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Introduction

(Un)making the Archive

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Within Redaction

Estranging the Archive as Decolonial Praxis

Rahael Mathews

Here are the rules.
You can't redact a name once it's been spoken.
If you say [] you must say []. If you say Gaza,
you must say Gaza.
If you look, you must look until there is
no looking left to do.
(Hala Alyan, *Revision*)

Once we notice a thing, asks Nathan Snaza (2023: 260), *what are we to do?* How to reckon with the becoming-event (Berlant 2011: 6) splayed out for the senses, how to hold one's own body and others' in the face of what seems like indomitable violence? The 'we' of my mind is the apertural witness, wholly desires intercession, wants to be a flayed bridge. But the 'I' of my body is dislocated from the site of violence, dislocated from community, and this I do not know what to do with. Following

the events of 7 October, 2023, my own subjectivity is distilled into the figure of an estranged witness to the genocide in Gaza. But I have had to ask myself: at what point does familiarity become imminent in estrangement? What are the prerequisites and mediations that allow this transformation to take place? I need to admit to myself – this current valency of attention comes as a result of some codicil that demands a certain apogee of bloodshed be inflicted upon a population in order to warrant an embodied presence in solidarity. My position of alliance with Palestine is certainly an insufficient one, reactionary and stoked by my fury against the ongoing genocide and the unprecedented levels of dehumanisation carried out by the state of Israel and its allied governments over the last two years.

To witness is to mediate, Divya Victor (2013: 3) writes. The witness is causality, the bridge between

happening and disappearance, remembrance and forgetting. But to witness is also to *be* mediated; the genocide in Gaza has become a catastrophe uniquely disseminated through the digital in an unprecedented manner. Palestine has been presented to many of us at this heartbreaking conjuncture of its history, narrated through an archive of violence largely projected in the digital realm, turning several estranged witnesses like myself into keepers of desolation. I am uncomfortably aware, that as I witness the collection of one thing, I am standing inside the silence of another. Given this, the underlying critical position I assume in this article will always be one of solidarity and coalition with a pro-Palestinian subjectivity, in a manner that revisits but does not replicate the grammars of violence (Hartman 2008: 4) that surround representation and archival epistemics.

Lia Brozgal (2020: 3), in her work on the Algerian fight for liberation in Paris, details an episode of mass violence by the French police against Algerian freedom fighters on 17 October, 1961. A peaceful demonstration by around 20,000 Algerians, coordinated by the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN, National Liberation Front) was met with sweeping brutality and disproportionate violence by Paris police, resulting in 10,000 Algerian men under arrest, countless injured, and an estimated 200 dead, although that figure remains a contentious one. She writes that, despite the protests that followed in the weeks after, and interventions both scholarly and otherwise, ‘October 17th’ remains the ‘convenient sobriquet’ (ibid.) given to the event. Histories overlap, repeat, and coalesce in another October struck by the colonial wound. One that has become a similar sobriquet in public discourse, the central point from which

current attention to Palestine radiates, only this time halfway across the world: in Gaza.

In the face of such an aggregated crime against humanity, it is important to remember that violence and ruination can be structural and, at the same time, intimate and differential. To be able to attend to the detritus that spills everywhere requires a recognition of this ruination not merely as a foreclosed temporal and material event, but an active and ongoing site of power and contestation. It requires, as Ann Stoler (2013: 11) writes, an attention to the ‘political project’ that ruination is, to recognise what mediations of violence accumulate, compound, and dislocate, or displace bodies differentially. This debris, these charged ruins that are so often absent from the limitations of the visible and the extant record, must then be rethought as potential¹ for the archiving process. That the unfortunate temporal conditions of my attention and arrival (Snaza 2023: 262) towards Palestine are predicated on the date of October 7th is the result of engineered invisibility, an intentional paucity of speech, and personal failing – but the spectre has long caught up to me now. *Spectre*, from *specere*, from *spek* – to observe, to notice (Etymonline). So, once we notice a thing, what are we to do about it?

Let it spill². Allow for an accumulation of attention, a proliferation of witnessing in the wake, disrupt its crushing weight in the service of contingency, in the service of resistance (Snaza 2023: 267). Refuse the dominant economy of feeling that halts at the edges of an encompassing language, and the imperial tropism of the archive as historical death-fact. Attend instead to those tendencies that spill over the death-record, that defy capture – the fissure of memory (Azem 2024: 122), the fragment, the trace.

At stake is remembering that the epistemic violence of redaction is carried out by halting proximity and intimacy to archives of repression – histories and records of the colonised are infrastructurally seized from sight. It is in keeping with these principles that three other colleagues and myself held a workshop last year titled ‘Digital Means to Physical Ends: Embedded Positionalities, Decolonial Coalitions,’ as part of the Amsterdam School for Cultural Analysis’ (ASCA) three-day symposium called ‘Resistance, Refusal, Fugitivity.’ Our academic positions within Western European infrastructures of knowledge are implicated in those same extractions, and normalisation of epistemic violences against the Palestinian people and knowledges. As such, undertaking a critical archival study nested in these dangers calls for, first and foremost, a position of refusal from within these digitally constructed witness positions through a situated task of listening (Duchatellier et al. 2024: 70). Central to this is a methodology of attention that views the ‘real’ as relational (Vázquez 2012: 5), and an acknowledgment of the absent(ed) as constituting the ‘real’, and it is this attention to the absent(ed) record that I take forward in this article as well.

In a conversation with Patricia Saunders on her collection of poems *Zong!*, M NourbeSe Philip (2008: 74) points to the inexhaustible human desire to express the inexpressible, the longing to enter the void left by the colonial wound, move through elision and attempt an excavation, a retrieval, an unearthing of some kind. Often, as they point out, it is not just the content of colonial archival records that are ‘discomforting’ (ibid.: 69), but the very form of these records as well. Pertinent to my study, is analysing works of art that find ways to

navigate these fraught intimacies to violence. In this article, I will be thinking through the potentialities offered by artistic representations to disrupt, exceed, and retrieve some of these archival elisions, with a keen attention to the act of redaction as a colonial tool in archival policing. I will be close reading two works of art: Hala Alyan’s poem *Revision* (2023), and Kamal Aljafari’s film *Recollection* (2015), as cultural objects in a Palestinian archive of resistance to Zionist redaction. I’ll be thinking with Palestinian aesthetic works that do not *aestheticise* that closeness to violence but rather draw attention through formal interventions to those same feelings of discomfort upon encountering the coloniser’s archive. In a discussion I led on the potentialities offered by poetry to transgress the institutional archive and its occlusions, one of the participants brought forth that same piercing question with which I started this introduction – how do we arrive? How do we arrive at the archive? How do we arrive at absence?

Israeli state archives and the premise of ‘truth’

There is no lack of scholarship of the archival turn in the humanities, but in cases and locations where the colonial violences of displacement and erasure are systematically exercised, the histories of creation, the present form, and methodologies of institutional archives and archiving cannot be overlooked. In this paper, I refer to archives created and held by nation states, government bodies, and museum holdings under the aegis of disseminating public history as ‘institutional’. Starting from the position that to archive is to record and remember, I argue alongside Ariella

Azoulay (2015: 6) that the archive is a medium for the performance of national sovereignty and citizenship, and as such establishes the definitions and limits of 'evidence', 'history', and 'fact', and, as a consequence, epistemic authority. The archive forecloses legitimacy of 'past' narrative, which the Zionist regime has taken great pains to construct in a specific manner through what Edward Said (1979: 95) has termed 'a policy of detail', precise down to the last millimetre both in planning and execution of the territorial borders of the state that would superimpose on the 'Promised Land'. The political ideology behind the formation of the state of Israel, and it is important here to remember that it was indeed a totalising *formation* – a gradual orchestration of mass displacement; one that borrowed and reproduced a community of ideas with Western European colonialism – aimed to create a society that would be overwritten as unquestionably 'native' (Said 1979: 88). This process of settlement, operating through the colonial logic of *terra nullius* in combination with the extreme orientation of Islamophobia that accompanied it culminated for the first time in the 1948 Nakba; the violent expulsion and dispossession of around 750,000 Palestinians from their homes and villages by Israeli defence forces.

The Nakba remains, to this day, denied in Israeli political narratives for the obvious infrastructural violence of the state it exposes. One of the largest and most violent instances of population exchange and forced dispersal remains invalidated in the public eye on political, imaginative, and ideological levels (Said 1984: 35). Perhaps more importantly, access³ to documentation and archival material on the Nakba would politicise Palestine, supplementing its historiographic

legitimacy on the global stage. It is unsurprising, then, that the sum of all declassified documents in Israel referring to the Nakba constitute less than 2 percent, which is an already minuscule figure currently in the process of being retracted, redacted, reclassified and erased further (Pappé 2020: 25). These materials include several documents outlining missions to displace civilians in Palestinian villages, letters from soldiers admitting to crimes of rape and bodily violence against Palestinian women, and several records of displacement operations carried out village by village. The consequent impunity this offers to the ongoing Zionist project is monumental. Institutional archives are a foundational medium and object of national sovereignty, citizenship, and identity, but are paradoxically absent from the senses. Faith in the 'truth' of a collective past rests on the relative inaccessibility of the archive, and the extensive processes of securitisation that preserve it in a constellation of distance from the civil realm (Azoulay 2015b: 196). And yet, Israeli archives as creators of collective imaginaries, memories, and identities perform the function of building the 'citizen' (Israeli), and simultaneously the 'infiltrator' (Palestinian) (ibid.). Thus, in the case of Palestine, the archive becomes another colonial weapon of erasure, striving with a horrifying degree of success to create an emphatic narrative of the 'true facts' of Israeli history.

I turn to Saidiya Hartman's work in archival studies of the Transatlantic slave trade, in order to illustrate some of the methodological possibilities of disavowing this ontology of erasure by thinking coalitionally across geographies for a moment. In her seminal essay *Venus in Two Acts*, Hartman (2008: 3) details to some degree the role of an orientation towards absence that

categorises human lives as numbers in an account ledger, as well as absence of the second order— in artefact, as record in the archive. What Hartman calls into question is the epistemic authority of these *facts*, ‘to write a cultural history of the captive’ (ibid.: 11). She calls for this through the methodology of critical fabulation, throwing into crisis the ‘status of the event’ (ibid.), by reworking inherited histories from contested points of view. Following Hartman, this study also considers work that offers possibilities for reconstruction, retrieval, and reassembly of the ‘received account’ (ibid.).

For all its well-guarded bulk, the archive is a void for some. But, as Said (1984: 45) writes: ‘if those are the facts, then so much the worse for the facts’. Despite the ‘designed destruction’ (Stoler 2018: 45) of the Israeli archive’s ratification of blatant lies as common sense and reasonable, there is always Palestinian life and memory that exceeds this ordering. Working with, and acknowledging these excesses demand among other things, an attention to the affective dimensions that (dis)orient these categorisations (Snaza 2023: 257). Thinking from a position of refusal towards this totalising emptiness of the archive, it is necessary for a moment to turn towards the collective lack of affect that enabled its organisation. One only needs to look towards the historic struggles for liberation in other geographies to identify the mechanisms in which the archive becomes ‘a death sentence, a tomb...an asterisk in the grand narrative of history’ (Hartman 2008: 2).

