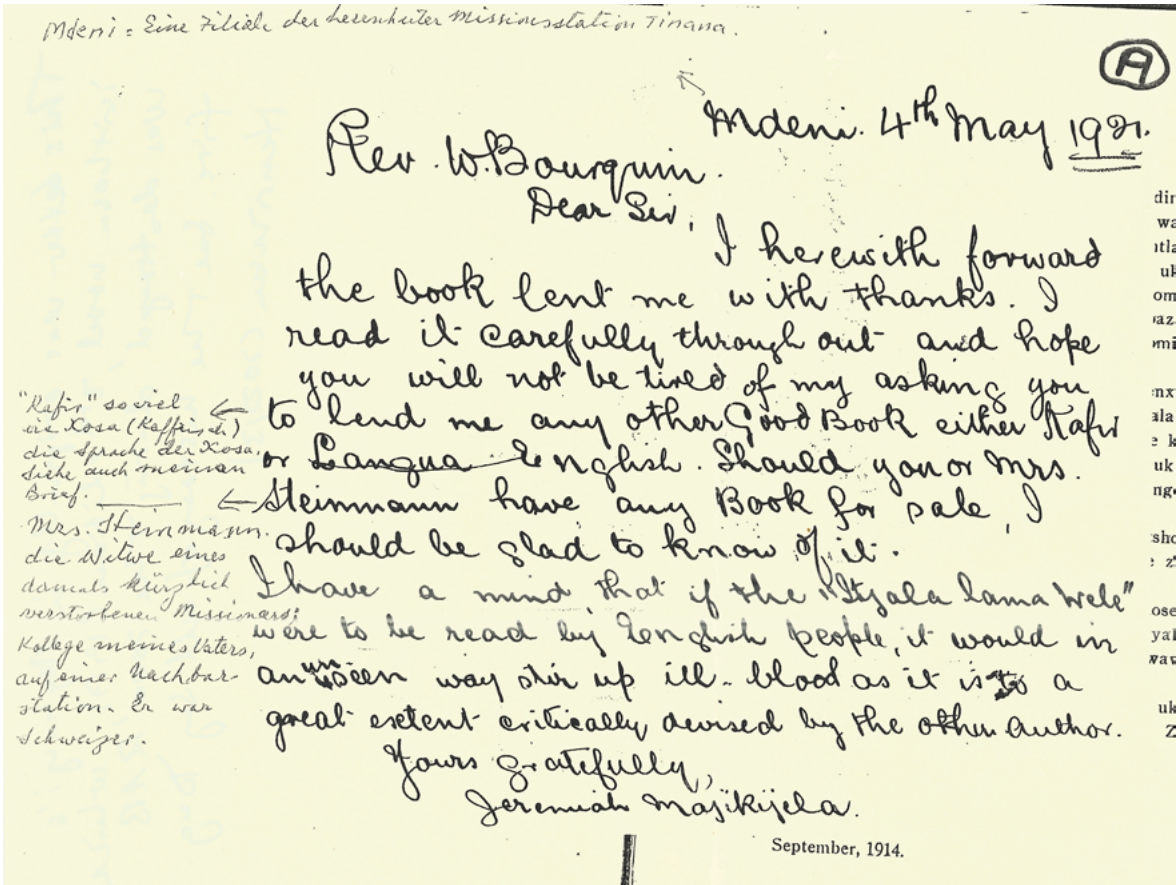
Majikijela’s letter refers to “Books” with a capital letter. He looked for more book contacts and was interested in acquiring, it seems, a library of “Good Books”. He was obviously an African Christian in Mdeni (Emdeni), an outpost of the Moravian (Herrnhuter) mission station Tinana serviced by Rev Bourquin, and at least bi-lingual, in isiXhosa (referred to as “Kafir”) and English. He seems also to have known Mrs Steinmann, the widow of a recently deceased Swiss missionary who lived at a neighbouring mission station.

Majikijela’s letter suggests that he was a critical reader who valued *Ityala* as a “Good Book” and reflected, across readerships and literatures, on the colonial world at large. Was he also a reader who saw in Bourquin, a known isiXhosa linguist, a potential translator of *Ityala* into English? Or, perhaps more likely, did Majikijela feel obliged to warn Bourquin about the consequences of any such venture? He clearly was a passionate and empathetic reader, concerned about potential “ill-blood” spilling in a colonial setting, aware of the power of books and their role in fostering and circulating anti-colonial thought. Was Majikijela himself a firebrand and, indeed, an “other” critical book “author”, as his letter seems to suggest at the end?

A book, a reader, a letter, and a fire.

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Mdeni 4th May 1921

Dear Sir;

I herewith forward the book lent me with thanks. I read it carefully through out and hope you will not be tired of my asking you to lend me any other Good Book either Kafir or Langua English. Should you or Mrs. Steinmann have any Book for sale, I should be glad to know of it.

I have a mind, that if the "Ityala lama wele" were to be read by English people, it would in an unseen way stir up ill-blood as it is to a great extent critically devised by the other author.

Yours gratefully,

Jeremiah Majikijela.

Rune Mqayi's book entered our library with the reference number R 1146.

Who was the author of *Ityala* and what was his book about?

Rune Mqayi, today referred to as Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi (1875-1945), is one of the most well-known South African writers, poets, and historians, in no small part because he co-authored the South African national anthem *Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika* (God bless Africa). The song was originally penned by Enoch Sontonga; Mqayi added several stanzas. Nelson Mandela writes in his autobiography *Long Walk to Freedom*:

"Krune Mqhayi was the great Xhosa poet [...] Mqhayi was actually an *imbongi*, a praise singer, a kind of oral historian who marks contemporary events and history with poetry that is of special meaning to his people."<sup>3</sup>

Mandela had experienced a performance by Mqayi, sometime around 1939, at an event held during his final year of school at Wesleyan Healdtown College in Beaufort, and describes it as follows:

"The day of his visit was declared a holiday by the school authorities. On the appointed morning, the entire school, including staff members, both black and white, gathered in the dining hall, which was where we held school assemblies. There was a stage at one end of the hall and from it a door led to [the school director] Dr Wellington's house. The door itself was nothing special, but we thought of it as Dr Wellington's door, for no one ever walked through it except Dr Wellington himself.

Suddenly, the door opened and out walked not Dr Wellington, but a black man dressed in a leopard skin, kaross<sup>4</sup> and matching hat, who was carrying a spear in either hand. Dr Wellington followed a moment later, but the sight of a black man in tribal dress coming through that door was electrifying. It is hard to explain the impact it had on us. It seemed to turn the universe upside down. As Mqhayi sat on the stage next to Dr Wellington, we were barely able to contain our excitement."<sup>5</sup>

3 Nelson Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom* (London: Little Brown & Co., 1994), 38.  
4 A rug or blanket of sewn animal skins.  
5 Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 38.



That day at Wesleyan Healdtown College, Mqayi presented in isiXhosa what was simultaneously a political lecture and poetic performance. Mandela quotes him as stating:

“I predict that, one day, the forces of African society will achieve a momentous victory over the interloper. For too long we have succumbed to the false gods of the white man. But we shall emerge and cast off these foreign notions.”<sup>6</sup>

Reflecting on the experience, Mandela writes:

“I could hardly believe my ears. His boldness in speaking of such delicate matters in the presence of Dr Wellington and other whites seemed utterly astonishing to us [...] He then discussed Africa and separated the continent into different nations, giving specific constellations to different tribes. He had been dancing around the stage, waving his spear, modulating his voice, and now, suddenly, he became still, and lowered his voice. ‘Now, come you, O House of Xhosa,’ he said, and slowly began to lower himself so that he was on one knee. ‘I give unto you the most important and transcendent star, the Morning Star, for you are a proud and powerful people. It is the star for counting the years – the years of manhood.’ When he spoke this last word, he dropped his head to his chest. We rose to our feet, clapping and cheering. I did not want ever to stop applauding. I felt such intense pride at that point, not as an African but as a Xhosa; I felt like one of the chosen people.

I was galvanized, but also confused by Mqayi’s performance. He had moved from a more nationalistic, all-encompassing theme of African unity to a more parochial one addressed to the Xhosa people, of whom he was one [...] I saw that an African might stand his ground with a white man, yet I was still eagerly seeking benefits from whites, which often required subservience [...] as I left Healdtown at the end of the year, I saw myself as a Xhosa first and an African second.”<sup>7</sup>

Mandela’s recollections reverberate with some of the possible reflections that Majikijela might have had in 1921 when reading Mqayi’s influential novel *Ityala Lama Wéle*.

6       Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 39.  
7       Mandela, *Long Walk to Freedom*, 39-40.

*Ityala Lamarwele* (translated in English as “The Lawsuit of the Twins”) is the first extant novel in the Xhosa language, and was first published in 1914 by the Lovedale Press. It saw many and different editions and until today (2000) has not been translated fully into English.

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Reaching out to a previous reader or book owner can be instructive when trying to learn more about a book’s history. In the case of rare books, annotated bibliographies and catalogues, too, are important. In late 1997, before the fire ravaged the BAB, I wrote to the previous owner of the book, Sighart Bourquin (1914-2004), Rev Bourquin’s son, to ask if he knew more about the copy of *Ityala Lama Wéle* from his father’s library now in Basel and if he knew more about Jeremiah Majikijela. My letter included photocopies of the book’s cover, the first pages of the book as well as a copy of Majikijela’s letter. But it was only in October 2000, shortly before the fire, that I received an answer. Bourquin apologised for the late reply, explaining that soon after receiving my letter, his library and archives were transferred to the Killie Campbell Africana Library in Durban, where it had only just been catalogued. A German-speaking archivist had found my letter of 1997 and “searched in vain for an answer which I usually clip to a letter received”. She contacted Bourquin, resent my letter and he, thus, could now answer. In his response to me, Bourquin wrote that Mqhavi’s book:

“offers a very critical overview of the colonial and annexation politics of the English in Xhosaland (the later Kaffraria) [...] who, admittingly, were often cruel, land hungry, selfish and reckless. The content list [of the book] contains many references to such historical incidents over one century which the Xhosa complaint about and which at times led to wars.”

Bourquin returned my photocopies from the book’s pages, together with a few helpful translations, and he returned my photocopy of Majikijela’s letter, also accompanied by some notes on Mdeni, Mrs Steinmann, and the term “Kafir”.

Thanks to both chance and the attentiveness of an archivist in Durban, Majikijela remains with us in Basel as a reader and writer, as does, indeed, the loss of his original letter and of Mqayi’s *Ityala Lama Wéle*.

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Curatorial Reverberations

In 2001, after the fire at the BAB, my colleagues Susanne Hubler Baier and Antonio Uribe engaged in the laborious task of rebuilding the RARA, replacing lost copies and expanding the former collection through (re)acquisitions. They managed to replace Mqayi’s *Ityala Lama Wēle* 3rd edition of 1917 with a copy of the 1981 Lovedale reprint of the abridged 6th edition from 1927. As this is not a rare book as such, it is currently shelved in the Southern Africa library Collection at the BAB, and not amongst the RARA. The photocopies with notes that I received in my correspondence with Sighart Bourquin were placed inside both the 1981 edition of *Ityala Lama Wēle*, as well as in the BAB’s institutional correspondence archives. In the RARA collection, both Mqayi and Majikijela remain absent until today.

The Killie Campbell Africana Library catalogue at the University of KwaZulu-Natal Library does not list *Ityala Lama Wēle*’s 3rd edition. Neither does the University of Cape Town’s Jagger Library. My efforts to trace a copy of this particular edition in any other (specialist) library known to me, inside or outside of South Africa, failed too. Jeff Opland, professor of African Language and Literature, pointed out in 2009 in his voluminous *Abantu Besizwe: Historical and biographical writings 1902-1944, S.E.K. Mqayi*: “I have not located the second, third or fourth editions [of *Ityala Lama Wēle*]”.<sup>8</sup> Comparing and discussing the editions and editorial documents that he had been able to trace, Opland “assumes” that the 3rd and 4th editions were “full editions”.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, he would also not have been able to trace the 3rd edition in Basel before the 2000 fire, as we had not yet established an online catalogue nor had we published a catalogue or similar on the RARA collection. Outside of Basel, knowledge about the BAB’s rare book collection circulated only amongst Namibian and, perhaps, West African scholars. As such, also the prefaces to the 2nd and 3rd editions by Mqayi, included in the latter edition and referring to the author’s delight about increasing readerships between 1914 and 1917,<sup>10</sup> remained in some way hidden and out of reach. Today, of course, the BAB’s online catalogue and knowledge about all its collections is known to a wider network of scholars and readers, and indeed, there are entries in the library catalogue which provide additional information about, for example, a letter in a book. A trace of a reader.

It is thus only now, in response to the fire at the Jagger Library fire in 2021, that I came to the realisation that the fire that ravaged through the BAB rare book collection in 2000 consumed an apparently very rare, but hopefully not singular, copy of the third edition of Mqayi’s book. This is a troubling and, indeed, late realisation. With hope, I recently reached out to Opland and sent him scans from the few remaining photocopies from *Ityala Lama Wēle* and from Majikijela’s letter. Opland answered appreciatively and emphasised the importance of these “precious relics” as he succinctly referred to the copies.<sup>11</sup>

Have these relics related to *Ityala Lama Wēle* and Jeremiah Mjikijela also been archived within the Killie Campbell Archive’s Bourquin collections?<sup>12</sup> What do archivists and librarians do with a few photocopies from a seemingly vanished book and a letter confirming the book’s existence? At the BAB, we have learnt to pay specific attention to Namibia-related rare books and their (non)existence in libraries in Namibia itself and, over the years, have repatriated original or copied publications to the relevant national institutions in Windhoek, apart from archival collections. But this particular book and the accompanying letter’s history brings to the fore, once again, the necessity of curatorial alertness and outreach. It underlines bibliographical and catalogue knowledge production and accessibility and raises questions about book and library migrations, acquisition, and repatriation policies. And critically, the fate of this book and this letter raise questions about the (im)possibilities of fulfilling, if this is the right word, as librarians and archivists the myriad tasks related to each book, each author and each reader who enters a library or an archive.

These precious copies from Mqayi’s burned book and Majikijela’s letter also invite engagement with questions of alternative repatriation. They stipulate the accessibility of digital open source book and letter relics, too, on our online platforms.

Jeremiah Majikijela continues to be unknown to me.

8 Jeff Opland, *Abantu besizwe: Historical and biographical writings, 1902-1944 S.E.K. Mqhayi* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2009).  
9 Opland, *Abantu besizwe: Historical and biographical writings, 1902-1944 S.E.K. Mqhayi*, 19.  
10 According to the prefaces’ summaries by Sighart Bourquin in 2000 on the copied pages, in German.

11 In an email to Dag Henrichsen, 21 September 2022.  
12 At the time of writing, I am in discussion on this with the library in Durban.



Whilst I have not consulted relevant archives or Eastern Cape historians, I now could read Walther Bourquin’s autobiography, *Bruder Mensch* (1967), which has been on the shelves of the BAB since 2005.<sup>13</sup> This book includes a photographic portrait of “Aron Majikijela, a young teacher from the Hlubi tribe”.<sup>14</sup> In the text, however, Bourquin does not refer again to Aron or Jeremiah Majikijela or, for that matter, Krune Mqayi.

But my sense is that Jeremiah Majikijela’s copied letter needs to be placed in Bourquin’s autobiography, too, next to Aron Majikijela’s portrait, as it was placed in the 1981 edition of *Ityala Lama Wele*. Albeit as relics, the presence of these copies in both Mqayi’s and Bourquin’s books could entice new readers to reimagine the resonances between the authors and readers of a “Good Book” and, in doing so, prolong and enlarge the life of Majikijela’s letter and his *Lesegedanken* as an African reader in a Basel library.

*Leseresonanzen*.

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13      Walther Bourquin, *Bruder Mensch 41 Jahre Herrnhuter Mission in Südafrika* (Hamburg: Ludwig Appel Verlag, 1967).

14      Image and caption facing p. 49.



# BURNING MAN

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Niren Tolsi* is an award-winning journalist, a former Ruth First Journalism Fellow, and a Heinrich Böll Foundation Journalism Fellow. Tolsi is one of the founding editors of the now defunct anti-media long-form magazine, *The Con*, and has been published in the *Mail & Guardian*, *Sunday Times*, *Al Jazeera*, *The Guardian and Reportagen*, among others. For the last ten years, he and photojournalist Paul Botes have documented the aftermath of the 2012 Marikana police massacre through the families and comrades of the 44 men who died. He directed, produced, and co-curated the *Marikana, Ten Years On* exhibition and public engagement programme at the 2022 National Arts Festival. Tolsi tells stories.

Niren Tolsi

On 18 May 2008 the world watched a man die. Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, a Mozambican migrant worker, burnt to death on the streets of Ramaphosa informal settlement outside Johannesburg. He became known as the “Burning Man.” His flailing, fiery body illuminated the violence South Africans had meted out to immigrants during a pogrom which left 62 dead. All were Africans.

Nhamuave was a father of three young children. He had sought out a job in South Africa so as to feed, clothe and educate his family – his was the simple urgency of a father and husband.

In October 2010 the South African police closed their investigation. Two years after Nhamuave’s death the police drew a line of words under his murder: “Suspects still unknown and no witnesses.” Yet, in the same month that the case was snapped shut journalists tracked down witnesses who were able to point out the alleged killers; still walking the same street on which Nhamuave had been set alight.

The men who had lit the match that killed Nhamuave remained invisible to the justice system, but the structural agents – dysfunctional governance and the non-delivery of jobs, a living dignity and basic services like running water, electricity, sewage removal and decent healthcare – remained in plain sight. As it does today.

From South Africa we stare at Switzerland through the inverted looking glass.

What is shouted out in Johannesburg remains unsaid in Zurich. What runs in straight tramlines in Basel bobs and weaves through peak-hour Durban traffic. Yet the commonalities of hidden hypocrisies are sometimes as incandescent as the living politics of those on the margins. Those who are forced to navigate the borders to which they are shoved, stopped and searched. Those relentlessly denied access to a living humanity and imprisoned in the immigrants’ state – not the nation state.

*“Once set, flame spreads rapidly and consumes what it touches, making its illuminant effects highly visible, but leaving the agents who have lit the match often invisible, mysterious, or unknown.”*

– Kerry Chance<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kerry Ryan Chance, “Where there is fire, there is politics.” Ungovernability and Material Life in Urban South Africa, *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 3 (2015): 394–423.



On 27 February 2017 a few people on a platform at a train station in Balerna watched a man die. The local media reported that he “burnt brightly before the eyes of terrified passengers.” The “Burning Man” had smuggled himself onto the roof of the S10 regional train and been struck by its high voltage line, the reported 3000 volts setting him alight.

Not many people outside Balerna – so small a backwater that locals laugh when visitors ask where the town is, and then point in the direction of the post-office – in the canton of Ticino, would hear of the death of the “Burning Man.”

His was a death that barely made the regional newspapers in other cantons. There was no international expression of outrage at Swiss immigration policies, which leave thousands in an immigrants’ state of flux on its borders with Italy. Policies which disregard the humanity of people running away from jihadis and bombs and neo-colonial interference. People merely looking to keep the future of their families safe.

The “Burning Man” was from Mali, it was established. An immigrant trying to get through Switzerland to Germany. He had previously tried to enter France, it was reported, but had been turned back. No friends or relatives turned up to claim his body, his past, his dignity. No one cared to find out if he had been a brother or a father. His life last revealed to the world as a man aflame.

From Switzerland, Africa is often stared at through the inverted looking glass.

It is an exotic place of tribes and rituals, of wild animals and even wilder governments. What is asexual in Geneva is orgiastic in Cape Town. Nothing is cheap in Lugano, but life is in Soweto.

Yet the commonalities of hidden hypocrisies are sometimes as incandescent as the living politics of those on the margins. Those who are forced to navigate the borders to which they are shoved, stopped and searched. Those relentlessly denied access to a living humanity and imprisoned in the immigrants’ state – not the nation state.

*Note:*

This article was first published in *A\*Magazine*, June 2017. At the time of publication Johannesburg-based journalist Niren Tolsi had recently completed a residency in Switzerland sponsored by Pro Helvetia. A line of enquiry during his visit had been migrations and margins.

*Author’s Note:*

In October 2022 I find myself sitting in Lausanne, Switzerland, escaping the fires of rage in South Africa for a few days. A rage that is, in large parts, stoked by misinformation, political misdirection, long-running currents of social conservatism, born-again religiosity, the post-apartheid political failures to address inequality and unemployment, hunger, the cynicism of populist demagoguery which runs through the political mainstream, prejudice, hate, fear, the abject failings of neo-liberal democracies, the emergence of authoritarian Big Men, our willing acquiescence of individual political will to technology .... all factors which permeate other parts of the world to varying degrees.

Sweden, Switzerland, South Africa, Senegal... we find fire all around us. In South Africa, I see it in the shack-lands being reduced to ashes during winter. Likewise, in the July 2021 insurrection which shook South Africa. I see it, too, in a future where the rampant xenophobia propagated by vigilante mafia like Operation Dudula will surely lead to more people burning in the streets?

Where is the love that James Baldwin talks about in *The Fire Next Time*? The love that “takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within.”<sup>1</sup> Love, “not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.”<sup>2</sup>

1 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, (London: Michael Joseph, 1963), 103.  
2 Ibid.



*Unsupervised veldfire near  
Zebediela Limpopo (2010)*

*Charles Rex Moabi,  
Jakkalsfontein (1989)*

Santu Mofokeng

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Santu Mofokeng* was born in Johannesburg in 1956. Although he began his career as a press and documentary photographer, joining the famed photographic collective Afrapix in 1985 and documenting the social conditions in 1980s South Africa, he would later identify as an artist. In his lifetime, Mofokeng was the recipient of numerous awards and accolades, including the Ernest Cole Scholarship in 1991 to study at the International Centre for Photography in New York, the first Mother Jones Award for Africa in 1992, and many more. In 2016, Mofokeng was the winner of the first International Photography prize established by the Fondazione Fotografia Modena. An avid reader and lover of books, Mofokeng collaborated with the German publisher Steidl to release an 18-book box set in 2019, exploring his entire oeuvre as one of South Africa's most important photographers. Santu Mofokeng passed away on 26 January 2020 at the age of 63, a Namibian historian and archivist at the Basler Afrika Bibliographien, Namibia Resource Centre & Southern Africa Library in Switzerland. He teaches at the Centre for African Studies, University of Basel and has published widely on topics and audio-visual themes relating to Namibia's history in the 19th and 20th centuries.









Santu Mofokeng, *Charles Rex Moabi, Jakkalsfontein*, (1989).

© Santu Mofokeng Foundation. Courtesy of Lunetta Bartz, MAKER, Johannesburg.