Sara Ahmed (2004: 120) has written that emotions have a ‘rippling effect’, they ‘stick’ and move through objects, and hence what sticks is invariably entangled with the ‘absence-presence’ of historicity. She goes

on to detail how fear and hate gain their velocity and viscosity only owing to the presence of other bodies through which they may travel. I see this as a double-bind. The archive vehemently rejects affect to privilege ‘fact’, and it is this rejection (another kind of absence in its own sense) that allows for the ‘slides’ between bodies to transform into a collective fear, and hate. The rejection of affect also builds it, but as destructive, oppositional and rooted in negation. Hence it is clear that it is indeed the ‘recruitment of spectators’ (Azoulay 2015a: 21) that takes the form of the public citizen which is necessary to preserve this constituting violence of the Israeli archives, existing and premised upon the erasure of the Palestinian people and culture. Decolonial readings and theorisations of the archive must therefore first and foremost start from a place of suspicion, a ‘general distrust of the “fact” of the artefact in the archive’ (Saunders and Philip 2008: 70), and a move towards affects that do not stem from negation but are instead fluid and generative. In this context, it is also productive to think of ‘acts of countering’ archival authority and subverting them for other ends, as Ann Stoler writes –

In such a project, the task may be to reimagine who the ‘*archons*’ (or the guardians of the archive, as Ariella Azoulay insists) are. On the other hand, it may be to question the principle of *access* itself (a term already imbued with improbable, unexpected stop signs) where something or someone is implicitly or explicitly ‘letting one’ in (no matter how much largesse might accompany that act, and no matter how ‘open’ that access might be). (Stoler 2018: 47, emphasis in original)

To insist on the infusion of affect in the archive is therefore to drag it back towards the present – to reject its fixity as a monolith of the past, walk willingly into the ‘locus of impossible speech’ (Hartman 2008: 3), and reconstitute it in the service of ongoing life. Stoler’s perspectives on archiving as dissensus that the above excerpt is from, points us to the spatial and political organisations that arrest access to the Palestinian archive from public view. However, what she also draws attention to is how these limitations of access also limit our engagement with the archive’s forms of *address* – the nature of the archival object and the discursivities embedded within. This article situates itself towards these multiple forms of address that have been seized from sight, and in the following sections I will pay specific attention to Stoler’s (2018: 46) call for ‘the cultivation of a capacity to make new objects available to thought’, through the close readings of Alyan’s *Revision* and Aljafari’s *Recollection*. Stoler reminds us that archiving as dissensus in a Palestinian context presents us with the possibility of considering our archival objects as ‘dense, impacted, charged sites of contest and contradiction’ (ibid.), rather than fastening ourselves to the categories protected by the archon under claim of public truth. Could we then look for Palestinian archives that address us in verse, in song, in memory?

Aesthetic projects of the archive: Reading redaction

I want to insist here that the political project of the institutional archives cannot be divorced from their aesthetic one; in fact, they are mutually linked. Azoulay

(2010: 250) writes in her criticism of Walter Benjamin’s distinction between these two planes of civil relations that ‘the aesthetic is given by way of the object’s being given to the senses’. By this first admission, it becomes clearer to see the aesthetics of coloniality/modernity as an ‘exclusion from the site of experience’ (Vázquez 2020: 14), which consequently means an exclusion from the site of memory. The aesthetic project of the institutional archive is to insist upon the domination of a sensory epistemology created through its detailed materialisation, monitoring, and bordering of the processes required to access it. Tied to and formed by the frameworks of power, extraction, and erasure that characterise Western European colonialism, it creates spaces of enclosure, limits movement and is premised upon certain exclusions. Through a collective (civil) enforcement of faith in this inaccessible past, the picture that the ‘Archive’ conjures is one of credibility – imposing concrete, metal doors, gloves to access documents, and complicated filing systems all reinforcing our certainty that the ‘past’ is ‘safe’.

It is therefore worth asking – what are the kind of aesthetic mechanisms and methodologies of obscurity that are necessary for the institutional archive to carry out its function of attempting⁴ to silence the colonial subject? Redaction in state documents is one of the cardinal functions of making material this aesthetic project of the colonial imaginary, because of its compelling visual quality, and I would argue – brutality. What this imbues the archival artefact with is firstly an enforced forgetting in the material of the text⁵, and second, the acceptance of what remains as the ‘actual, instantiated, the accessible, and deployable’ (Gilliland and Caswell 2016: 55) in civil and political

forums. The thick black streaks across the archival artefact are to me, paradoxical, pointing clearly to what it attempts to obscure, a sanctioned removal that allows the state exoneration, and patrimony over the ‘postfactum premise of history’ (Azoulay 2019: 291). As Astrid Lorange (2022: 19) writes: ‘what can be gleaned from an archive is always accompanied by what it occludes, its transparency a mere surface effect’. She carries out an extremely incisive analysis of the function of redaction and poetry’s subversive capabilities through a reading of Carlos Soto Román’s 2013 text *Chile Project: [Re-Classified]*. The document is a forty-five-page long collation of materials gathered from the Clinton Administration’s declassified material following the arrest of Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. The already heavily redacted source material was ‘re-classified’ by Soto Román’s editorial interventions in which he ‘whites out’ parts of the material in an act of appropriative witnessing and re-mediation of the archival material. This approach to redaction turns the poem into a witness, and a dynamic site of relation from which new narratives might emerge (ibid.).

The paradox of redaction lies in the fact that its occlusion serves as a mode of drawing attention. Wilful attempts at obscuring parts of a record only serve to create it anew in the imaginary, where it takes on several afterlives in the realm of the poetic. And so I return once again to the figure of the witness. For Lorange (2022: 18), Soto Román’s poem contributes as witness and gestures to a ‘fugitive archive of refusal, survival and silence’. The poem (and myself) as witness is what drives my own dialogue with redaction, and indeed the capability of the poetic dimension to exit⁶ the limits of the political. Documents on the 1948

Nakba are heavily redacted, sometimes retroactively after declassification, leaving large gaps in history and often a betrayal of lived experience and memory. It is this elision, this ongoing redaction of Palestinian land, life, and legacy that I am concerned with. The material, genealogical, and epistemic violences done to the Palestinian identity through its systemic redaction in Israeli documentation have made it clear that I cannot in good faith remain a stranger to the archive anymore.

I want to introduce now the text that has functioned as both interlocutor and foundation for my conference with absence – Hala Alyan’s *Revision*. Alyan is a Palestinian-American poet, and clinical psychologist based in New York, and the author of five collections of poetry, a novel and several longform essays. *Revision* was published in Guernica Magazine in November of 2023. The poem reads as a fragment of her diasporic experience; her recollections are also reflections, a frayed testament of grief at the violence currently being inflicted on her people. She writes of her grandmother, of her son, of her land left behind. She writes suggesting that in the ongoing indiscriminate process of physical eradication, what is also at threat of destruction are intimacies; a mother, a flower, a name. She writes:

How far can you go in sixty-five seconds? Eleven?
 If you have a favourite flower, now’s the time to redact it.
 If you have a mother, now’s the time to move her to the basement.
 If you don’t have a basement?
 I don’t mean to profit from this poem, but I do.
 I don’t mean to say I but I do. Here are the rules.

The rules are redacted.

[] is [].

[] is a red herring.

(Alyan 2023)

Redaction here in Alyan's hands manifests itself as two square brackets: []. This is an inherently different aesthetic suggestion from the blackening out that we tend to associate with redaction and removal in state documents. Undoing this redaction – if that is possible at all – would mean an active attempt to critically re-fabulate what is obscured through the poetic imagination. In Alyan's writing, it is a rejection of the choking blockage that the black ink contains and instead reads simultaneously as possibility of retelling and impossibility of recovering, a double gesture of subverting and performing the act. In some strange sense, this is hopeful, the emptiness leaving possibilities for an absence and aspiration in the imaginary. Might the poem 'show the seams, edits, and marginalia left by the drafting and redrafting of history,' and 'denaturalise the violent language of the state,' as Lorange (2022: 24) writes? What kind of archive can it create, preserve, and perform? Poetry alone cannot be the resolver of conflict, but might it archive and mediate it?

In attempting to trace redaction as relational, I have drawn quite heavily on Joseph Pugliese's (2013) reflection on redaction within declassified records of torture in the American Central Intelligence Agency's (CIA) black sites. He writes:

The redactive blackness generates asignification, the impossibility of meaning, and occlusions without referents. Yet, within these zones of blackened

text, *something persists*, a perverse semiosis *continues defiantly to signify*. I want to attempt to read these redacted black slabs against the grain, to read for meaning where meaning has seemingly been obliterated. (Pugliese 2013: 178, emphasis added)

This reading of redaction, as defiant and perverse semiosis, is the historian's refusal to inhabit the wilful obscuring of violence and sealing it as final. Reading redaction 'contra erasure' (Lorange 2022: 22) means to point towards and emphasise that which has been rendered absent by those 'symptoms of imperial violence' (Azoulay 2019: 287) that serve to obfuscate and occlude. This turn, from redaction, removal, and reduction towards (re)membrance and reiteration is what I find at the forefront of *Revision*. Alyan writes:

Here are the rules:

We bear what we bear until we can't anymore.

We invent what we can't stand grieving.

The sun sets on Gaza. The sun rises on Gaza.

On your [].

On your blue pencils.

On your God-given eyes.

(Alyan 2023)

Here are the rules is the refrain that runs throughout the poem. Here are the rules of the polity on the outside looking – displace or invent the grief that is always a mute presence in the body. Leave to fester the lesion of memory, do not name it⁷ 'Palestine'. *Revision* then, gestures also to the (re)vision of Palestine, a defiant imagination against this finality prescribed by the Israeli archive. Through the flexibility afforded by

poetic mediation, Alyan is ‘straining against the limits of the archive’ (Hartman 2008: 11). Contrapuntal to the process of redaction being an obscuring or sealing, the emptiness between each square bracket in her poem leaves open *new possibilities of address*. In its partial emptiness, the poem is *an archive embedded in its own iterations*, it is changeable with each reader, with each witness. Perhaps in idealistic optimism, reading redaction as this paradox suggests that what is removed from the official record is spilling over elsewhere, gestured to in a different location. What is required to uncover it, is a careful and sustained attention, collection, collaboration, and compilation. Alyan’s poem points to the redaction of places, people, names, flowers, trees, memory. She is at once exposing and surrendering to the lapses in memorial records about the displacement of the Palestinian people, and in her poem allowing opportunities for a reader to fill the spaces she leaves with their own imagined trajectories of the future.

I am reminded here of M NourbeSe Philip’s (2008: 73) restless search for space, always probing, as though ‘the words are seeking space to breathe’. But there are no words for Alyan at this present juncture, no morphology of syntax that might provide a conveniently complete picture that lends itself to sympathy. Again, we come up against the limits of language, the incapability of it to express deictically a living punctured by absence. Having said this; possibilities for coalition and decolonial aesthesis as the ‘verbality of reception’ (Vázquez 2020: 14) arise in poetry, and in Alyan’s (re)vision of redaction. That is, *Revision* becomes a poem that points to both the function of redaction and simultaneously opens up possibilities for critical-fabulation vis-a-vis Hartman as a method

of pro-Palestinian solidarity and intersubjectivity that exist not only in reference to anti-Zionism, but as something rooted in an imagination of relational futurity.

Estranging the archive; decolonial praxis

To this end, I want to think through alternate conceptualisations of the archive itself: the need to engage collective imaginaries in service of ‘communities disenfranchised by the extant record’ (Gilliland and Caswell 2016: 73), which certainly has its precedence in theory. Contact with the past among communities subjugated to colonial wounding disbands any notion of it being a ‘radical other’ (Mácon 2023: 348), and this temporal slippage is certainly what drives most of the theoretical re-conceptualisations of the archive. Lia Brozgal’s *anarchive*, Brahim El-Guabli’s *other-archives*, and Ann Stoler’s perspectives on *duress*, are some among many ways of thinking through these problematics, however owing to limitations of scope I will not address them in detail at this juncture.

Working instead from Hartman’s frustration at being unable to ‘derange’ the archive (Hartman 2008: 13) to arrive at restitution, I suggest a move towards ‘estrangement’. Hartman writes of a need for maddening the coloniser’s records, to strip it of its violating logic. While that is in part the goal here, estrangement in the Palestinian context is a necessary political position to acknowledge and assume in critical reflection. *Shatat*, the Arabic word for ‘dispersal’, is often the way Palestinians refer to those in diaspora. *Shatat* embodies the ‘endless absence’ (Alyan 2016: 65), the violent and forcible estrangement from land and

family that Palestinians in diaspora are often forced to inherit – coerced estrangement.

Kamal Aljafari's 2015 essay film *Recollection* holds a conference with absence that demands an analogous 'splintering' of the archive (Abbas and Abou-Rahme 2013: 358) while striving towards intimacy with it, articulating a radical and cumulative imaginary of refusal that can 'thaw out the crisis of the imaginary' (ibid.). Aljafari is a Palestinian director and artist born in al-Ramla, now based in Germany. *Recollection* is the third film in what has been referred to as his 'Jaffa trilogy' (Hochberg 2021: 54), a series of cinematic explorations on the violence of occupation on urban environments in Palestine. *Recollection* is created entirely using footage from Israeli and American films and still photography between the 1960s and 1990s, that the director then digitally manipulates, edits, and recontextualises to provide a visual narrative of Jaffa without ever shooting a single frame himself. Sharing an ethos with Alyan's work on revisiting the realm of memory, *Recollection* has the almost tactile visual quality of a home movie. Grains, abrupt cuts, awkward angles of framing, and close-ups characterise the camera work in the film. This fraught intimacy is intentional, *Recollection* was created in Aljafari's Berlin apartment through a somewhat solitary process of 'citing, cutting, erasing, duplicating, framing, photographing, and arresting the original (Israeli) cinematic images' (Hochberg 2021: 66), leaving the film at once 'close and remote' (ibid.).

Recollection is a film made in what Nadia Yaqub (2022: 288) has reminded us of is the 'post-catastrophe', after Jaffa has been resettled, gentrified, occupied, and built over by its invaders. The dissidence in this film

occurs primarily at the level of the frame – Aljafari shifts the focal point of the archival material to its backgrounds, and in doing so exposes the ongoing ruination of the Zionist project. Through his frequent gaze on the background, we see traces of Palestinian residents, precarious spectres⁸ that slip away from the frame if 'the zoom is too radical' (ibid.). This aesthetic precarity is crucial to the film's resistance work, as Yaqub reminds us. She writes –

Works of film and photography are particularly useful in this regard because both their physical and temporal frames are visible, reminding spectators that what they are seeing has been selected. The indexicality of film and photography also necessarily introduces the notion of excess: one can never know everything about what appears within the image because it consists of a trace of an object, person, and/or place in the real world that will always exceed representation.

(Yaqub 2022: 289)

The film reminds us to consider the fault lines in the failure to archive oppression, but at the same time asks us to pay notice to who is failed *by* the archive. What the colonial order of memory imposes on us is also limited remembrance, it is erasure in the realm of memory. Striving against this 'double erasure' (Vázquez 2020: 130) is the work of the film. Can we think of estranging the archive conjointly with noncompliance to it? In naming and noticing moments of excess, Aljafari reminds us again of *redaction fatigue*, conflicting remainders of a mnemopolitics under erasure. In multiple colonial contexts, the camera and

the gun were simultaneously introduced to indigenous lands, the camera sometimes preceding the gun (El Bouayadi 2023: 1189). At its core it is this field of vision of the coloniser that Aljafari refuses through his editing. In such a context, elisions, slippages, and affect in the archive are especially useful, particularly in a study discussing redaction. Aljafari's engagement with redactive blackness is not quite as direct as Alyan's but by virtue of the archival material he chose, he is already gesturing to a voiding in the Israeli artefact. In the face of this, can we think through the aesthetic and affective orders that are complicit in these foundational violences? Can we meditate on a decolonial imaginary that develops solidarities in transversal ways? How do we strive against the 'view from nowhere' (Barua 2024: 43)?

As I attempt to historicise and situate Palestine among other histories and geographies that have experienced similar erasures, I increasingly want to approach the idea of the archive (as well as myself) as 'estranged' so that it is firstly a decolonial attempt at standing outside and separate from the limits of the institutional archive, and secondly an action that may somehow encompass irrecoverable silences in any attempt at retelling/remembering. Hartman (2008: 13) acknowledges that fabulation, and the drive to 'derange' the colonial record cannot result in a miraculous resuscitation of life lost under the colonial yoke. Admittedly, this intentional disorder, the decomposition and disruption of the colonial archive, remains necessary to scholarship and engagement with the archive. Estrangement of the archive, and indeed the archive's user, is instead a notion that hinges upon a somewhat paradoxical imminent intimacy with it.

At its heart, such an archive centres unmooring the archive's central impulse from what Anjali Arondekar (2014: 99) has called the 'stakes of reliable ghosts'. *Recollection* and *Revision* are both works that slip through archival categorisations, both works brimming with spectres hard to grasp, and often hard to rely on. To an estranged archive, these fraught intimacies and tenuous affects are necessary for its becoming, to draw our attention to the 'lineages of the nonreproductive and unfinished' archive (Arondekar 2014: 101).

In defence of excess

How buoyant could such a Palestinian archive be? An archive of spills, of absence that is both enclosed in and escapes the sepulchre (Mbembe 2002: 25). An archive of dissenting objects, in Ann Stoler's words; sites of resistance, refusal, imagination. An archive, emanating first and foremost from implicating and rooting archival practice in the affective mode. This is necessary for several reasons, but perhaps most importantly and most simply, the reorientation towards collective humanity and hope, without which decolonial thinking is lost from the start. For all their reductiveness, institutional archives as they exist now are necessary to analysis if only for the large quantities of information they still contain. This is why I make the distinction between 'derangement' and 'estrangement', because I do not see the potential Palestinian archive as a methodology or collection that needs to exist in reference to the settler's episteme in any way. Reading redaction in this manner is not merely optimistic potentiality, it is deeply grounded in the truth that certain silences will

eternally remain uncoverable. However, as the Zionist genocide against the Palestinians continues with every passing day, it becomes more urgent than ever to dislocate ourselves from the colonial framework that has shaped the episteme of the Israeli archives, and its many limitations. Instead, estrangement offers different modes of engagement with absence, and potentialities for relational (re)membering. Key to such an archive is therefore to understand what comprises it and the subsequent refusal of institutional claims to 'legitimacy' those elements are able to make.

I am a stranger and trying to understand a loss that will never be mine. 'Loss remakes you', Hartman writes (2006: 78). She writes of return in the face of this loss as a liminal experience, suspended in between a home that the stranger does not belong to, and a home that is yet to be made. Loss left untouched makes memory 'spoiled like milk' (Alyan 2023). Loss like this makes archives of debris, that are thick with the silences embedded in it. While violence has made fragmented homes and memories; through critical fabulation and a constructive reimagining, perhaps there can be (re)visions of such great loss. The paradox of redaction therefore demands that loss, and the consequent archives it begets, be read as *estranged from itself*. What is central to such an archive is, at one register, a stepping away from the legal impunity redaction offers the Israeli state – on a literal, as well as tropological level. On another register, it is a stepping away in the plane of the memorial. A refusal of redaction as finality, a refusal of redaction as erasure. It is an assertion – *You can't redact a name once it's been spoken* (Alyan 2023), you can't redact a name once it has been loved. Such an archive must become a stranger to itself; it must stand

separate to its own delineations if it has any hope of remediation.

In that sense, such an archive is decidedly an aesthetically mediated one. Viewing affect, both individual and collective, as immanent to the archival impulse can enable us to rethink the ways in which it can be embedded in the collective memory. In its dispersal, in the absence-presence of legacy and generational memory, as that which surrounds us always; affect must be intrinsic to archival study. We must insist on naming, gesturing, pointing, precisely to that which has been overlooked in the past, by those who have been overlooked by regimes of power – 'If you say Gaza, you must say Gaza,' Alyan writes. We must look for those objects that exist not in any hierarchy of power, but rather as a consequence of it, these estranged witnesses that particularly in the context of Palestine are dispersed and fragmented, although certainly not fragile.

To identify them requires the spillage of attention NourbeSe Philip refers to (Saunders and Philip 2008: 78), affect is that undefinable thing that exceeds containment and opens archival agency. Spilling rejects false essentialisms based on dominant ontologies, and the farce of an unmediated, immediate reality (Scotini and Galasso 2015: 14). It is an attention to the thickness of time, and the charged task of sorting, that is necessary to rethink our deixis with the archive (Stoler 2018: 43). Activating this urgent need for capaciousness in our conception of a Palestinian archive, must also contend with the question of what it means to claim political failure as cultural heritage (Hochberg 2021: 6). It must reckon with a solidarity that hopes to be affective, attentive, and ongoing; but that can never

escape the multiplicity of pessimism⁹ that orients it. This fractured affect allows us to recognise that trailing after spills at the scene of subjection (Hartman 2008: 4) is not in communion with a politics of redemption (Pad.ma 2010), but rather, of retrieval and relationality. It is an exhumation, not to commit a second order of violence (Hartman 2008: 6), but to link the excised to a 'tissue of citations' (Hochberg 2021: 22), offering it to the sensorium once again.

Conclusion

Pursuing surfeit and excess in this particular orientation to the archive snakes along the borders of absence that escape temporal ordering. Spills can disappear into an absence that refuses immanence, refuses haunting and refuses animation. What then, of these disappearances that arrest potentiality in favour of revolution and refusal? What of the expunged that refuses retrieval? What is the role of the reserve (Pad.ma 2010), the not-yet-archived, which like the remnant and trace is also cloaked by the violence of erasure? Does our common denominator of solidarity¹⁰ fail us then?