# A gathering in three parts

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

**Nisha Merit** is an independent curator, writer, and artist-liaison working between Johannesburg and Berlin. She is the co-founder of Merit Art Collective, an international art collective working towards an interdisciplinary knowledge transfer and activations through art productions. Instagram: @meritsworld /website: workofmerit.cargo.site/

Nisha Merit

## Introduction

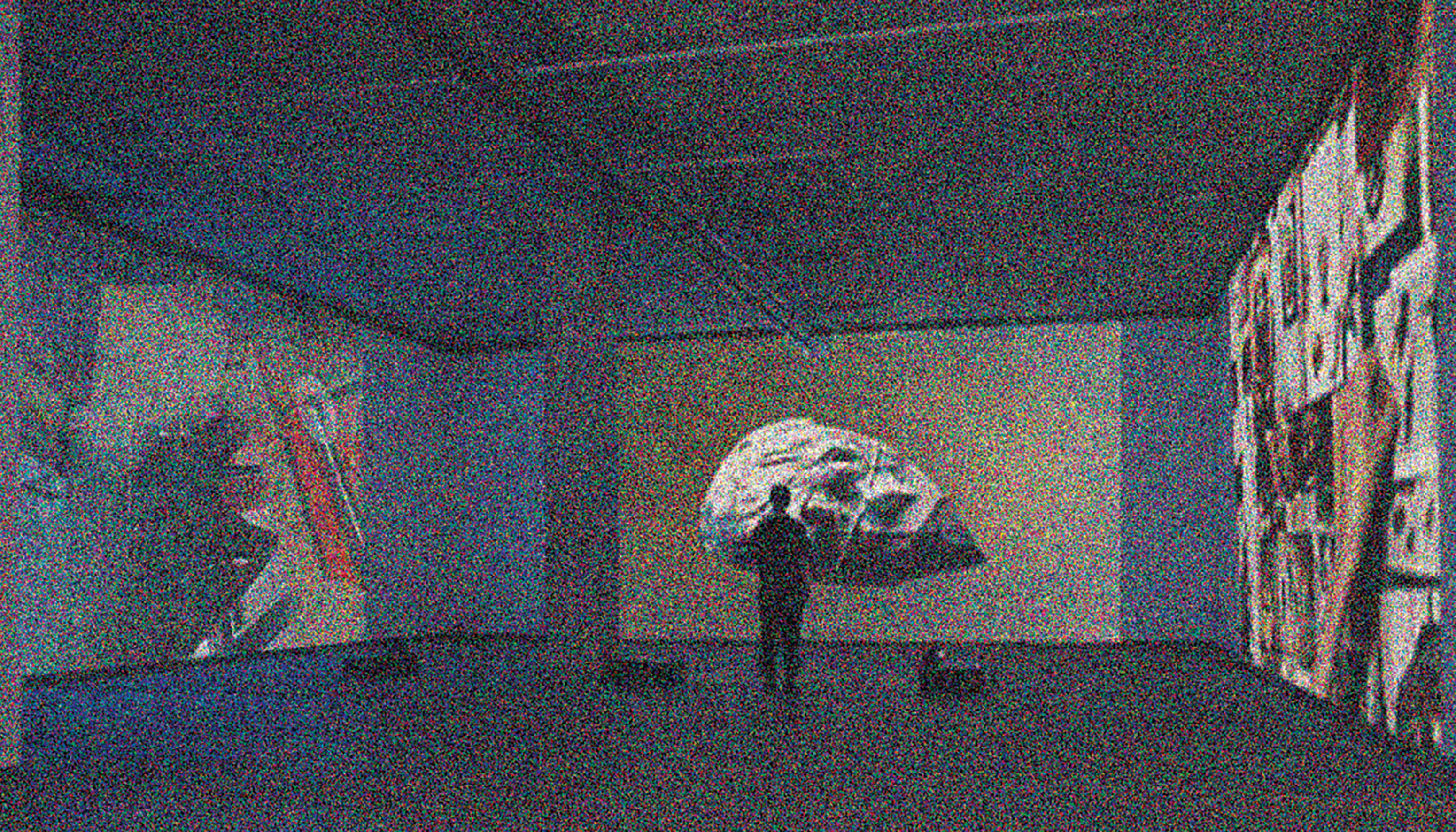
In three parts, I gather my thoughts around possible definitions for the work of the curator, sparked by conversations with Ofri Cnaani, an artist and educator, who works in time-based media, performances, and installations. Cnaani is also an associate lecturer at the Visual Cultures Department, Goldsmiths, University of London. We have been conversing about our respective practices as an act of mapping out thought spaces in the digital and the analogue realm. Her recent work, *Leaking Lands*, which she introduces as follows, offered us a site to discuss aspects of the curatorial, the para and institutional concepts like the archive and its power:

“This is a story that begins with an error. In six short hours in September of 2018 a disastrous fire brought an end to two centuries’ worth of treasures held in Brazil’s national museum. Only a handful of artefacts of the 20 million items that were housed at the museum survived the fire. In the age of algorithmic reproduction, it feels almost unimaginable that so many valuable objects were simply wiped off the face of the earth without leaving any sort of digital trace. Among the digital remains there is a sporadic collection that was contributed by users via WikiCommons and includes photos of the collection as captured by visitors on their personal devices. The digital files are accompanied by a full virtual tour, a product of Google Arts & Culture, where one can easily visit the no-longer existing museum.

*Leaking Lands* is a video installation that acts like a ‘digital séance’ in three parts. On one screen, Cnaani uses the virtual tour to wander around the spectral museum, guided by conversations with several of the institution’s caretakers who were looking after its collection and its publics. On the second screen, the artist uses the hybrid collection to look at ways data systems intermingled and refused the canonic institutional order and its indexing system, industry standards, and the forms of governing these orders represent. Finally, the third screen, brings to life a collaboration between the artist and dance-maker luciana achugar (Uruguay). Achugar’s ‘pleasure practice’ is a healing practice that decivillizes the body, a storage space of transgenerational trauma, through pleasure. Cnaani subjects 3D models of objects from the collection to a methodology of movement. Following a similar speculative methodology, objects can no longer be ‘known’ or ‘utilized’ to a specific set of indexing or ‘put to work for a specific ideology.’”<sup>1</sup>

1 Ofri Cnaani, ‘Leaking Lands’, *Ofri Cnaani*, accessed 26 September 2022, <https://ofricnaani.com/Leaking-Lands>





Modified installation view of. 'Leaking Lands'



Ofri and I have known each other for years, worked together, and talked numerous times but never met outside the digital sphere. In a way, we follow the premise of *Leaking Lands* and its methodology of the ‘digital séance’ as our engagements – similar to the objects in her video – occupy the realm of pixels and signals. Yet our bodies are anchored in the analogue world and, while the digital offers us these remote exchanges, we ultimately translate them into the world we inhabit which is guided by physics and manifestations. Using Ofri’s work as a prompt to contemplate about my own practice leads me to the following three-part gatherings – *Contemplation towards a Gesamtkunstwerk*, *Conversation* (in which Cnanni’s responds to my musings on the role of care in curation, art, the archive, and the museum), and *Conclusion* (which suggests some playful ideas going forward).

### *Contemplations towards a Gesamtkunstwerk*

A former boss once declared, “Nisha gets things done!” after being asked to define my position within the institution. At the time I thought, *what a great position to be in!* But now, looking back at the construct of the institution from an independent position, which is largely undefined other than in conjunction with the cultural and institutional landscape, I see the need to define the parameters of collaboration and positioning. On the one hand, we have the confrontation with freedom and the possibilities lurking around the corner and, on the other, the inherent insecurity of freelance work. As much as the institution apparatus had confined me, it also legitimised me, defined what I do and offered both monetary and idealistic value to my work. In a professional environment that still largely works within a system of validation through an institutional body, my self-declaration of being a ‘one person curatorial para-space’ is a hard sell. In this context, the Greek prefix *para* describes a state that is neither against the institution nor fully defined by it<sup>2</sup> – an ambiguous periphery that is not consumed nor defined by the centre or the institution, but a rhizomatic interchange, I like to imagine.

Returning to “Nisha gets things done!”: this statement defined a product-driven idea, something finished, polished, and packaged. No question, its productional completeness feels great and is the ultimate institutional gratification, but the process, the nuance – the tools of the *para* – are also consumed during its making. While independence is lacking institutional legitimation, I have traded it for a vast playground to explore my space and my process. And when it comes to process, *Care* is the modality I use within the intersection of curatorial and artistic practices, creating interstitial spaces of knowledges and processes to be articulated and shared. A process that is intrinsically collaborative, practising *Care* invites a multitude

2 Nora Sternfeld, *Das Radikaldemokratische Museum* (Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, 2018), 64.

of voices into the context – that of the artists, the space, and the audience. Conversations become the connecting membrane here and form part of the curatorial concept through exchange, interviews, and sharing of ideas. *Care* holds space that is inquisitive and inclusive that tends to disrupt and invite. It is a practice that London-based curator Renée Mussai explains as:

“both praxis, and process, this remedial curatorial care work I describe entails a deep commitment to diversity, and within that our curatorial responsibility – or response-ability, to borrow Toni Morrison’s phrase – is to continuously support new and different voices – to act and activate our power(s) to create inclusive spaces for solidarity and multiple occupancies: it means a long-term promise to work towards cultural and structural change and social justice – towards a counter hegemonic ‘otherwise’, if you will.”<sup>3</sup>

Extending these contemplations to the idea of the curator, which by now feels almost limiting, I want to use the unique quality of the German language – constructing compound nouns. The ability to build new words from existing words and, by that, creating almost infinite new meanings. Here is an example and a personal favourite: *Gesamtkunstwerk*, something like: all-encompassing-art-work. Within the premise of inclusivity that this word speaks to, a lexicon is developing and, with that a multitude of practices arises. So many creative practitioners around the world are contributing to this lexicon, a lexicon that, by its very nature, has no originator, sharing an understanding by re-defining and questioning the status quo and defining different cultural (para) spaces into being.

3 ‘Curator Conversations, #15 Renée Mussai’, *1000 Words*, accessed 14 September 2022, <https://www.1000wordsmag.com/renee-mussai/>



## Conversation

In order to think beyond the abstract theory of this growing lexicon, to go beyond the psychology of my own work and apply these thoughts to artistic practice, I spoke with Cnaani about *Leaking Lands*, a video installation investigating the glitch, the residue, and the algorithmic reproduction of the museum's archive. As mentioned, Ofri and I have never met in real life, or Away From the Keyboard (AFK), a term which counterposes the notion of "digital dualism", that life online is less authentic than life offline.<sup>4</sup> And yet, we share time, space, and ideas through these flat surfaces that connect us despite the distance: talking about her practice, the idea of the archive, and the concept of *para* – navigating between the inside and outside.

### Nisha Merit (Nisha)

Let's start at the beginning, or rather, with the process. I am establishing definitions for myself, my work, and the methodologies that guide my engagements especially in conjunction with others. I follow the idea of *Care*, which emphasises process but also tries to establish an extended connotation of the curator, especially using *para* as one of its super powers. How do you define your practice?

### Ofri Cnaani (Ofri)

My practice is usually driven by a question. Never by a form, which is something I find rather confusing. My practice takes many forms. The initial question is often situated within a historical case or a quote, event, or a locale, but it's always driven by an inquiry. My practice is discursive and, as time goes by, it overlaps with my writing, where the more theoretical work and the practice are becoming similar in a way. I don't work so much towards a product; of course it might become a performance or a video, but I almost always work within clusters or constellations. The same set of inquiries can become a lecture performance or a series of photos, an article, or a video installation. It's really time-based in the deepest way; by that I mean, almost every project is also a culture for the next project. It's not packaged with a beginning and end.

<sup>4</sup> AFK or Away From Keyboard counterposes the notion of "digital dualism", that life online is less authentic than life offline, as described in Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso Books, 2020).