As decolonial praxis therefore, estranging the archive through a generative reading of redaction aims to engage with the long memory of coloniality, and to *do* affect as well as *show* affect. It is methodology and medium at the same time. I want to encourage that we disband notions of an archive in imposing inaccessibility, uproot it from its position as a dust-laden container of death and instead move towards scattering and embedding it in communities – rooted in relational practices of care, reception and listening as

sites of interpellation (Vázquez 2012: 6). It is a stumbling attempt to 'bring into the realm of experience that which has been doubly negated under the modern/colonial order' (Vázquez 2020: 18).

We are witnessing today barbarous attempts to eradicate the Palestinian cultural archive, its lineaments, subjectivities and histories and so the question of archive is one of urgency in the Palestinian and Gazan contexts. Estranging the archive must therefore be undertaken from a situated position of responsibility, an acknowledgement of the need to document this ongoing genocide, to remember it, as well as to archive efforts of pro-Palestinian resistance and support, which in the framework of the academy has become mired in its own violence. It is, therefore, an invitation to ways of remembering that centre a solidarity that is not fixed, but 'passes through our body archives as it takes on different forms, flowing through different paths, different surfaces, different histories and different subjectivities'.¹⁰ The history of Palestine continues to be recounted, and depends on, its estranged and on its allies. To that end, I am writing while thinking about the prospects that coalition, alienation and estrangement afford, and the many ways in which an embodied being with the 'other' can be lived and not just theorised.

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Notes

1. *Potential*, instead of possibility, is a term borrowed from Ariella Azoulay. In the context of the archiving process, this opens up a form of inhabiting time, a 'being with others, both living and dead... against the separation of time.' (Azoulay 2019: 43)
2. Spilling comes, following a conversation between M NourbeSe Philips and Patricia Saunders, from the overflow of attention when looking to the archive. See: Saunders, Patricia, and M. NourbeSe Philip 2008: 78)
3. Much of our present access to Israeli archives about the Nakba stems from the work of the 'New Historians' in the 1980s and 1990s, a group of Israeli historians that demanded declassification of archival records.
4. I want to refuse, here, the 'pessimism of the intellect, *and* pessimism of the will' (Said 1984: 45) that might suggest that colonial, Zionist erasure is a successful finality inflicted upon the Palestinian people. My orientation towards absence is an acknowledgment of its incommensurability, its irrecoverabilities, but forging ahead in perhaps naive optimism to chart from its space some generative retrieval anyway.
5. I use the word 'text' here both to refer to the contents of an artefact, but also because the largest type of archival material are documents, and the written word. For more on the associated 'truth-imperative' of the same, see Azoulay (2015) on the figure of the 'infiltrator'.
6. Following Loyal Ftouni's question at her keynote lecture 'Affirming Life in Colonial Death-Worlds in Palestine' at the ASCA 2024 workshop on *Resistance, Refusal and Fugitivity*, I am urged to consider: 'What does it mean to think about the principle of *exit* as the foundations of revolutionary freedom?' In the context of Ftouni's work on carceral body politics, this raises several issues as regards to refusal and autonomy.
7. Personal recollection from author Ibtisam Azem on her grandmother's childhood in Jaffa. In the years following the Nakba, even the word 'Palestine' was effectively excised from speech. See: <https://arablit.org/2024/09/02/ibtisam-azem-on-absence-presence-and-disappearance/>
8. Aljafari's treatment and attention to the background in *Recollection* shares an ethos to ghosts with Sohail Daulatzai's work on the *Battle of Algiers*. Spectrality in this sense is indexing and gesturing to 'an/other archive', disassembly of pastness, and the 'ghost archive'. See: <https://cmsw.mit.edu/podcast-sohail-daulatzai-battle-of-algiers/>
9. Working from Edward Said's refusal of a pessimism of intellect, this terminology comes from a class discussion. We had a generative conversation on the potentiality of pessimism if it were multitudinous.
10. These are words borrowed from Özge Calafato in her opening address to a collective workshop on intersubjective solidarities with Palestine, also held within the ASCA 2024 workshop.

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Barber Shops and Mosques

Informal Community Memory Centres and Marginalised Histories in Stellenbosch, South Africa

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It's a sunny Saturday morning in Idas Valley, Stellenbosch, where owner Faizel Biscombe and his son Shuaib work briskly in their two-chair Arts Barber Shop. Patrons lined up on a cracked-leather bench behind them greet each other by name and chat about neighbourhood news, while a Spotify radio plays the Commodores in the background. 'People don't just come here for a haircut,' Faizel tells me, clipper in hand, 'they come for the social element.' But the shop is unique as a social hub for another reason: its walls are lined floor to ceiling with time-speckled photographs, newspaper clippings, and Stellenbosch memorabilia, all tracing the history of the area's coloured¹ population. Faizel's father, Fuaad, opened Arts Barber Shop in Central Stellenbosch in 1963. But when Apartheid's Group Areas Act² declared the racially-diverse neighbourhood a 'White Group Area', Fuaad, like all the

other coloured businesspeople and families in the area, was forced to relocate to Idas Valley, a newly designated 'Coloured Group Area' on the urban periphery.³ The shop remains there today.

In contemporary South Africa, the self-identifier 'coloured' refers to a specific cultural identity created under 'very specific conditions of creolization' (Erasmus 2001: 16), which was legalised under Apartheid's systems of racial classification to broadly refer to people of mixed racial descent (Kamies 2023). Coloured people have long been rendered somewhat invisible in national historiographies, which have tended to focus on white-black relations and power struggles (ibid.). In Stellenbosch, despite more than half of the District's population today self-identifying as coloured (Statistics South Africa 2023), this historical erasure is exacerbated by a lack of public historical representation: the

picturesque town is internationally celebrated for its colonial heritage, wine industry, and university, but the area's history of forced removals and racial violence during colonialism and Apartheid remains largely unacknowledged (Giliomee 2007; Du Toit et al. 2022). The forced removals of around 3700 coloured people from the Central Stellenbosch neighbourhood formerly known as *Die Vlakte*, after it was proclaimed a White Group Area in 1964 (Biscombe 2004; Giliomee 2007), has still never been formally acknowledged by the municipality.

Although some efforts have been made by Stellenbosch University in recent years to address the area's history of racial violence, dominant historiographies and public history locales in the area continue to centre narratives of European settler history. Going beyond such public representation, the archives of the area, reflective of the colonial mentalities of the archives' creators (Stoler 2010), contain little information about the development of this local population group. As archives are often positioned as the ultimate primary source for historians (Harris 2002), such an 'archival silence' (Trouillot 1995) risks perpetuating the racial biases embedded in colonial and Apartheid-era record-keeping into contemporary historical narratives.

In response to this knowledge gap, I developed the *Colouring In the Map* (CITM)⁴ public history project as an interactive digital map that geotagged historical images onto the contemporary landscape to visualise where coloured people once lived, worked, and socialised in central Stellenbosch before Apartheid's segregation laws reshaped the town. Drawing primarily on archival research as well as interviewing and participant observation, the process of creating the

map revealed something unexpected: two locations where the history of Stellenbosch's coloured community is richly documented through oral, visual, and textual means. In Arts Barber Shop and the Goejjatul Mosque, informal collections of newspaper clippings, family photographs, and everyday social interactions form a counter-archive, centring coloured histories in contrast to official records that often reflect a white colonial perspective.

This paper argues that within Stellenbosch's urban landscape, such spaces function as Informal Community Memory Centres (ICMCs): sites where marginalised histories are preserved and actively shaped. These spaces combine spatial, social, and material aspects of memory to act as focal points for the coloured communities they serve to remember the historical landscape which no longer exists, and aid in constructing a place-based historical identity despite the official erasure of this history. I thus frame this paper as an ethnographic reflection on the process of conducting historical research into this historically marginalised group, to explore how ICMCs can be studied as counter-archives by challenging traditional historiographical methods and demonstrating how community-focused research can uncover histories absent from institutional records. Examining how ICMCs centre the voices, spaces, and memories that official archives have long overlooked not only challenges the silences in Stellenbosch's historical narrative but also offers a model for rethinking how marginalised pasts can be recovered and represented in postcolonial and post-apartheid contexts worldwide.

This issue of historical epistemology, or how we know what we know about the past (Lustig 2020), is not unique to South Africa. In recent years, scholars

have been exploring different ways to study marginalised pasts in the absence of traditional primary records. Recent scholarship has emphasised the interconnect- edness of space, time, and identity: Eyerman (2004) and Hayden (1995)'s work, for instance, has argued that physical landscapes can 'store' social memory. However, less attention has been paid to the ways in which specific sites within these 'memory landscapes' (Hayden 1995) function as focal points for community memory and identity, particularly when the stories they preserve are marginalised within the broader urban and historical context. As such, this research develops the concept of ICMCs as spatial, social, and material memory focal points, building on Hayden's concept of memory landscapes (ibid.) and theory from archival studies.

When my initial plan to build the CITM project using only official archival material proved inadequate, I secured interviews with community members through gatekeepers who made my access to predominantly 'coloured' spaces like the Goejjatul Mosque and Arts Barber Shop possible. Despite conducting a historiographic study, research in these spaces necessitated an ethnographically-minded methodology which required building good interpersonal relationships and trust over time, and constantly reflecting on both my positionality as a relative outsider and the ethics of doing such research within the historical, racial, and socioeconomic frameworks of contemporary South African society. In sum, this paper also reflects on the racial dynamics and epistemic power imbalances to be navigated by white researchers such as myself when studying marginalised histories.

The following sections begin with a review of the

literature on archives, archival silences, and memory landscapes, before briefly discussing the methodology behind the CITM project. Two identified ICMCs, Arts Barber Shop and Geojjatul Mosque, are then analysed in terms of how they not only preserve but also actively shape community identity. The implications of studying them as alternatives to official archives are then discussed, before a final reflection on how studying such spaces can contribute to more inclusive historiographies. As such, this research contributes to a growing body of interdisciplinary archival and critical-spatial scholarship that seeks to study silenced histories beyond the confines of traditional archives by developing the concept of ICMCs as locations for inclusive historical inquiry.

Archives, silences, and the spatialities of marginalised histories

To understand the importance of studying ICMCs as archives, the link between traditional archives and the historiographical discipline must be clarified. Archives have long been positioned as authoritative storehouses of societal memory, shaping not only what we know about the past but also how we know it (Harris 2002; Carbone 2020). This perspective is central to historical epistemology (Lustig 2020): the study of how knowledge about the past is produced, preserved, and privileged. As such, archives are not passive repositories of memory, but rather, active sites of power, authority and interpretation which reflect the dominant worldview of their creators (Derrida 1995). Silences in history are compounded by archival omissions, as power dictates

which events become records, which records become archives, and which archives become history (Trouillot 1995). Official archives often offer only fragmented glimpses of marginalised communities' pasts, if at all (Caswell 2014). In South Africa, where colonial and Apartheid-era archives were created to serve the interests of the state, the absence of certain voices is not accidental but systemic (Harris 2002). As such, historians of marginalised groups are left to grapple with what Trouillot (1995) calls an 'archival silence' which risks perpetuating historical erasure.