### Nisha

You are an artist and educator – how does one discipline influence the other? I am thinking of the prevailing knowledge system that tends to be limiting and self-serving. But also about how the idea of the institution and the idea of the archive are both contested and complex and yet instrumental for knowledge transfer. And yet, these are often simultaneously inaccessible and even sacred spaces?

### Ofri

In *The Parasite*, French philosopher Michel Serres describes how "every parasite that is a bit gifted, at the table of a somewhat sumptuous host, soon transforms the table into a theatre."<sup>5</sup> It's a good place to start and to think about the performative potential of what Serres calls 'the table', what we may also call 'the institution'.

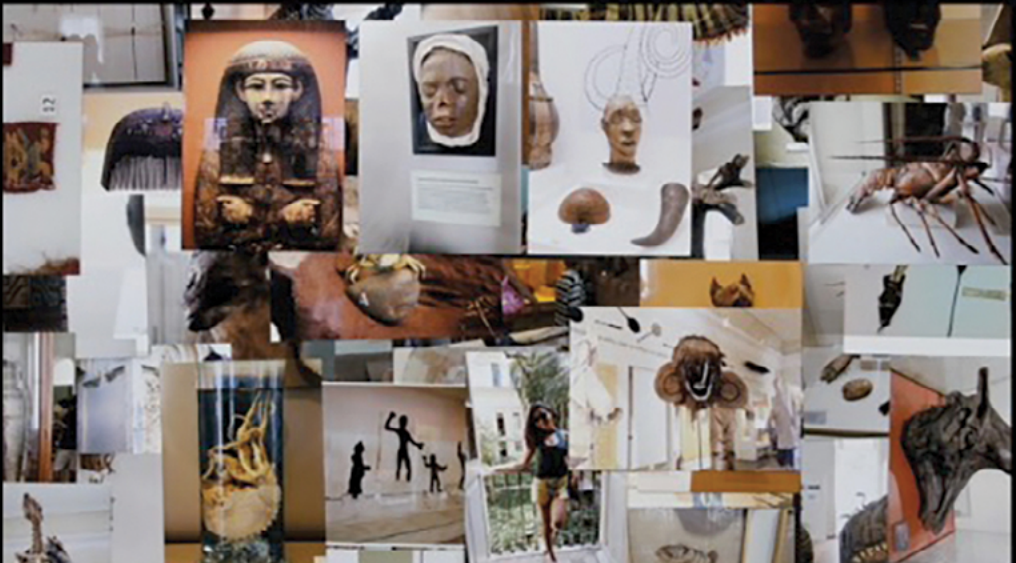
I sometimes say that the museum is my medium because, in the past ten years, most of my work looked at different conventions of the institution. The world of museum mediation and the space between objects and subjects is often traditionally unified. This space in-between, which is highly controlled and mediated, although it has shifted quite a bit within the digital world. I am interested in what happens there, who the experts are or how objects are being staged. In that respect, I am looking at the conventions of things like guided tours, information signage, IT networks, orientation maps, and other museum apparatuses that embody the institution's thinking, all methods that are largely accepted. And when I say 'museum is my medium', it's also about the question of how museum conventions of mediation can be used otherwise because all these performances you cannot look at, there's nothing to see, it is rather a staged conversation.

If the table is the institution, it turns it into theatre or a performative potential, but in a folded way. Many of my performances think about the *para* in that way of taking care of this fold between education and performance or art making. So the art is not turning into education but taking the art of mediation or the space of mediation, which is often approached as a pedagogical space, and radicalising it by revisiting it. To quote Andrea Fraser who was pursuing this kind of institutional critique back in 2005 already: "It is because the institution is inside of us, and we can't get outside of ourselves."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

<sup>6</sup> Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', *Artforum* 44, no. 1 (September 2005): 278.







## Nisha

*Leaking Lands* deals with the impermanence of the physical archive, using the case of the fire at the National Museum in Brazil in 2018. In the work, we see the museum's artefacts manifested in the digital, where pixels turn into the only evidence of what was lost – a cartography of moments in time and space so to speak. What was the process for you? Can you explain that transient space of the physical to the digital?

## Ofri

I entered this story – of the National Museum of Brazil burning down – remotely. I'm not from Brazil, and I was not working with this case from the perspective of either geographical or cultural proximity to Brazil. Instead, I was thinking about how, in recent years, quite a few museums and archives have been damaged or destroyed, similar to the fire at the Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town in 2021. In these cases, there is a very tangible way of thinking about the end of the archive or the end of the collection. But in this case, it's not simply a metaphor – the fire in Brazil is actually a meeting point between processes of privatisation and financialisation, often through hyper national leadership that uses the neglect of the museum as a device of governance, which is reflected in a systematic state of austerity. A second entry to this story was the fact that, in our current time, we are confronted with an oversaturation of images, and we often need to fight for the right to be digitally forgotten. And yet, in the case of the National Museum of Brazil, almost nothing survived in the digital realm. This brings to mind issues related to the inequality of media representation and algorithmic biases as a growing phenomena when it comes to collections of art and archives.

So when I started with this case, it was from my interest in Algorithmic and Media Studies, looking at what I call the residues – what survives. While the museum is interested in what survived in a very technical, literal way in terms of the physical objects, I look at the residues of this fire in an all-encompassing, but abstract, way to propose that what survived exists in matter, whether that matter is ash, heated steel, or meteorite. I propose that this exists through the flesh – burns, or lungs damaged by smoke and other bio forms – as well as through social orders, memories, oral histories, places of gathering, employee routines. And it also exists in the media and data that have been circulating as copies through the internet and other surviving metadata.

The museum can be thought about in terms of separating rights: you take an object away from its originating environment and reorient it under the order of the museum, which is centred around the index. But the residues are scattered; they're in the ultimate state of

incompleteness. They all remain unclaimed by the museum, because the museum is interested in what survived physically but not in their employee's lungs, which cannot be quantified and captured in the same way. But what survives are affordances, so the objects are removed, but the conditions remain. And these conditions are kind of dragged with the objects and exactly this movement of dragging, which is also a movement of the cursor, is the movement that comes from performance theory of the *drag* – the drag queens. This term originates from Shakespeare's plays where men played the women as well, performing in big fancy dresses and dragging them across the stage. So it is about the movement that also always picks up the dust through dragging.

Normally, the institution is the one that holds things together but, in this case, the conventions of the institution are no longer available: not the display, not the mediation, not the collections. The archive is very similar in that way; everything we know and need or love and hate about the archival, is no longer available. But what stays are all those conditions and affordances that have been dragged from the museum into another realm, which is the realm of the residues, which I believe, presents a different epistemological model of knowledge production, one that is more about alliances and kinship, one that is not human centric. It doesn't really have a beginning and end; it's really based on movement. So it's not a para-institution as an alternative to the institution, but it is *para*, because of its thinking with the conditions.

## Nisha

I am thinking about your practice which, as you say, is not working with the form as such but rather with the movement. The museum's objects are largely manifested in form, but now they have been translated into non-form. So you come in once they have lost their form and turned into information. That's why I think it's quite instrumental for the work that you didn't physically go to the site of the object residues but the digital site of information residues.

## Ofri

That was very clear to me because I work only with what survives digitally, which was basically only a virtual tour by Google. On the same night [of the fire], local students started a campaign through Wikimedia, asking people to upload any photos they took – selfies, photos of objects and the museum space, photos of their kids in the museum, etc. There is no institutional digital collection but, instead, we have this amazing relational, ghostly, and completely subjective user generated collection, a re-collection. Next to that, we have the most corporate remain, which is a virtual tour by Google Arts and Culture. So one can



actually visit the no-longer existing museum but, at the same time, it's a product by Google, with the same camera that documents your street, developed through military technology that was then adopted by Google. It sits on Google's Cloud somewhere else; it actually has nothing to do with Brazil or with the museum, but it's the main remnant. And then you have a set of rather limited 3D models that I worked with. So I decided very early on that *Leaking Lands* is all about those digital remains, turning them into sites of interventions. I also had many meetings with museum stakeholders from the director of the museum to the maintenance staff and educators, and I met them in virtual tours where I asked them to lead me in a conversational walkthrough, which is a very frustrating experience. But nevertheless, it was to habituate those impossible spaces and share them with others.

### Nisha

The performance by Brooklyn-based Uruguayan dance-maker luciana achugar that accompanies *Leaking Lands* as one of the three screen installations is very interesting; it brings to mind how the temporality and physicality of performance rests against the backdrop of the ashes of material history and the digital afterlife. Fire points to a certain urgency, that there is something to fix. Something is broken, and if the object is a hole, situated in a museum space, we think it's fine, but yet it often carries a lot of trauma. These kinds of intangible moments cannot easily be spoken about but may be powerfully performed. It also brings to mind the fragility of the singular entity, trusting something seemingly powerful and safe like a museum.

### Ofri

Taking performance away from its final form and instead conceiving of it as a way of engaging with the world and as a way of thinking led me to the presentation for this video work as a method of research. luciana achugar has developed a practice that she calls 'pleasure practice'. She both choreographs and teaches through this method where she calls on the participant to get into a body state of pre-knowing what things are, an infant place of things. And for that she considers the body from the inside, because she speaks about growing a new body, a utopian body, as a way of healing from the transgenerational trauma of colonialism. When the body is in a state of pleasure, not in a sexual sense but rather like a newborn, the body cannot be captured, because you cannot say what it is and, therefore, it cannot be used or abused.

In that way of thinking with performance, I asked luciana if she can channel her practice without a body, only via voice. Because when I work with the digital remains, there is no body; even the virtual tours with the museum staff are movements without a body. When objects

are scanned into 3D, they're always scanned from the outside but, through her instructions, I let my cursor or my digital movement travel inside those objects, and the images that are exposed are like caves, like inner spaces. These are not, and this is very important, not scanned spaces but speculative spaces, machine made spaces. luciana speaks about a state of healing from the trauma, and I wanted to take her feminist, embodied methodology where the subject of the body and the object and this critical space between them collapse. Those objects, you cannot look at them anymore, and they are not doing their job according to the museum apparatus; they cannot be used or put to work for a specific ideology; they melt into a space that is utopian, releasing them from their colonial past.

And fire is another level of trauma. In Brazil, indigenous activists spoke about how the loss of this museum is a second genocide, because the museum contained a huge archive and housed many documents and indigenous material culture. But the space after the fire also holds the possibility of thinking about an after the museum or after the archive. The many worlds or relations that are more based on kinship or a network of alliances between different entities that emerge and the residues that are in an active form protocols for relations. Thinking with the provocations offered by Ariella Azoulay in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*,<sup>7</sup> this is an invitation for us to try and think about the potential of other histories through the perspective of shared rights.

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<sup>7</sup> Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso Books, 2019).



## Conclusion

Conclusion is a big word. It tends to point towards a resolution or some sort of finite. And linguistically, it is, as one would hardly start with the conclusion. I do like to think of the possibility of a rhizomatic one, a conclusion that leads to the yet unwritten chapter and, thus, is rather a temporary placeholder for the potential to come.

That said, looking back at the pages, three things are specifically poignant – *definition comes through process, the periphery is a moving utopia*, and *the digital is real*. Language is a difficult tool, and defining something also means setting boundaries. It is, as Homi K. Bhaba writes: “To exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness, its look or locus. It is a demand that reaches outward to an external object and as Jacqueline Rose writes, ‘It is the relation of this demand to the place of the object it claims that becomes the basis for identification.’”<sup>8</sup> As much as I agree with Bhabha and Rose, I also wonder what happens if the definition is not a static binary but a development as the one formed from the limitations of Male & Female into the spectrum of LGBTIQ+, if the *one* and the *other* keep moving and, thus, are consciously and actively redefining as we go along? Would that not translate into an inclusive act of morphing and adapting like a non-human but a microbial culture way of a soft surface boundary?