In response, scholars and artists have sought alternative ways to 'counter' official archives, from digital community archives (Breckenridge 2014; Caswell 2014) to artistic reconstructions of colonial records (Taylor 2003; Carpio 2020; Msimango 2020; Santos 2023; Zaayman 2023) and oral history projects (Biscombe 2004; Schellnack-Kelly 2024).⁵ Family photographs, for example, have been studied as repositories of resistance, particularly in racially segregated societies (Cadiz and Trinidad 2020; Kamies 2018, 2023). The collective, spatial dimensions of historical preservation are also useful to think through in the absence of official representation. Hayden's concept of 'memory landscapes' (1995) offers a framework for understanding how physical spaces embody layered histories, serving as sites of collective memory and identity, while Eyerman's (2004) theory of cultural trauma underscores the interconnectedness of space, memory, and identity, particularly in contexts of racial injustice. Eyerman, writing on the spatial legacies of slavery and segregation, argues that urban layouts can 'embody' the past, shaping how communities remember and respond to historical trauma (ibid.). This is espe-

cially relevant in South Africa, where Apartheid-era urban planning continues to structure residential segregation and social inequality (Jazeel 2012; Yang 2015; United Nations 2024). The persistence of these spatial hierarchies means that the traumas of dispossession and discrimination are not only historical but also geographically inscribed. Yet, as Du Toit (2011) and Gibson (2004) note, official narratives often fail to acknowledge these connections, leaving collective memory fragmented along racial and class lines.

This gap between official historical representation and lived experience is particularly acute for South Africa's coloured communities. After the term 'coloured' emerged in the nineteenth century as a catch-all identifier for those of mixed, South Asian, or unknown ancestry during a process of cultural creolisation which was not unique to South Africa (Erasmus 2001),⁶ the category was codified under Apartheid's 1950 Population Registration Act (Adhikari 2005; Kamies 2023) which classified all South Africans as either 'White,' 'Black,' or 'Coloured'. People classified as 'Coloured' occupied a liminal position in Apartheid's racial hierarchy: they faced more discrimination and fewer opportunities than those classified as 'White', but still had greater privileges than those classified as 'Black' (Taylor et al. 2011; Kamies 2018). In the post-Apartheid era, this ambiguity has left many coloured South Africans feeling 'forgotten' in the national narrative, as Adhikari (2006) explains of the common refrain 'first we were not white enough, now we are not black enough'. Despite a recent surge in 'colouredism', critical historiographies of coloured communities outside major cities remain understudied, and their visual histories are largely absent from public archives.

The Stellenbosch District exemplifies this erasure. Since its founding by settlers on the land of the Khoi and San in 1679, the town's population comprised European settlers, enslaved people, as well as the Indigenous Khoi, and San (Giliomee 2007; Worden 2009). Its public history continues, however, to historically centre white settler narratives.⁷ An example is how the local history museum's small exhibition about slavery remains a sidenote to the town's vaunted colonial heritage and architecture (Du Toit et al. 2022). While recent academic research has begun to address the area's legacy of slavery and forced removals (Giliomee 2007; Biscombe 2009; Fransch 2010; Verbuyst 2021), these accounts are usually visible only within academic circles. Efforts by Stellenbosch University to acknowledge the Group Areas Act's impact, such as a commemorative map above the entrance to a faculty built on land from which coloured residents were forcibly removed, the creation of a study bursary for descendants of former-residents of *Die Vlakte*,⁸ and the symbolic renaming of the former-Lückhoff High School, currently one of the university's administrative buildings, with apparent plans to turn it into a Living Museum,⁹ are important yet isolated gestures in a landscape still marked by segregation and inequality (Maneli 2022; Govender 2024). As a result of Apartheid-era urban planning, coloured people continue to inhabit mainly the periphery areas of Idas Valley, Cloetesville, Kylemore, and Pniel, while the historical and economic centre of the town remains a decidedly white residential and touristic space (Yang 2015; Du Toit et al. 2022). The result is a geographic history of racial marginalisation, where the absence of public historical representation is reinforced by archival silence.

The CITM project aimed to reconstruct a visual record of this history. Photographs, Sealy argues, can disrupt dominant narratives by offering 'different points of departure' (2016: 98) for translating the past. When combined with mapping, as in the CITM project, they create a public, accessible link between past and present (Harper 2002; Kuhn 2007; O'Connell 2012). However, studying the photographs contained within community spaces during the CITM project, it was impossible to understand their meanings and significance without also taking into account the spatial and social contexts in which they existed. While scholars have explored how landscapes 'store' memory (Hayden 1995; Eyerman 2004), no literature has examined how specific locations within these landscapes function as repositories of memory in the face of archival silence. Realising this allowed me to begin considering how such spaces challenge traditional notions of archives, not as institutional collections but as living, community-driven sites of historical preservation.

From photo mapping to memory centres: ethnography in Stellenbosch's coloured communities

The CITM project was rooted in the principles of public history, an interdisciplinary, democratic approach that seeks to make history accessible, engaging, and relevant to the communities it represents (Brennan 2016; Demantowsky 2018). The digital project aimed to create a visual, spatial narrative of Stellenbosch's coloured population, challenging the Eurocentric focus of the town's dominant historiography. Initially,

I planned to combine archival research with ethnography, using interviews and participant observation to gather data. Following Stoler's (2010) methodology of reading 'along' and 'against' the archival grain, the archival phase quickly revealed the limitations of institutional records, both in volume and ambiguity. While the Stellenbosch Village Museum and the Archive of the Western Cape held some relevant historical visual material, the difficulty of identifying images depicting coloured people became clear early on, as the arbitrary nature of Apartheid-era racial categories made it ethically problematic to assign racial identities to individuals depicted. I tried to mitigate replicating the very systems of exclusion that the project sought to challenge through incorporating as much first-hand feedback from coloured participants as possible, but acknowledge the limitations of this form of visual data gathering.

However, the most significant breakthrough came not from official archives but from community spaces. By building relationships with gatekeepers at Stellenbosch University who had conducted research into the area's coloured population and subsequent snowballing, I gained access to private collections and informal memory sites containing relevant visual and oral material that had never been formally archived. This shift in focus from institutional archives to community-driven repositories became the foundation for identifying what I now term icmcs. Situated at poignant points within the urban landscape, community memories are socially negotiated and transmitted through oral, ritual, and material means in these locales. The two examples discussed in this study, Arts Barber Shop and the Goejjatul Islam Mosque, were

identified as containing the most spatial, social, and material information related to the area's coloured population in Stellenbosch's memory landscape. My entry into these spaces was mediated by gatekeepers, a necessity given my outsider status as a white researcher unfamiliar with the peripheral neighbourhoods shaped by Apartheid's spatial legacies. In Arts Barber Shop, I spent Saturday mornings observing and participating in conversations, noting how patrons engaged with the photographs and memorabilia lining the walls. I visited the Goejjatul Mosque and its madrassas with the Imam, and we spoke at length with worshippers passing through. These informal interactions often led to impromptu discussions about the archival images I had collected, with community members providing context, correcting misidentifications, and sharing personal stories. Such exchanges were invaluable, not only for enriching the crtm project but also for revealing how these spaces function as living archives.

Semi-structured interviews (Weiss 2004) with coloured Stellenboschers who had experienced the forced removals additionally enriched my understanding of how they perceived the past and contemporary urban landscape. To facilitate these conversations, I used the photo-elicitation method (Harper 2002) with archival images of locations pertaining to the town's coloured population, such as former cinemas and schools, as prompts. This method proved effective in 'breaking the ice' and eliciting detailed narratives about the landscape. Participants often recognised people, places, and events in the photographs, filling in gaps left by the archives. However, the process was not without challenges. Some interviewees expressed hesitation about sharing family photographs, citing

past experiences with researchers who had taken materials and never returned them. Others, like the man who initially described one Mr. Bailey as a prominent businessman only to later admit he was a smuggler, demonstrated the complexities of self-representation and the desire to present their community in a positive light.

My positionality undoubtedly influenced such interactions. Despite always being warmly received, I was acutely aware of the racial, geographic, and socio-economic frameworks structuring my research: participants often expressed surprise that ‘someone who looks like you’ would be interested in ‘coloured’ history, and I was occasionally labeled an ‘activist’, reflecting both curiosity and a cautious optimism about my intentions. These moments underscored the need for hyper-self-reflexivity (Dozono 2020; Hardy 2021), as my identity as a young, white, female researcher in relation to the mostly older, coloured, male participants inevitably influenced the stories shared and how they were framed in my presence. I adhered to the National Council on Public History’s Code of Ethics (2007) and the US Oral History Association’s interviewing guidelines (2018). Nonetheless, much of the information obtained during fieldwork was shared informally: over short discussions with archivists, worshippers, or pedestrians passing by. I have tried to represent their spaces, words, and stories as accurately as possible, keeping in mind the original wishes of participants and the academic position from which I write them.

By the end of the two-month fieldwork period in early 2024, I had collected approximately 130 historical images to be georeferenced on Google Maps using Duxbury et al.’s (2015) community mapping method.

While the resulting map was more of a prototype than a finished product, it offered an original spatial-temporal perspective on pre-segregation Stellenbosch by centring coloured histories in a landscape dominated by colonial narratives. Yet, the project’s limitations were also clear: a digital map, while accessible, could never fully convey the oral and visual histories embedded in icmcs. This realisation shifted my focus from mapping to analysing these spaces as repositories of memory. As examples, Arts Barber Shop and the Goejjatul Islam Mosque will be expanded upon.

Arts Barber Shop

Interviewees repeatedly directed me to Arts Barber Shop as a counterpoint to official archives, describing it as a ‘treasure trove’ of visual and textual history (see Photo 1). Situated in Idas Valley, a ten-minute drive from central Stellenbosch, the shop was relocated after the Group Areas Act declared it as falling within a ‘White Group Area’. This displacement underscores how the shop’s physical location is inextricably linked to Apartheid’s spatial violence. Like many Southern African barbershops, it functions as a community hub where predominantly male patrons of all ages gather to share stories and get a fresh cut (de Clerq 2016). In Arts Barber Shop, though, they also engage with the past. Faizel’s late father started a tradition of collecting old photographs depicting both their family and the town’s coloured population, especially in the form of old sports photos, and displaying them on the walls. Customers, too, began offering items for the collection on the shop’s walls, contributing to the collective narra-



Photo 1. Arts Barber Shop as a 'third space' where memory is collectively curated. Idas Valley, January 2024. Image by author, with permission from Faizel Biscombe.

tive of the space. The space is intimate: a narrow room with a bench for waiting patrons, two barber chairs, and walls crowded with images (see Photo 2). As Moser (2010) notes, museum displays actively shape knowledge. Here, the 'artefact display' is haphazard yet deeply curated, and interacting with it in such close quarters means one feels immersed in the history of Stellenbosch's coloured community depicted.

Unlike formal archives, this collection is socially

animated. As patrons congregated within the space, they would often situate themselves in relation to the visual narratives presented on the shop's walls: a grandfather coming for a haircut while looking after fussy grandchildren entertained them with anecdotes about family members appearing on the walls of the shop; patrons discussed the formations of the soccer teams visible on the walls, comparing past leagues to present ones. Anthropologists have long recognised



Photo 2. Sports photos as markers of collective identity and continuity in Arts Barber Shop. Idas Valley, January 2024. Image by author, with permission from Faizel Biscombe.

that memory is not just cognitive but embodied and material (Kuhn 2007). The sports team photos in Arts Barber Shop, for example, are not just visual records; they are active participants in social interaction, sparking conversations, debates, and nostalgic reflections. Speaking of the importance of stories to collective memory, Eyerman writes, ‘while the past may be embodied in material objects... what the past means is recounted, understood and interpreted and trans-

mitted through language and dialogue’ (2004: 162). Discussion of the material on the shop walls is both encouraged and necessitated by the lack of captions on many of the images – if you want to know who is in an image, or what it is related to, you have to ask. This demonstrates how the meaning of these artefacts is negotiated in real time, shaped by who is present, who is speaking, and who is listening.

Customers were always curious about my presence

and research: the novelty of a young, white woman in a space frequented predominantly by older, coloured men, professing an interest in 'their' history, as they put it, no doubt contributed to the copious amount of stories and historical information enthusiastically relayed to me every time I was present. This oral repository allowed me to fill in contextual information related to the archival material I had collected for the CITM project, as on several occasions, participants could recognise individuals or places in the collected archival photographs, providing information related to the images which was not present at the archival source. Yet, as a historian, I could only 'access' these pasts through human interpretation, highlighting how ICMCs embed history in social interaction.

In addition to the nostalgic sports and wedding photos dotted around the shop, several laminated newspaper clippings about the forced removals offer a stark reminder of the cultural trauma (Eyerman 2004) of the area, ensuring, at least here, that this knowledge is not forgotten. Derrida (1995) theorised traditional archives as representative of the worldview of their creators: the preservation of these clippings signals that for Faizel and his community, displacement retains a central role in their historical narrative. The presence of contemporary photographs and clippings, alongside more 'historic' ones, positions them in a historical continuity. Thus, in Arts Barber Shop, history is not merely preserved, but lived, contextualised, and reimagined. The shop's crowded walls serve as both a visual archive and a catalyst for dialogue, demonstrating how memory is actively constructed through spatial, social, and material engagement. Shaped by displacement and resilience, the space offers a powerful counter-narrative

to official archives, embedding the past in the everyday rhythms of a busy community barber shop. Another bustling community space, the local mosque, offers a comparable location where history is both curated and contested through different rituals, objects, and forms of collective remembrance.

Goejjatul Islam Mosque

The Goejjatul Mosque, established in 1896, is one of the few remaining traces of *Die Vlakte* (Giliomee 2007). While most coloured worship spaces in the area were demolished or repurposed, the mosque endures as a physical and symbolic anchor for Stellenbosch's Muslim community.¹⁰ Its continued presence and cultural importance, amid mostly industrial buildings and student housing, challenges the erasure of Muslim coloured histories from the urban landscape, with its social dimension being central to its role as an ICMC. During a visit with Imam Tahier Cornelson, an elderly worshipper insisted on giving me an impromptu tour of the surrounding area so that he could tell me about how the area looked when he was young. Gesturing disgustedly to the tarred-over spaces where homes once stood, he explained, 'everywhere we used to live, there are now parking lots'. Another elderly interviewee described always sitting in the same spot during prayers to glimpse her childhood home, now a white-owned guesthouse, through a specific window: 'Our house... was at least not demolished, but we had to give way... People were very unfair.' These testimonies reveal how the space grounds personal and communal memory of the neighborhood which used to exist here.

Like Arts Barber Shop, the mosque and its attached madrassas (Islamic schools) display historic photographs of imams, religious celebrations among everyday educational materials (see Photo 3), linking worshippers to a past physically erased from Stellenbosch. As Fransch (2009) has noted, historiographies of the local Muslim coloured community are even rarer than narratives of the area's coloured Christian denomination, making such documentation through visual and oral traditions all the more important. Children learn this history formally in Islamic classes and informally through social interactions at frequent religious community events, ensuring an intergenerational transmission of memory. Likewise, in the private photographic collections and memories of interviewees related to *Die Vlakte*, the mosque continues to play a prominent role. Interviewees would often explain the location of a certain home or event to me in relation to the mosque's position ('You know where the mosque is? Our house was on the block just behind it; we used to walk to prayers'), and rare photographs of ancestors were often taken in the context of religious celebrations (see Photo 4 as an example). The forced removals dispersed the religious community which predominantly used to live in the vicinity, and today, most worshippers commute to the mosque by car or taxi. However, the gathering of the Muslim community through religious practice in the same space as before the removals provides a spatial, temporal, and social link to a landscape which is no more, and plays an important role in place-based identity. By merely continuing to exist and function, the mosque is testament to the resilience and collective memory of its community, who, almost sixty years after Apartheid legislation tried to erase their presence,



Figure 3. A frame inside one of the madrassa's classrooms depicts the Goejjatul Mosque and two past imams: one outside the Mosque, the other on Hajj. Image by author, with permission from Imam Tahier Cornelson.

continue to claim this space as culturally and historically theirs.



Figure 4. *The Muslim youth of Stellenbosch, circa 1946. This photograph was taken on the occasion of Eid, outside the Goejjatul Mosque on Banghoek Road. Image provided courtesy of Caushiem Toefy.*

The social life of memory: how ICMCS challenge archival silences

Spaces like Arts Barber Shop and the Goejjatul Mosque, although not designed as formal archives, function as centres of historical learning by offering materials and perspectives which are absent from conventional records. Their informal, social nature provides two key advantages: firstly, by preserving officially underrepre-

sented histories, they encompass a counter-narrative of Stellenbosch's history by centring the town's coloured and Muslim communities. Secondly, as 'third spaces' (Oldenburg 1989), they foster community-driven historical dialogue which centres first-person perspectives in a way formal archives do not. These ICMCS reveal how marginalised communities preserve their histories, despite official archival silences. Their value lies not just in the spatial, oral, and material historical material

they contain, but in how they empower communities to define their own histories, on their terms, in their spaces. As many project participants expressed a sense of detachment from the town's dominant, Eurocentric historical narrative, which primarily highlights white settler history, such locations arguably serve as anchors for place-related identity and feelings of belonging. Studied collectively, they provide a uniquely representative insight into the historical development of the various communities within the local coloured population, as well as possible sociological perspectives into collective memories in the area.

However, the informality of such spaces poses challenges from a research perspective. Access requires trust, time, and gatekeeper mediation, with researchers having to adopt an ethnographic mindset. Speaking from personal experience, historians may be unsure of how to navigate such settings due to a lack of training in anthropology, collaborative methodologies and relevant ethical frameworks. Whereas traditional archives are formal and institutional, with clear-cut bureaucratic procedures and articulated responsibilities on the part of the researcher, working with people and memory in unfamiliar environments requires a wholly different skillset and sensibility towards the materials, individuals, and environment under study. Understanding them in their entirety thus requires a deeply interdisciplinary approach. During the CIRM project, my focus on dates and names, rather than interactions and impressions, reflected this gap and was retrospectively a missed opportunity to understand the social significance of these spaces more deeply. As with traditional archives, researchers should also remain critical towards how power dynamics within

these spaces shape whose memories are preserved. For instance, Arts Barber Shop, as a male-dominated space, contains very little historic information related to local women; similarly, traces of working-class coloured agricultural labourers were notably absent in all the urban locations I visited.

Nonetheless, the importance of such ICMCs cannot be overstated in a context where official public history continues to centre white settler narratives. Stellenbosch's local museum, its heritage sites, and even its university, remain symbols of exclusion for many coloured residents. ICMCs, by contrast, are spaces of reclamation, where coloured histories are not just preserved but celebrated, mourned, and passed down. They function as counter-sites to the dominant memory landscape, offering an alternative geography of the town. Hayden (1995) argues that urban landscapes are not neutral but are imbued with the memories of those who have shaped them: ICMCs make these memories visible, inscribing coloured histories onto a landscape that has sought to erase them. As such, they offer a model for how marginalised communities reclaim their pasts outside the epistemological frameworks imposed by colonial and state power. For researchers wishing to study them, engaging with methodologies that prioritise community collaboration and ethical reciprocity are essential. It also means recognising that some stories are not ours to tell, and that our role should be to amplify rather than appropriate the voices of those who have been silenced.

In Stellenbosch, the future of ICMCs is uncertain. As the town continues to change, through gentrification, studentification, and the commodification of its colonial heritage, spaces like Arts Barber Shop

and Goejjatul Mosque remain vital, if currently officially underappreciated, parts of the town's memory landscape. Their preservation is not only a matter of safeguarding the past but also of ensuring that local coloured histories remain visible and valued in the present.

Conclusion

This study has ethnographically explored the process of researching the history of a marginalised racial group, revealing how history is not only preserved but actively shaped in spaces beyond official archives. While developing the CITM project, a visual map designed to centre the history of Stellenbosch's coloured residents as a counter-narrative to the area's Eurocentric historiography, I identified several locations where spatiality, social interaction, material culture, and collective memory converge to construct alternative historical narratives. Drawing on Hayden's (1995) concept of 'memory landscapes', I analysed Arts Barber Shop and Goejjatul Mosque as ICMCs: focal points within Stellenbosch's memory landscape that embed spatial, oral, and material links to the pasts of historically marginalised communities. These spaces, neither fully private nor entirely public, function as in-between zones where identity and history are collectively negotiated. Arts Barber Shop, for example, operates as a classic 'third space' (Oldenburg 1989), where coloured men of all ages gather not only for haircuts but for camaraderie, recognition, and a sense of historical continuity. Similarly, Goejjatul Mosque serves as a spiritual and historical anchor for a Muslim community dispersed

by Apartheid's spatial engineering. Both spaces offer more than historical information: they foster a sense of belonging in a town that has long rendered coloured people historiographically invisible.

Unlike formal archives, which fix history in documents and institutional frameworks, ICMCs are dynamic, community-driven spaces where the past is negotiated, contested, and transmitted through everyday practices. The photographs on the walls of Arts Barber Shop, the oral stories shared between haircuts, and the artefacts displayed in Goejjatul Mosque are not passive remnants but active participants in the construction of collective memory. As Eyerman (2004) notes, memory is not merely stored in objects or landscapes but is recounted, interpreted, and transmitted through dialogue. In ICMCs, this process is particularly evident: patrons engage with visual narratives, situating themselves and their families within the history of the coloured community, while worshippers at Goejjatul Mosque connect their personal and communal pasts to the physical space of the mosque, one of the few remaining traces of the coloured neighbourhood of *Die Vlakte*. These interactions underscore the interconnectedness of space, memory, and identity, reinforcing the argument that ICMCs are not just places where history is stored but where it is lived and transmitted. One of the key contributions of this study is its challenge to traditional notions of archives and historical authority, as ICMCs demonstrate that history is not solely the domain of institutional archives but is also preserved in informal, community-driven spaces. This has implications for historical knowledge production, particularly in postcolonial and post-apartheid contexts where official narratives have long silenced certain voices.

By centring the experiences and memories of coloured Stellenboschers, iCMCs offer a decolonial alternative to dominant historiographies, prioritising community ownership and self-representation.