The introduced concept of the ‘para’ or the periphery as a moving utopia looks at the independent curation that often happens in the in-between spaces or the temporary spaces that we carve out. They are incredibly fluid and defy a linear definition. These spaces are the ones that are magical and playful yet largely underrated because they tend not to fit into an institutional way of measuring and approval. To find a method of sustaining these spaces without absorbing them into the centre would be a dream come true, and yet it seems to stay an oxymoron.

And lastly, the digital being real; yes, I do believe in the autonomy of the digital as the potential sustainable in-between space, and I am currently investigating how it might work and how we can connect the tangible and the pixels through art. The rise of Augmented Reality (AR) in art seems to be a good start, with South African artists like Magolide Collective and Aluta Null who concern themselves with the performative nature between the digital and the physical. It is an exciting space of which Ofri Cnaani’s *Leaking Lands* is a precursor and a phantastic example between material culture and the world of the digital and, in her words, *Leaking Lands* “is an invitation for us to try and think about the potential of other histories through the perspective of shared rights.”

8 Homi K. Bhaba, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 44.



# Something in the Way of Things

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

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Bongani Kona

*“If two parallel lines do not meet it is not because they cannot but because they have other things to do.” – Vladimir Nabokov*

He wrote:

Yesterday, I met a dead man on the side of the road. Walking northeast along Keizersgracht Street at daybreak, I came across a small gathering. Men and women of indeterminate age, who’d spent countless winters on the street. They stood at an equal distance from each other, in a half moon, their belongings piled onto the grass by the side of the road. I circled the perimeter of the gathering, edging back and forth, until I noticed the dead man. His bare feet poking out from under the blue tarpaulin.

I looked up. Took in the scene in its entirety. A man in a long black coat and a hi-vis jacket worn like a waistcoat, stood straight-backed, holding a bible in his outstretched hands. I couldn’t make out what he was saying (because of the wind) but his companions listened intently. Their concentration unbroken even when the foghorn sounded from the lighthouse down below.

People die differently here, my friend L\_. used to say. It’s as if they were never people at all.

He wrote me:

Dear S\_.  
A poet from this strange place I’ve come to call my adopted home tells this story. It is 1958, and her mother is the first in her family to go to university on the hill. ‘At one point during the lectures at medical school,’ she writes:

black students had to pack their notes, get up and walk  
past the ascending rows of desks of the theatre  
Behind the closed door, in an autopsy  
black students were not meant to see,  
the uncovering and cutting of white skin.

Under the knife, the skin,  
the mystery of sameness.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gabeba Baderoon, ‘I Forget to Look’, in *The Heat of Shadows: South African Poetry 1996 – 2013*, by Denis Hirson, (Makhanda: Deep South Press, 2014) 174.



He wrote:

This winter, my mother, a retired schoolteacher, had a bad fall while waiting in the checkout line at the supermarket. She lives alone in a small flat in Newlands, and while she was being attended to in hospital, I moved into my old room. I hardly slept during that fortnight, and I was down to my last skin as the old saying goes. But one morning I decided to go for a run. Exiting the gate, at 5.30 am, a jogger rounded the corner into Benson Street and drew to a halt. To go on with the rest of the story, I must mention that she was white. In her early forties, maybe. Our eyes met, and her whole body seemed to tremble with fear. I raised my hands and turned away from her, slowly, taking care not to look in her direction.

He wrote me:

After nearly twenty years here S\_, the thing I'm most interested in now is personhood. The novelist Madeleine Thien says that "so many people in our society are denied the privilege, the well-being, the grace of personhood. That quality of human dignity that we give to each other."<sup>1</sup> This is why when I think of Cape Town, I don't think of the Indian or the Atlantic Oceans, or Table Mountain. I think of borders, boundaries. Dividing lines which mark territory. And I think of personhood, and the "harder, more devastating question," as Madeleine Thien says, "of who here is allowed to be a person."<sup>2</sup>

He wrote:

Seven years ago, I was unemployed for three months and in that short spell I became invisible. I stopped being a person in the eyes of others. It wasn't a sudden metamorphosis, it happened gradually. I spent mornings at an Internet café on Long Market Street which billed its clients R5 by the hour. It was run a by an elderly Chinese man and his son. Both men spoke very little English and neither did much of the clientele, and occasionally, voices would flare up in anger as they sometimes do when people misunderstand each other. But it was still worth it. An affordable Internet connection can be the difference between finding a job and remaining unemployed. The men and women I encountered could barely use a computer, but the same mixture of hope and desperation coursed through our veins every time we sat down in front of the computer and the machine hummed to life.

1 Madeleine Thien, 'The Closing Down of Personhood', Walrus Talks 2014. Recording available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbrSA8jDOIE>

2 Madeleine Thien, 'The Closing Down of Personhood', Walrus Talks 2014. Recording available on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JbrSA8jDOIE>

As my appearance took on the character of my hardships, I had the feeling that no one outside the Internet café could see me. This was devastating for me. Here I was, a graduate from that prestigious university on the hill, that ivory tower, so used to 'the privilege, the well-being, the grace of personhood' that being associated with the institution and its hallowed halls afforded. From being part of a select minority with degrees – 6% of the population – I now felt like a blind spot. It was only after that experience that I understood how easily we become habituated at ways of not seeing here. Walk through the city centre at any time, day or night, and you're likely to be greeted by dozens of outstretched hands asking for change. And often, I find myself quickening my stride and looking straight ahead. Refusing eye contact with the stranger in front of me.

He wrote me:

Dear S\_.  
Recently, a court case I had been following for a documentary project came to an end. It was mid-morning and I stood by the concrete steps of the Western Cape High Court, looking on, as three men squeezed into the back of a white Toyota Corolla with a cracked taillight. A state prosecutor, a man with thin grey hair, stood at the base of the steps, his black gown rippling in the breeze. When the car rounded the bend, into Leeuwen Street, I overheard someone behind me say to her companion "I told her, she should just get a black woman to clean the house." I was taken aback, but I was refused to be drawn into the conversation. I walked away. Stepping into the day's heat.

Some of this – speaking of another as if they were property – has got to do with distance. Geographical distance which translates to social distance. The question of who here is allowed to be a person is inextricably linked to architecture and city planning. The apartheid state marshalled all its might to displace black people from the city and a totemic example of this here in Cape Town is District Six. The inner-city neighbourhood was declared a 'white area' in 1966 and flattened by bulldozers. Similar displacements took place in dozens of other neighbourhoods across the city. "My mother's family used to live in Claremont in a narrow house just behind what is now the curved glass and brick Cavendish Mall," Gabeba Baderoon writes. "I'd heard stories of their impossible neighbourhood, with its mixing of religions, occupations, and colours and the glacial social distance between Upper and Lower Claremont, below the railway line."<sup>3</sup>

3 Gabeba Baderoon, 'High Traffic', *Chimurenga 07: Kaapstad! And Josi the Night Moses Died* (July 2005), 2.



The neighbourhood was declared white in 1968 and its residents banished to the outskirts of the city. “I was born a year later, so I knew the Square as a white mall where eventually we would go to watch movies,” Gabeba says, “but sometimes when she picked us up at Cavendish Mall, I have seen my mother cry quietly in the parking lot.”<sup>1</sup>

He wrote:

There are neighbourhoods in this city that are 90% white (according to census data). And if you live in one of these neighbourhoods, every morning at first light, you’re likely to see the same scene. Black men and women – but mostly women – walking up the hill in twos and threes in the direction of someone’s home. Where for the day they will look after the children, wash the laundry, polish the floors, tend the garden. And then at 5 pm, you see the same mass heading down towards the train station.

He wrote me:

Dear S\_.

During the fortnight that my mother was in hospital, I went to both the afternoon visit, 3 – 4 pm, and lingered in the corridors and in the cafeteria until the evening visiting hours, 7-8 pm. I met so many people in those two weeks, whose names now I can’t recall. But perhaps our names really didn’t matter. Everything was on the surface, collected on the faces of strangers. By the simplest of gestures – a quick sideways glance, say, or the gentle brush of hands as you crossed each other in the corridors – you could be drawn into a world of sadness, worry, despair. What I’m trying to say is that we knew the weight of each other’s stories and because of that we held each other with kindness. We understood that ‘under the knife/the skin’ there lay the ‘mystery of sameness.’

He wrote me:

Not long after my mother had been discharged, I took a train to Muizenberg beach one Sunday. Once there, I stood alone with my feet in the water, looking out at the wide, wide sea. When three children suddenly appeared by my side. Uncle, one of them said, why don’t you go into the water? And just like that we are holding hands. The girl on my right and the two boys on my left. I pull them deeper into the water and they double back, laughing and screaming. We hold hands and again I pull them into the water and they double back, laughing and screaming. Uncle! They shout. Giggling irrepressibly. We edge closer to each

1 Gabeba Baderoon, ‘High Traffic’, *Chimurenga 07: Kaapstad! And Jozi the Night Moses Died* (July 2005), 2.

other again, our fingers entwined, the water lapping at our feet. I am aware that I am both held and holding onto something. That if only for this moment, we are more than strangers.

*Author’s Note:*

This essay is adapted from an earlier text produced for radio and its use of the epistolary form borrows from Chris Marker’s 1983 film, *Sans Soleil (Sunless)*. Marker’s film, to oversimplify things, is a meditation on memory but what struck me the most are the digressions in the narrative and how they enable meaning to be arrived at associatively. I found this non-linearity quite useful instead of the usual gambit – to quote from the preface of Lewis Hyde’s book, *A Primer for Forgetting: Getting Past the Past* – “of inventing transitions to mask the native jumpiness of my mind.”<sup>2</sup>

2 Lewis Hyde, *A Primer of Forgetting: Getting Past the Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019), 4.



# The Burning is the Mourning: Queer Fire as Affective Labour in ‘The Fire This Time’ by Qondiswa James (2022)

Lost Libraries,  
Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

*Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja* is a cultural worker, educator, and writer based in Windhoek, Namibia. His practice-research interests in performance, archives, and public culture. He completed his PhD in Performance Studies at the University of Cape Town. Mushaandja’s work has been performed widely at festivals, museums, theatres, and archives in Senegal, India, Germany, Switzerland, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Cameroon, and Namibia. He is also engaged in curatorial and research leadership in his work as a partner at Owela Live Arts Collective, a non-profit and autonomous cooperative of cultural workers forging practices in live art, artistic research, and applied arts.

Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja

On 6 February 2022, just before I went to bed, I was scrolling through Instagram and chanced upon an Instagram post from theatre maker and performance artist Qondiswa James about a performance intervention titled *The Fire This Time*. The caption read:

“An intervention at UCT tomorrow 7th Feb from 6AM with @sungakonji for @uct\_woac. A haunting shadow in mourning, to remember how much more there is still left to do.”

Intrigued, I decided to see the work but was dismayed the next morning when I overslept, thinking that I had missed it. Little did I know that this was to be a durational performance? so imagine my delight when I encountered James later that morning on the stairs of the Sarah Baartman precinct of the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) upper campus.

As both an artist and a scholar of performance studies, I have had an interest in James’ live art practice since I met her in 2018 when I began my PhD at UCT’s Centre for Theatre, Dance ,and Performance Studies. In her work, James explores the potential of live art to aesthetically examine and express pain – one example of this is her durational performance, *Jailbed* (2019) performed at Infecting the City, a public arts festival that takes place in the City of Cape Town. James’ live art practice is part of a rich genealogy of performance in South Africa. Jay Pather and Catherine Boulle argue that this live art tradition is characterised by notions of transgression, risk, endurance, and extremity. They write:

“In South Africa, live art is born of extremity. Its syncretic form has evolved in response to rapidly changing social climates, colonial imposition, cultural fragmentation and political upheaval; its affective tenor of excess and irrationality embodies the unpredictability of crisis. It proffers a new language that resists the narratives of certainty and linearity through which a neocolonial agenda has been perpetuated (even if sometimes inadvertently) in this country, reflecting – without seeking to resolve – the inscrutability and urgency of states of socio-political flux.”<sup>2</sup>

1 Qondiswa James (@blqgrl.radikl), ‘The Fire this Time’, Instagram, 6 February 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZpqf73Kf9C/>  
2 Jay Pather and Catherine Boulle, eds., *Acts of Transgression: Contemporary Live Art in South Africa* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2019), 2, <https://doi.org/10.18772/22019022798>





Qondiswa James stands still and Tapiwa Guzha walks around the pedestal at the stairs of the Sarah Baartman precinct.



In this essay, I reflect on how James' performance, *The Fire This Time*, invites inquiry into the themes set forth by Pather and Boule. The piece was one of four live artworks commissioned by the Works of Art Committee (WOAC) at UCT to be added to the university's art collection.

James' performance was a collaboration with sex educator and rope tying generalist Tapiwa Guzha. The ritualised performance encouraged viewers to think about the enduring labour of colonised bodies, the regenerative opportunities of queer fire, and the work of mourning. I think of queer fire as an expression that moves queer bodies to make themselves and their labour visible. Queer fire is the epistemic dimensions of affective labour which refuse to remain underground and on the margins of dominant cultural hegemony.

The site-specificity of James' performance is one way in which this queer fire manifests, considering that it travelled to multiple sites in Cape Town. It maps a journey from "Rhodes Memorial via the Constantia gate, Upper Campus Southern Pedestrian Entrance and Library Road to Sarah Baartman Hall, across Jameson Plaza, across Residence Road to the Cecil John Rhodes plinth on Madiba Circle."<sup>3</sup> The programme of commissioned live art works (including works by Grant Jurius, Lukhanyiso Skosana, Lesiba Mabitsela and Lorin Sookool) was conceived by the writer-researcher and curator Pamella Dlungwana. Artist and Professor of Art History at UCT, Nomusa Makhubu, describes *The Fire This Time* as "a set of provocations", elaborating further:

"*The Fire This Time* invites us to think anew, to feel, to see, and to hear the affective resonance of the Sarah Baartman precinct at UCT. This [...] is a prompt towards placemaking and being responsive to the affective resonance and shared experiences in the precinct."<sup>4</sup>

She looks more closely at the significance of the location where I serendipitously encountered James' work:

<sup>3</sup> Nomusa Makhubu, 'The Fire This Time', The UCT Works of Art Collection, accessed 20 January 2022, <http://www.artcollection.uct.ac.za/Art/the-Fire-This-Time>

<sup>4</sup> Makhubu, 'The Fire This Time'.



Qondiswa James stands at the Cecil John Rhodes memorial where her performance begins.  
Photograph: Lerato Maduna.

"The Sarah Baartman precinct is potentially the heart and soul of the University of Cape Town (UCT) campus. It is a site where many narratives, many paths, converge and intersect. The often hidden histories and events at the precinct have had a far-reaching impact on how the site is experienced today: the 'Mafeje Affair' protest that took place on the 7th of August in 1968, where students demonstrated against the discriminatory rescission of Archie Mafeje's appointment at UCT, protests leading to the momentous removal of the Cecil John Rhodes statue, the 2016 Shackville protests in response to student housing, and the debates facilitated by WOAC regarding the Sarah Baartman sculpture by the artist Willie Bester which had been installed in the library. Within this vicinity, the Jagger Library, 'home to the African Studies collection,' was ravaged by fire in 2021. It is also in this precinct that the pursuit of knowledge is officially symbolised by the conferral of degrees."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Makhubu, 'The Fire This Time'.





Qondiswa James sitting on the road that leads to the Rhodes Memorial.

## *Holding While Waiting*

The title *The Fire This Time* (2022) alludes to James Baldwin's seminal text *The Fire Next Time* (1963). The non-fiction book includes two essays in which Baldwin gives testimonial evidence about how race and religion affected the lives of Black Americans. First published in 1963, it was a crucial and influential text of Black intellectual work for the emerging Civil Rights Movement. In a 'same same but different' sense, *The Fire This Time* at UCT "reflects on sparks in the university's ongoing aspiration for transformation."<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Makhubu, 'The Fire This Time'.

Specifically, James' performance is a ritual that reflects on the fire at UCT in April 2021 to think about the generations of affective labour of Abantu.<sup>7</sup> *The Fire This Time* reminds us that as artists, cultural workers, student activists, feminist, queers, we are always in processes of putting fires out if not making the fires. James' theorising-in-practice during this performance shows us ways of *visibilising*, making visible, the long-invisible work that has been and continues to be done. The labour of the colonised bodies that built UCT, the work of mourning, cleaning, cleansing, and the cultural work of making homes in the City of Cape Town, the work that we have yet to do as a collective. *The Fire This Time* points us to the historically invisible work that continues to haunt the city.

*The Fire This Time* adds to a series of about 12 other live artworks performed since 2021 in different sites of Cape Town, where James explored how the public imagines the work that South Africa needs to do to get to where it has to be. Most of these public artworks were performed in places such as Philippi and Sea Point, spaces that she might have chosen because they exemplify the wildly different race and class relations of the city. The performance-series formed part of her MA Performance-as-Research in interdisciplinary live art at the University of Cape Town.

Upon arriving to the campus to find the performance still taking place, I saw that the artist wearing a black dress with a veil draped over her head, standing still on the pedestal that once held the Cecil John Rhodes statue. The dress had a long train that covered several metres on the stairs. The co-performer, Guzha, also wore a see-through black veil that flowed over a black lace top and a black tutu. At times, they both stood still. In other instances, Guzha whistled as he tied James to the pedestal, where she would eventually remain for hours. Guzha carried a huge stack of extra-long ropes, engaged in what appeared to be a deeply meditative yet laborious task of holding James. They held each other. In this performance, the black costumes were more than racial markers. We witnessed an embodiment of grief, pain, struggle, and deep tensions of both the past and the present. For both performers, the intense rope work was an act of *visibilising* the continued bondage of the Black and gender non-conforming bodies in post-apartheid South Africa.

I was surprised to see Guzha engaged in an artistic intervention like this. I was more familiar with his work as a sex educator and as the founder of the organic ice-cream store, Tapi Tapi, where he makes ice cream that he terms "an African indulgence".<sup>8</sup> Guzha also holds a PhD

<sup>7</sup> Abantu (or 'Bantu' as it was used by colonists) is the Nguni word for *people*. It is the plural of the word 'umuntu', meaning 'person' and is based on the stem '—ntu' plus the plural prefix 'aba'.

<sup>8</sup> Nobhongo Gxolo, 'A big scoop for African indulgence', *The Mail and Guardian*, 4 January 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-01-04-00-a-big-scoop-for-african-indulgence/>



in molecular biology. It was therefore especially fascinating to see him do rope work, outside his usual work of sensuality, sexuality, and the erotic. And yet, there are many connections to be made from his collaboration with James.

My initial thought upon seeing the performance was that I would be watching a Black man tying up a Black woman by means of demonstrating the obvious: everyday patriarchal violence. However, I soon realised that this was not about representation, but rather an invitation for the audience to *feel* and *see* a different type of work. The audience included students, cleaning staff, security staff, academic staff, and the production team. There were several conversations happening around me as we all witnessed the work together. For example, student guides unpacked the artwork to a group of first year students while conducting orientation week tours. UCT support staff recognised and linked *The Fire This Time* to structural issues at the university. I was struck by how the work invited those around me to engage in difficult conversations that are not always publicly comfortable. The performance, thus, became an intervention that enabled critical engagement about UCT's colonial history and the resistance thereof.

In my own reflection on James, Guzha, and their collaborative performance, I interpreted the rope work as a gesture to bondage that simultaneously suggested an embodied process of releasing the body from all that it is burdened with. Rope work in *The Fire This Time* appeared as an act of dealing with shared baggage – somehow, a way of *bonding*. Witnessing this slow and long-lasting performance at the UCT campus, I established that the work was raising a question of being bound in public. To me, the prominence of time and duration as a theme in the performance also evoked the notion of waiting: waiting to heal, waiting to be addressed. James waited in silence as Guzha did the tying and untying. We too are in a constant state of waiting. Waiting for justice. Waiting interrupted. Here, we are reminded of how the oppressed have been waiting for freedom that has been promised and remains continuously delayed.

## *Ghosts and Hosts*

*The Fire This Time* is a refusal to wait for a redress of colonial continuities and legacies that are haunting southern Africa. In this vein, the performance is an evocation of both bad and good ghosts while, at the same time, it is itself a ghost.

Hauntings, ghosts, and the unfinished business of grappling with the past are increasingly becoming visible in African live art. One example is *The Mourning Citizen* (2019), co-curated by



Guzha and James to the pedestal.



Trixie Munyama and myself. *The Mourning Citizen* is a ritualised site-related work performed at Alte Feste, a Windhoek-based historic fort that was used as a German colonial military centre and concentration camp during the 1904-1908 genocide of the Nama, Ovaherero, San, and Damara people. In this work, we reflect on what it means to mourn collectively in post-apartheid Namibia:

“We find our acts, rituals and archives of mourning in our cultures, communities and far between spaces of healing and traumatising, cleansing and erasure, care and violence, praying and cursing, weeping and whipping.”<sup>9</sup>

Both *The Mourning Citizen* and *The Fire This Time* haunt the sites in which they are performed and address the ghosts haunting these sites. My approach to thinking through this hauntedness is informed by the theories of performance studies scholars Cathy Turner (2004) and Nick Kaye (2000), who conceptualise site-specific performance through the notions of host (place/spaces) and ghost (event).<sup>10</sup> The ghost is transparent, allowing us to see both the visible and hidden sides of the host. This host-ghost relationship is defined by the hauntedness in which the performance haunts the place. Investigating site-specific performance practices, Turner argues that “one can identify vocabularies both of fragmentation (fracture, layering, gaps, incompleteness, absence) and of merging (relationship, dialogue, the past-in-the-present, presence).”<sup>11</sup> These vocabularies of fragmentations and merging are visible in the acts, rituals, and archives that *The Fire This Time* references.