The study also highlights the need for methodological adaptation when researching marginalised communities. My access to these spaces was mediated by gatekeepers and built on relationships of trust, requiring reflexivity and sensitivity to the racial and socioeconomic dynamics at play. As a white researcher from Stellenbosch, I was acutely aware of how my positionality shaped my interactions. While some participants were generous with their stories, others approached my presence with caution, reflecting a broader history of epistemic violence and academic extraction. This experience reinforces the importance of collaborative, ethnographically-informed approaches in historical research, which if conducted ethically, can reveal histories that official archives have overlooked or erased.

The concept of iCMCs invites further interdisciplinary research, particularly between history, anthropology, and archival studies. While historians bring a focus on temporal depth and structural power, anthropology offers insights into the more social and material dimensions of memory. Future research could explore similar spaces in other contexts, such as Indigenous communities, diasporic groups, or post-conflict societies, to reveal common strategies of resistance and the unique ways communities use space and material culture to assert their presence in history.

Ultimately, this study has shown that iCMCs are more than alternative archives: they are sites of resistance, identity, and collective memory that chal-

lenge the silences of official history. By studying these spaces, we gain a deeper understanding of how marginalised communities navigate the legacies of displacement, oppression, and resilience. For coloured Stellenboschers, iCMCs are not just about the past: they are about claiming a place in the present and future. As researchers, our task is to listen, learn, and stand in solidarity with the communities who have kept these histories alive, contributing to a more inclusive and just understanding of history that honours the agency and resistance of those long excluded from its pages.

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Notes

- 1 Although I reject simplifications of race as a scientific concept, it is impossible to move away from racialisation in discussions of South African historiography. Taking my cue from leading coloured identity scholars Erasmus (2001) and Adhikari (2005), I have thus chosen to write 'coloured', 'black' and 'white' in lower case letters except when referring to Apartheid classifications, with my use of the terms being limited to the South African context.
- 2 The Apartheid 'Group Areas Act', passed in 1950, allowed the government to designate certain areas for habitation by certain races only (Newton & Schuermans, 2013). Under this law, urban centres and the most arable land was almost always reserved for those designated 'White'. In line with the government's policy of 'Separate Development', the law was designed to prevent racial mixing, and under it, hundreds of thousands of South Africans were forcibly displaced over several decades (Kamies, 2018).
- 3 It should be noted that people classified as 'Black' were also removed from the town centre to a 'Black Group Area', namely Kayamandi. This project chose to focus on coloured people as historically they have always been the biggest demographic group in the District, and because I had more connections within the town's coloured population. Historical research into the town's black population remains a salient topic for future study.
- 4 You can view the final project at the following link: <https://storymaps.com/stories/7af5487e90c54ff0839c1e5aace41316> (accessed on 21 August 2025).
- 5 A recent example in the larger Stellenbosch area is 'Landscapes of Dispossession' (Oelofse and Fortuin 2024), which gathered testimonies about the forced removals and dispossession that happened in the Tiervlei area in the 1970s.
- 6 Examples of cultural minority groups with similar histories related to colonisation and contemporary socio-political identity-related challenges in their respective nations include the Métis of Canada, Afro-Brazilians in Brazil, and Creoles in the Caribbean.
- 7 See, for example, *Stellenbosch: Drie Eeue* (Smuts 1979). This volume was commissioned by the town council on the 300th anniversary of the founding of the town. An example of the racial bias of the tome is that although sixteen pages are devoted to the histories of the town's white schools, barely one is given to descriptions of schools that served the area's inhabitants of colour.
- 8 <https://finaid.sun.ac.za/files/2022/06/Die-Burger-us-Die-Vlakte-beurs.pdf> (accessed on 21 August 2025).
- 9 See: <https://www.sun.ac.za/english/Lists/news/DispForm.aspx?ID=10671> for more information (accessed on 21 August 2025).
- 10 It should be noted that not all coloured Stellenboschers are Muslim, but only coloured people make up the local Muslim community.

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Reading the Cultural Archive in *Het Zuid-Afrikahuis*:

Coloniality, Racial Capitalism, and Dutch Whiteness

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Gloria Wekker's seminal book *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016) has shown how whiteness operates intersectionally in the Netherlands. Drawing on Edward Said's (1993) notion of the cultural archive – not as a physical repository but as a set of memories and feelings embedded in minds and bodies, structured by a racial grammar – Wekker demonstrates how race and racism are sustained through discourse, affect, and material culture. Crucially, she shows that the colonial past is not past at all but is continually enacted through the cultural archive. Whiteness, in her reading, structures Dutch understandings of race and history, casting national identity as innocent and disconnected from colonial violence. I extend that insight by asking how material histories themselves might unsettle this narrative of white innocence. Through a spatial and object-based reading of a room in *Het Zuid-Afrikahuis* (ZAH, The

South Africa House), a cultural and knowledge centre about South Africa in Amsterdam since 1923, I show how whiteness is not only maintained discursively and affectively, but also through seemingly neutral arrangements of objects and archival structures. This includes analysing the relational arrangement of four objects in a room that point to how a dominant narrative of a white kinship relation between the Dutch and Boer-Afrikaners has come to form and be maintained, while actively omitting Black Africans.¹ When read critically and in relation to other archival materials such as railway photographs, these objects expose white innocence and the cultural archive, revealing how the exploitation of Black African labour, or in other words, racial capitalism, materially facilitated a Dutch identification with Boer-Afrikaners and underpins the very foundation of the ZAH. Additionally, these material objects point to practices of selective remembering and

forgetting, as well as silences and hierarchies that are informed by the cultural archive.

The erasures made visible through these material objects echo in the present, where questions of colonial memory and the legacies of white supremacy have become increasingly contested in Dutch public life. The urgency of this debate is evident in the current political climate, in which large-scale protests such as #BlackLivesMatter in 2020, ongoing anti-Black Pete activism, the Dutch Prime Minister and King's formal apologies for slavery, and plans for a national slavery museum mark a shifting landscape. Cultural institutions now face growing demands to reckon with their colonial entanglements and the Eurocentric frameworks that continue to centre whiteness (Van Bijnen et al. 2024). Initiatives such as *Musea Bekennen Kleur*, launched in 2020 by a coalition of Dutch museums, signal an institutional recognition of these demands by committing to embed diversity and decolonial practice across programming and collections.² As Johanna Turunen (2020: 2) notes, 'colonialism continues to influence the subjectivities of "white" Europeans and through them our ideas about European heritage'. Institutions are increasingly pressed to confront their role in producing and maintaining the Dutch cultural archive: a site through which whiteness is constructed, sustained, and now contested. While scholars have explored how Dutch whiteness is constructed in relation to colonised and racialised others (Essed & Trienekens 2008; Ghorashi 2014; Hondius 2014; Weiner 2014), less attention has been paid to how it is also shaped relationally with other white groups, or how colonialism formed white subjectivities within the metropole itself (Edwards 2016). Focusing on the ZAH,

I contribute to this conversation by examining how Dutch whiteness has been informed transnationally in relation to Boer-Afrikaner whiteness in South Africa, through the lens of cultural heritage in the Dutch metropole.

The ZAH has not been exempt from these shifting debates; it has faced criticism for its overwhelming whiteness and its historical focus on white Boer-Afrikaner subjectivity and culture, with limited engagement with post-apartheid realities (Trouw, 7 March 2020). At the same time, critical projects have begun to interrogate its holdings (Stobbe et al. 2022; Henkes et al. 2024). The ZAH exemplifies what MacDonald (2009) terms 'difficult heritage': colonial traces that provoke tension in the present. I focus on a specific space within the ZAH, known as the 'ZASM meeting room', to explore how Dutch racial imaginaries are spatialised and enacted. The room's arrangement of objects reinforces identification with white Boer-Afrikaners while rendering Black South Africans largely invisible. It stages a narrative of *stamverwantschap* (kinship) between the Dutch and Boer-Afrikaners, linking whiteness to notions of shared blood, religion, and history. As Sara Ahmed (2007: 150) reminds us, whiteness is 'real, material and lived', and its materiality extends to spatial organisation, shaping practices of belonging and exclusion.

Methodologically, this paper moves between the meeting room and the ZAH's archival collections to read them as entangled sites of memory and power. While the archive houses objects, textual, and visual materials, the ZASM room functions as a spatial archive in itself – curating narratives through the placement and juxtaposition of objects. Following Mbembe

(2002), I approach the archive not only as a collection of documents but as a physical site that organises and institutes imaginaries. Reading across the physical archive and the spatial archive of the ZASM room, I adopt a method of relational spatial reading that foregrounds archival materials, space, and display as active in shaping racial imaginaries. Although the ZAH is not a museum, museum anthropology provides insights into how displays function as knowledge-making devices (Moser 2010), enabling me to engage with the curation of whiteness within institutional space. Alfred Gell's (1998) anthropological theory of art helps conceptualise objects as 'ways of seeing' within cultural systems, mediating social agency through networks of exchange, politics, and kinship. Laurajane Smith (2006: 30) notes that heritage objects 'provide a physical representation of those things from "the past" that speak to a sense of place, self, belonging, and community'. This aligns with Bauer's (2019) view of objects as active participants in meaning-making networks, and with Henri Lefebvre's (1991) notion of space as a realised abstraction, allowing me to analyse how objects in space produce a racialised grammar of belonging.

Postcolonial metropolitan archives are not merely repositories of overseas records but colonial spaces where imperial narratives were curated for a domestic audience (Edwards 2016), historically 'used to generate collective identity and social solidarity' (Featherstone 2006: 592). Using Said's (1993) approach of contrapuntal reading and Stoler's (2009) call to 'read along the archival grain', I attend to both the presence and absence of Black South Africans in the cultural record, as well as to 'white' colonial commonsense and 'how

unintelligibilities are sustained' (Stoler 2009: 53). This approach enables an ethnographic mode of analysis that treats space, silence, and arrangement as central to the archive's racial logic. Engaging with these theoretical and methodological approaches also requires situating myself in relation to the archive and space. As a white Afrikaner-raised South African researcher working in the Netherlands, I carry particular embodied knowledges and affective responses. Entering the ZASM room, for instance, I was reminded of contestations around Boer-Afrikaner statues in contemporary South Africa, of the ambivalent place of Afrikaner identity in post-apartheid society, and of the silences around histories of Black African labour exploitation that marked my own schooling. These memories and affective resonances shaped how I experienced the room: not only as a display of objects, but as a staging of whiteness that felt familiar in its omissions and emphases. My reading of the ZASM room is therefore shaped not only by archival analysis but also by lived experience, which forms part of the broader cultural archive through which race and imagined kinship are felt as much as they are known.

I proceed in three parts. First, I examine the spatial arrangement of objects in the ZASM meeting room. Second, I situate this within broader genealogies of kinship, nationalism, and imperial ambition, asking: how has Dutch whiteness been shaped through a narrative of kinship with Afrikaners? How were Dutch imperial ambitions in South Africa entangled with the construction of a white self-image, given that whiteness must be located 'in the machinery' (Hunter and Van der Westhuizen 2021) that produces it within the global colonial world system? Finally, I turn to the

concepts of racial capitalism and coloniality to show how Black South Africans are rendered invisible in the Dutch cultural archive. Here, I examine the capital used to purchase the ZAH building itself, arguing that this material history unsettles dominant narratives of white innocence.