It is in this landscape of contradictions that *The Fire This Time* asked us to pay attention to the shadow of Rhodes haunting the site, landscape, and social environment in which it is performed. The work evokes the wandering spirits, the haunting nature of the university’s colonial baggage, and its implication in white supremacy and neo-liberal capitalism. While scholars of African Studies might be mourning a burnt archive, James insists that the “burning is the mourning.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the university must burn. Through this assertion, *The Fire This Time* demands the right and time to mourn properly, because mourning in our post-apartheid societies has always been interrupted. As proof, we can refer to the long

9 Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja quoted by Martha Mukaiwa, “The Mourning Citizen” Seizes The Night, *The Namibian*, 29 March 2019, <https://www.namibian.com.na/187102/archive-read/The-Mourning-Citizen-Seizes-The-Night>.  
10 Cathy Turner, ‘Palimpsest or Potential Space? Finding a Vocabulary for Site-Specific Performance’, *New Theatre Quarterly* 20, no. 4 (November 2004): 373–90; Nick Kaye, *Site-Specific Art: Performance, Place, and Documentation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).  
11 Turner, ‘Palimpsest or Potential Space?’, 389.  
12 Qondiswa James, pers. comm., 24 June 2022.

unfinished business of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Marikana Massacre, the Fees Must Fall and Rhodes Must Fall movements, not to mention the devastation of the Coronavirus pandemic during which the fire at UCT occurred. James challenges us to reimagine not just the fire, but to think beyond it:

“What if the fire came from the underground and what it burnt meant to burn? What if there is a group of radicals that is going around the country and burning universities and parliaments? What if it is the Black ancestors saying that we do not want to be here anymore?”<sup>13</sup>

*The Fire This Time* has the courage to simultaneously point us to radical compassion and address our failures. It wants us to work through our national failures, to think about histories of failure. The rope work, the artist standing still dressed in black, the breath and the silence as a response to the UCT fire in *The Fire This Time* demonstrates that, in site-related work, there is always a symbiotic relationship between the place and the event. In the case of this particular work, this relationship is characterised by the national failure to recognise the affective labour of Abantu.

The mourning figure that James performs in *The Fire This Time* re-appears a few days later on 10 February 2022, this time on Darling Street in Cape Town’s inner-city. James was standing on a wooden chair while weeping and moving with the wind.<sup>14</sup> Here, James was making an intervention ahead of the State of the Nation Address that President Cyril Ramaphosa was about to deliver. She was forcibly removed by police during the act of performing.<sup>15</sup> This was not the first time that her artistic and activist work has come into contact with police. In 2017, James and Nsovo Shandlale staged a nude protest, placing their bare bodies in the middle of the road. Both were removed by authorities and thrown into a police van. This protest action was a continuity of the 2015 Fallist protests that took place across South African universities – James was one of the many student activists who were involved in organising the movements at UCT.

13 Qondiswa James, pers. comm., 24 June 2022.  
14 Karabo Mafolo, ‘State of Her Art: Meet the Artist and Activist behind the Hooded Figure Haunting the Streets of Cape Town’, *Daily Maverick*, 22 February 2022, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-02-22-state-of-her-art-meet-the-artist-and-activist-behind-the-hooded-figure-haunting-the-streets-of-cape-town/>  
15 *Qondiswa James Explains Her Solo Performance Outside the City Hall Ahead of Ramaphosa’s #SONA22*, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QztSVXSFF0>.





*The haunting figure* performed by Qondiswa.  
The Sarah Baartman precinct also has a wide view of City of Cape Town.



Since then, she has, however, become suspicious of the intentions of the greater decolonial project and is averse to labelling her work as such, citing dismay at how this project has been co-opted. She is disheartened by the obvious lack of intergenerational dialogue between the current student activists and the FMF/RMF generation. “We have muted ourselves by not passing down the baton”, James says, maintaining that this is a continued failure in the struggle for liberation in southern Africa.<sup>16</sup>

Queer fire is queer time. In this essay, I have grappled with how *The Fire This Time* embodies queer fire as a form of affective labour. This adds to my reading of the critical usefulness of fire and how it can be understood as a generative aspect of public culture.<sup>17</sup> Through its generative potential, fire is applied in ecological, spiritual, and revolutionary moments which are often facilitated through cultural production.<sup>18</sup> Queer fire is one of these useful uses. The work of James, in collaboration with Guzha at the Sarah Baartman precinct at UCT, was about “confronting the people choosing not to see the work that is being done by women, Africans, and the queer”.<sup>19</sup> James’ *The Fire This Time*, reveals itself to be teaching us to attend to the “simmering ancestral wound”, calling in the emotional, the political, and the spiritual.<sup>20</sup>

16 Qondiswa James, pers. comm., 24 June 2022.  
17 Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, ‘There Is Fire on the Mountain: An Eco-Speculative Dream’, September 2022, <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1786OCKWgAONFkeoLINEGmltAC-QKJ1wp/view>  
18 Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja, ‘Black Boxes and White Cubes as Concentration Camps: Concerning Institutional Violence and Intergenerational Trauma’, in *Echoes of a Place*, ed. Jorge Munguía (Mexico City: Buró—Buró, 2020), 149-163.  
19 Qondiswa James, pers. comm., 24 June 2022.  
20 Qondiswa James, pers. comm., 24 June 2022.



Tapiwa Guzha begins to tie Qondiswa James.



# Acts of Language, Acts of Image

## Lost Libraries, Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

**Danielle Bowler** is a writer, editor and musician based in Johannesburg. With bylines in multiple publications including *Dazed*, *Wanted Magazine*, *Imbiza Journal of African Writing*, *New Frame*, *Africa is a Country*, and *Moya*, her work focuses on reading, understanding, and theorising art and culture through a Black feminist lens. Danielle is a PhD fellow and researcher at The Centre for Race, Gender, and Class at the University of Johannesburg and an associate of the SARChI Chair in African Feminist Imagination.

# Lost Libraries, Burnt Archives

Date: February 2023

**Lady Skollie** is the moniker of artist Laura Windvogel (b. 1987, Cape Town, South Africa), 'skollie' being a derogatory term used to describe a 'hooligan' or 'petty criminal' in the Afrikaans language. The oxymoron is significant, as Lady Skollie's provocative use of stereotypes demand her audience engage with this duality. Working primarily on paper, Lady Skollie combines her training in printmaking with her signature use of wax crayon and ink. Her practice is immediate in its mark-making and rich in colour and detail. Using symbols and imagery from Khoi San oral history and ancient rock paintings, Lady Skollie speaks about the history of her community and their status as a marginalised segment of South African society, reflecting global issues around ethnic minorities both historically and today. Lady Skollie also addresses the "politics of lust" through questioning both existing and imaginary power structures. In 2020, Lady Skollie was announced as the 10th recipient of the esteemed FNB Art Prize and, in 2022, she won the prestigious Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art.

Danielle Bowler

With hard hats on and torches in hand, we wander through what remains of the Jagger Library's Reading Room, seeking to illuminate shadows. Now a labyrinth, boarded up, beams exposed and unstable in parts, recognition has been made an act of language: we hear what has been – “there was a cabinet holding maps here”, “a film archive there”, “water reached this height” and other signposts – as we traverse the weighted darkness. Journeying up staircases, down into the basement and around corners, we map the site of the disaster at the University of Cape Town, now made to imagine what had once been tangible.

In another act of language, as a group of writers, scholars, photographers, poets, and artists gathered to create this volume, we speak through our diverse and intersecting responses to the fire that took place on the 18th April 2021. It is now a year later, and we are attempting to find words for a vast set of feelings and ideas that arise, coalescing around the expansive question: how do you quantify loss? In doing so, we invoke its philosophical echo, too: what is it, precisely, that has been lost?

Our questions call for more than cataloguing: looking for and at the spaces in-between and reaching beyond an inventory. And as we talk, they become a reflective surface: we are speaking of this country and continent, of its histories, of institutions and, ultimately, of ourselves too. African Studies. For how do we even begin to make sense of the loss of part of a collection that includes “printed and audio-visual material on African studies and a wide array of other specialised subjects”; “more than 1 300 sub-collections of unique manuscripts and personal papers”; books and pamphlets [exceeding] “85 000 items on African studies alone”; and over 3 000 [African] films?<sup>1</sup>

Art, it often feels, offers what language cannot: a synthesis, reflection, and distillation of what is too vast, too difficult or complex to express in a single work. Or perhaps, it simply provides a place to begin – an opening, a gesture. As our words filled the room, ricocheted and riffed on each other, themes of knowledge, creativity, pain, identity, trauma, access, loss, history, recovery, and violence filled the space between question and answer. And among us was an artist whose body of work has consistently navigated these thematic pathways, often through fluid references to fire: Lady Skollie.

1 Niemah Davids, 'Devastation as historical UCT buildings gutted by runaway fire', *University of Cape Town*, 19 April 2021, <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2021-04-19-devastation-as-historic-uct-buildings-gutted-by-runaway-fire>



An alumna of Michaelis School of Fine Art at the University of Cape Town, Laura Windvogel – who works under the moniker Lady Skollie – has crafted a practice that deftly works with subversion, humour, bright and compelling colour palettes, and pointed captions to confront contemporary realities head-on – aiming her arrow dead-centre with uncompromising critique.

“Fire has always been part of my practice”, she explains as we discuss her contribution to this volume over a Zoom call.<sup>2</sup> In the artist’s considerations of gendered violence, coloured identity and culture, enduring legacies of colonialism, slavery and apartheid, and more, her paintings and lithographs speak of fire in multiplicity, often as metaphor and symbol. At her hand, it becomes a source of rebirth, togetherness, catharsis, retaliation, and ritual to speak to the present, as she grounds her use of fire in storytelling, mythology, spirituality, religion, and indigenous traditions – particularly of the Khoi and San peoples.

*Fire with Fire* – Lady Skollie’s solo show with Tyburn Gallery at FNB Joburg Art Fair in 2017 – was a reference, direct challenge, and response to the idea that “you can’t fight fire with fire”. The work within it speaks to “catharsis, revenge, violence and being a woman in South Africa”.<sup>3</sup> One of the paintings from that exhibition appears here: *JUMP: Escape from the Burning Tower* (2017). On Instagram, the artist states that the painting “depicts a woman jumping out of the top of a burning tower pursued by men.”<sup>4</sup> Her post further sets forth:

“She throws herself into the consuming fire instead of getting caught by the throng of men behind her. In SA we are made to sacrifice ourselves, over and over choosing the fire just before getting caught.”<sup>5</sup>

In *Good & Evil*, her 2020 show at Circa Gallery in Johannesburg, another work, *Burning Bush, Shield Your Eyes, The Truth is Ugly and Bright* (2020), draws on the Bible, referencing God appearing to Moses as a burning bush and instructing him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and to a land of “milk and honey”. The painting is its own revelation alight, speaking to our slave histories and the foundational realities of sexual violence in South Africa – as Pumla

<sup>2</sup> Laura Windvogel, pers. comm., 28 September 2022.

<sup>3</sup> Lady Skollie (@ladyskollie), ‘In 2017 I opened a show titled FIRE WITH FIRE’, Instagram, 5 September 2019, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B2CnSnplLBi/>

<sup>4</sup> Lady Skollie (@ladyskollie), ‘In 2017 I opened a show titled FIRE WITH FIRE’.

<sup>5</sup> Lady Skollie (@ladyskollie), ‘In 2017 I opened a show titled FIRE WITH FIRE’.



Artwork: *Sunrises Sunsets* (2022)



Dineo Gqola's work shows – as its figures turn away from the truth before them.<sup>6</sup> As the artist said in a walkabout of the show, cited by Zaza Hlaethwa, “I want this show to be a burning bush to you all.”<sup>7</sup> This is the heart of what her work aims for: to reveal and speak to contemporary South African realities by researching and thinking through what has come to be accepted as ‘History’ and ‘The Archive’, indigenous traditions lost and echoes, and considering how identity is made and shaped.

*Flaming Mountain* (2018), one of the works that appears in this publication, “sees fire more as a centre”, she tells me, observing that this is made visible:<sup>8</sup>

“even [in] the way those people rally together, you know, to restore and to work together to recuperate everything and get everything out [...] fire's been a thing that draws people together.”<sup>9</sup>

The painting's reference to indigenous traditions and rituals also radiates a sense of hope, as its figures, in the heart of a blaze, gaze into the starry night sky. The work most directly speaks to the fire that “raged across the slopes of Table Mountain” and the collective salvaging efforts of library staff and over 2 000 volunteers, removing material in thousands of crates.<sup>10</sup>

6 See, for example, Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (Johannesburg: MF Books, 2015); Pumla Dineo Gqola, *Female Fear Factory: Unravelling Patriarchy's Cultures of Violence* (Abuja: Cassava Republic, 2022).

7 Lady Skollie quotes by Zaza Hlaethwa, ‘Lady Skollie: A pussy power prophet delivers us from Good and Evil’, Mail & Guardian, 17 June 2019, <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-06-17-00-pussy-power-prophet-delivers-us-from-good-and-evil/>

8 Laura Windvogel, pers. comm., 28 September 2022.

9 Laura Windvogel, pers. comm., 28 September 2022.

10 ‘Jagger Library Fire: A Timeline of Developments’, *Ibali Digital Collections UCT*, accessed 5 October 2022, <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/jagger/page/timeline>



*JUMP: Escape from the Burning Tower* (2017)

Walking into the Michaelis Gallery at Hiddingh Campus, a tiny fraction of these charred materials appears in green crates gathered in the centre of the room. Large-scale images of volunteers at the library point to their provenance, as burned bookshelves take on a sculptural form, mounted on the wall. Attached to a grate, also mounted, is a piece of paper bearing the words: “The telling of alternative historical perspectives through preservation.” On cabinets of architectural drawings salvaged from the library, a prompt urges: “Write a response to the given question and take a corresponding print.” One question asks: “How would you heal this wound?”

*Of Smoke and Ash: The Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition*, curated by Jade Nair and Dr. Duane Jethro, documents salvage and recovery, while also acknowledging all that might remain unrecovered. In their curatorial statement, the curators note:





Lady Skollie, *Flaming Mountain* (2018)

“Questions about Jagger Library’s colonial heritage, the histories and politics that inform its collections and historic rights of access to the archive remain unresolved. After the fire, Jagger Library remains a site of vigorous, unfinished debate.”<sup>11</sup>

In our conversation, we ponder this debate, what remains lost and where the library might be going. For the artist:

“Even the concept of recuperating what was lost [...] how does it work? Who now has access to it? Is it [the library] a different place? Is it going to be the same type of place and trying to get the same things back?”<sup>12</sup>

Her questions and reckoning are critical in the wake of controversies around the processes and ideas being imagined for the library’s future.<sup>13</sup>

For, in Lady Skollie’s acts of image, she leans into questioning and into fire – unafraid to deal with difficulties head on and to pose radical critique in paint. In *Invisible Arrows, All Destroyed* (2021), she paints a compelling portrait of self-determination, as the central figure’s leans her head into the fire, seeking its cleansing power, while destroying all the poisonous arrows – opinions and ideas – that have been aimed at her across time and experience.

And in *Burning Suns*, multiple suns rise, their rays ablaze – both rising and setting at the same time. The painting, she says, speaks to “the fire in itself as a symbol [...] of a new dawn for the library, or what it represents”, even with and through immeasurable, unquantifiable loss and in the entangled complexities of what it means to map the pathways of its future.<sup>14</sup> Her work with fire, in its range, reach, and reckoning, is ultimately a reminder that in imagining a future for the library, we are simultaneously imagining our own.

All artworks by Lady Skollie.

11 Duane Jethro and Jade Nair, ‘Curatorial Statement: *Of Smoke and Ash: The Jagger Library Memorial Exhibition*, *Ibali Digital Collections UCT*, April 2022, <https://ibali.uct.ac.za/s/of-smoke-and-ash/page/curatorial-statement>

12 Laura Windvogel, pers. comm., 28 September 2022.

13 Nadia Krige, ‘Reimagining the Jagger Library – together’, University of Cape Town, 1 August 2022, <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2022-08-01-reimagining-the-jagger-library-together>; Rebecca Davis, ‘Dark days: Accusations of capture and governance instability rock UCT’, *Davily Maverick*, 3 October 2022, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-10-03-dark-days-accusations-of-capture-and-governance-instability-rock-uct/>

14 Laura Windvogel, pers. comm., 28 September 2022.



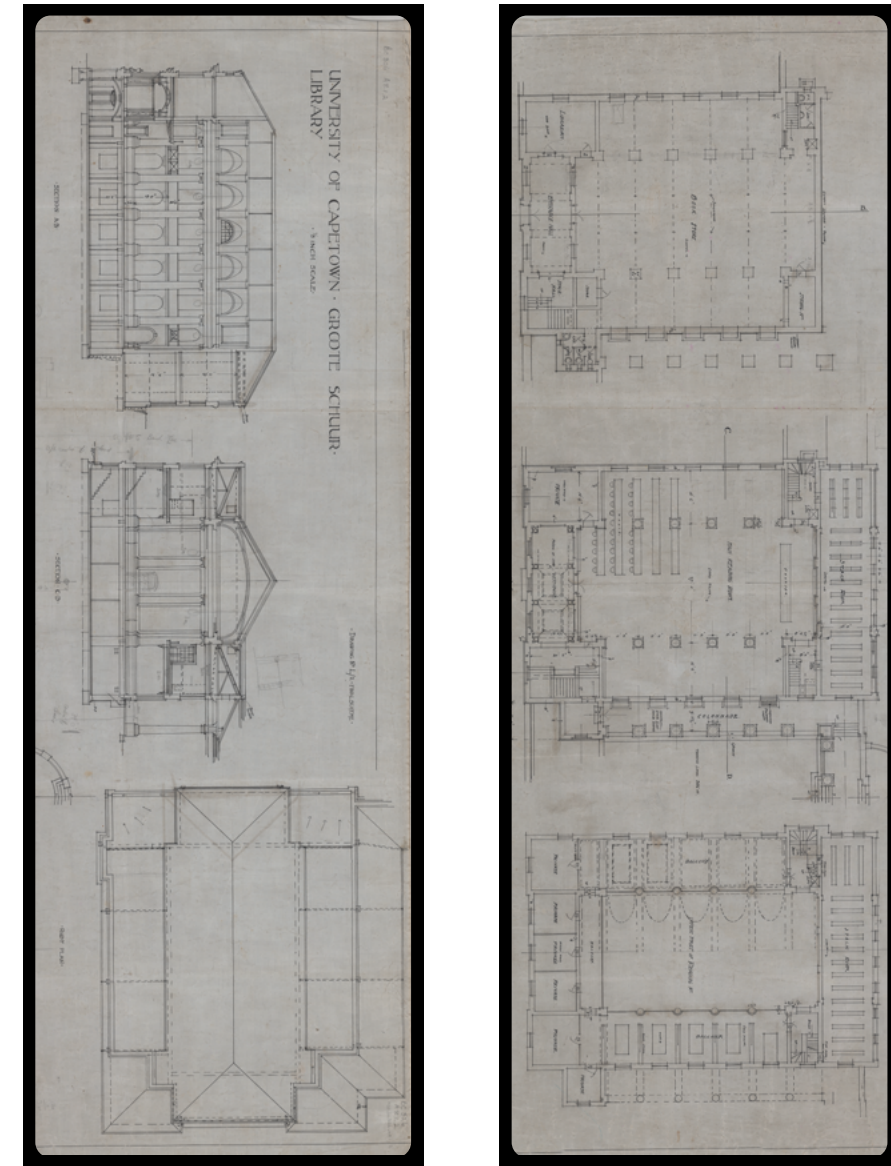


Lady Skollie, *Invisible Arrows, All Destroyed* (2021)



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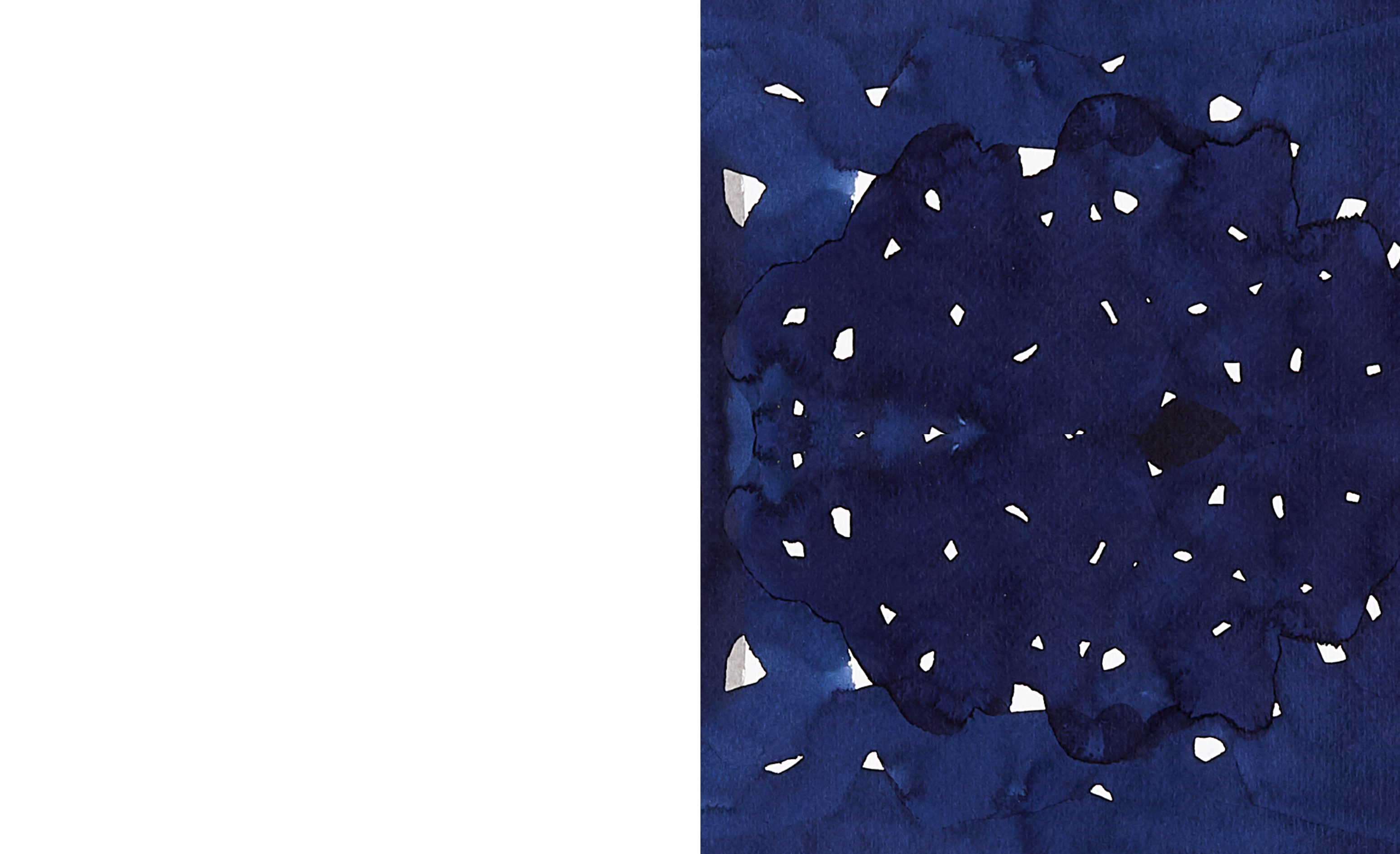


Bookmark image credit<sup>1</sup>:  
Hawke and McKinlay Collection, BC326, A8.1.2, Special Collections, University of Cape Town Libraries.

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<sup>1</sup> During the book design process, we asked UCT Libraries for an original architectural drawing of the Jagger Library – just our luck, these had been salvaged and scanned days before.







What surfaces when a library is burnt, an archive lost?  
What emerges from the ashes and ruins?

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Duane Jethro  
Atiyyah Khan  
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