The ZASM meeting room and its entanglements

The first time I visited the ZAH, I wandered through its seventeenth-century building on the Keizersgracht canal, browsed the library and explored its archives, mostly dating from the nineteenth-century. One room, known as the ‘ZASM room’ room on the *bel-étage* at the back of the building has lingered in my memory since then. It commemorates the *Zuid-Afrikaansche Stichting Moederland* (ZASM, South African Foundation Motherland), which purchased the property in 1923. The ZASM was a successor to the *Nederlandsch Zuid-Afrikaansche Spoorwegmaatschappij* (NZASM, Dutch South African Railway Company), which built and operated railway lines in the Transvaal and is known for the construction of the Eastern Line between Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) and Pretoria (now Tshwane) (Clarke and Fisher 2016). After the South African War (1899–1902) between the British and Boer-Afrikaners, the NZASM was compensated by the British in 1908. The interest from these funds helped create the ZASM, purchase the property, and subsidise the archive, library, and activities within the ZAH (De Graaff 1993).

The ZASM legacy is immediately visible in the room’s décor. Besides the long table and chandelier, my attention was drawn to a portrait of Paul Kruger (see



Photo 1. Portrait of Paul Kruger, seated, with bible, during his stay in Utrecht. Painting by Thérèse Schwartz (oil on canvas, 140 cm x 110 cm), 1902, Amsterdam. Photograph by Sean Fitzpatrick, 2023, ZAH, Amsterdam.

Photo 1), the Boer-Afrikaner president (1883–1900) of the Transvaal Boer colony. He sits with a copper-covered bible, his hand resting solemnly on its pages. I was surprised. What was Kruger doing here, hanging so prominently in Amsterdam? In South Africa today, Kruger is a deeply contested figure. But in the Netherlands, he seems to go largely unnoticed – like the many streets still named after him.

In 2015, as a student at the University of Cape Town, I joined the #RhodesMustFall movement. It shifted my perception of figures like Cecil John Rhodes and Paul Kruger. In Tshwane, a statue of Kruger became a focal point for protests, symbolising a legacy of exclusion and violence against Black South Africans (Dondolo 2022). Standing in the ZASM room years later, I found myself wondering: who commissioned this portrait, and why? Just as these questions surfaced, my attention shifted again. Near the door, behind one's back upon entering, a Zulu shield hung on the wall, alongside knobkerries and spears (see Photo 4).³ Who made this object, how did it end up here and was it meant to recall the Battle of Blood River/Ncome (1838) in relation to the portrait of Kruger, or to represent a generic 'African' identity?

Circling the room, more objects came into view. In one corner stood a black-painted steel canister with white lettering in reference to the NZASM and purchasing of bonds (see Photo 5). The numbered stubs inside also reference NZASM bond payments. Beside it on the ground, leaned a tile tableau depicting Princess Wilhelmina at age ten, some years ahead of her coronation (see Photo 2). Taken together, the Kruger portrait and tableau of Wilhelmina conveys a dominant narrative of *stamverwantschap* – a feeling of 'tribal kinship' that was pertinent among the late nineteenth-century Dutch public toward the Boer-Afrikaners. The canister on the other hand hints at the history of the NZASM and its links to the capital that was used to purchase the building. The Zulu shield with knobkerries and spears stands as the anomaly, behind our back when entering the room – an 'absent presence' in the dominant *stamverwantschap* narrative. I argue when viewed in relation to the canister, a different narrative emerges

about the history of the NZASM, one of racial capitalism that is intimately connected to the very foundation of how the ZAH came to be. This spatial reading provides a lens I return to, anchoring the subsequent historical and archival analysis.

***Stamverwantschap*, Nationalism, and Cultural Imperialism**

The objects I have introduced tell a connected story. The portrait of Kruger, for instance, reflects a period when Dutch feelings of *stamverwantschap* with Boer-Afrikaners were increasingly framed around language, religion, history, and race. After the Transvaal War (1880–1881) and the Boers' victory against British annexation, a wave of *Boerenliefde* (love for the Boers) developed in the Netherlands. This sentiment not only created new cultural and economic ties but also reinforced a powerful nationalist identification among the Dutch, shaping how they imagined themselves in relation to the Boer-Afrikaners (Schutte 1986). Crucially, these developments coincided with a symbolic revival of Dutch imperial aspirations, with southern Africa envisioned as a potential 'new Netherlands' (Kuitenbrouwer 1991). It was in this context that the *Nederlandsche Zuid-Afrikaansche Vereeniging* (NZAV, Dutch South African Association), the eldest forbear organisation of the ZAH, was founded in 1881 to consolidate pro-Boer networks in the Netherlands. As Benedict Anderson (2006) reminds us, nations are 'imagined communities', forged through shared symbols and affective ties. The circulation of portraits and propaganda made Boer leaders like Kruger part of a Dutch



Photo 2. Rozenburg tile tableau of Queen Wilhelmina, aged 10. Painting on ceramic tiles by Daniël Harkink, produced by Rozenburg Pottery Factory (ceramic tiles, 7 x 10 tiles), 1891, The Hague. Photograph by Sean Fitzpatrick, 2023, ZAH, Amsterdam.

national imaginary, allowing *stamverwantschap* to be felt as natural while in fact being carefully constructed. Kruger quickly became an icon, alongside other Boer generals, and the sentiment of *stamverwantschap* only deepened with the outbreak of the South African War



Photo 3. *L'illustration* front cover of Kruger and Wilhelmina. 1900.

in 1899. Widespread protests, fundraising campaigns, and pro-Boer propaganda emerged across the Netherlands (Kuitenbrouwer 2012). When the Boers were ultimately defeated, Kruger found refuge in the Netherlands after Queen Wilhelmina – sympathetic to the

Boers though politically neutral – sent a cruiser to Lourenço Marques to bring him to safety. The portrait of Kruger in exile, painted in 1902 by prominent Dutch artist Thérèse Schwartz, crystallises these dynamics.

The painting, later acquired by the ZASM, offers a visual entry point into the period (1881–1902) that gave rise to the founding organisations of the ZAH. Seen together with the Wilhelmina tile tableau, gifted by the Queen to Kruger during his stay in the Netherlands, and the December 1900 cover of *L'Illustration* (see photo 3), these objects reveal the cultural system from which they emerged. They illuminate the racialised scaffolding of imagined kinship, what Jurg and Kuitenbrouwer (2021: 177) identify as part of the Dutch 'cultural archive of colonialism'. Barbara Henkes (2020) has criticised the way *stamverwantschap* has often been treated in historical narratives: as an essentialist, 'self-evident bond' between Dutch and Boer-Afrikaners, rather than as a carefully constructed memory strategy that implicitly invoked whiteness while masking colonial violence. Similarly, Christi van der Westhuizen (2024) has demonstrated how the ZAH, through its historical focus on *stamverwantschap*, functioned as a site where Dutch and Afrikaner whiteness were mutually reinforced. Building on her insight that the ZAH's archival practices actively sustained a racialised imaginary centred on white kinship, I align with these critiques, challenging the 'racial normalcy' of *stamverwantschap* (Van der Waal 2023: 77).

By tracing how the forerunner organisations of the ZAH operationalised these kinship myths for imperial ends, we can see how Dutch elites instrumentalised their connection to the Boers to extend influence in southern Africa while simultaneously bolstering

their own fragmented national identity and, in turn, whiteness. This phenomenon operated on multiple, intersecting levels. The Transvaal was imagined as a colony, partially justified through Calvinist rhetoric; ideas about gender, especially concerning Dutch womanhood, were mobilised to substantiate notions of blood relation; and the Boers were paradoxically seen as both racial kin and 'lesser whites' in need of Dutch civilisation. This final point is particularly significant: it demonstrates that whiteness itself must be understood as operating on a contingent hierarchy, not only in relation to racialised others but also among different European groups claiming white identity.

Kinship construction and imperial ambitions: The founding of the NZAV

The founding of the NZAV marked the institutionalisation of Dutch efforts to capitalise on the feelings of *stamverwantschap* with the Boer-Afrikaners following the Transvaal War (1880–1881). The NZAV's activities went far beyond symbolic expressions of solidarity. As Burnett (2022: 3) describes, it functioned as an 'extra-parliamentary lobby group' that developed concrete policies focused on several strategic areas: capital investment in the Boer colonies, migration schemes, education programs, and capital raising for infrastructure development – most notably the railway line between Pretoria and Lourenço Marques. These initiatives were carefully designed to secure lasting Dutch influence in the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, and the wider southern African region. South Africa was seen as a possible 'new Netherlands'. The association created a scholarship fund for Afrikaner students to study in the Netherlands, supported Dutch-language

education by sending teachers and textbooks to South Africa and facilitated immigration to the region, attracting settlers eager for economic opportunities in mining, agriculture, and railway construction (Schutte 1986). However, this growing Dutch presence was not universally welcomed. Many Boer-Afrikaners developed resentment toward what they perceived as Dutch arrogance and interference in their affairs, leading to the phenomenon known as *Hollanderhaat* (hatred toward Dutch persons). Some Boers strongly rejected Dutch assumptions that they required ‘recivilisation’ exposing fundamental tensions within the rhetoric of *stamverwantschap* (Schutte 1986).

Calvinist visions and the ‘New Netherlands’ imaginary

The Dutch imagination of the Transvaal as a potential ‘new Netherlands’ found its clearest expression in a booklet on Boer-Afrikaner history written by Nicolaas Oosterbaan (1896), a high-ranking Dutch educator who later represented the Calvinist Anti-Revolutionary Party (ARP) in parliament. The publication carried a foreword by a founding member of the NZAV, highlighting the institutional ties between this ideological vision and the association’s practical work. Oosterbaan openly stated that he wrote the booklet to inspire support for the Boer-Afrikaners and to encourage immigration or ideally colonisation to strengthen Dutch ties with South Africa (Oosterbaan 1896: 7). His portrayal of the Boer-Afrikaners was deeply romanticised. They were imagined as the ‘young Holland of South Africa’: a purer, more resilient version of the Dutch people, untainted by the modernity and moral decline that Neo-Calvinists such as Abraham Kuyper feared would corrupt the Netherlands (Van Koppen

1992). Their Calvinist virtues, courage, and moral resilience were emphasised, with deliberate parallels drawn between their struggle against British imperialism and the Dutch revolt against Spanish rule in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Such nostalgic evocations of the ‘Dutch Golden Age’ were a recurring feature of nineteenth-century nationalist discourse (Aerts 2022). By situating the Boer-Afrikaners within this historical continuum, Oosterbaan and others could cast them as heroic defenders of Dutch values while simultaneously advancing an imperial vision for South Africa that consolidated Dutch cultural and economic influence. This dual narrative of kinship and colonisation demonstrates how cultural nostalgia was entangled with imperial ambition in the Dutch imagination of southern Africa.

The religious dimension of this imagined kinship was especially potent, as captured in the portrait of Kruger with his hand resting on the Bible. Dutch Calvinists saw themselves and their nation as chosen by God to spread the true faith. As philosopher Saskia Pieterse and theologian Janneke Stegeman notes, ‘[t]hat is why it was so important for the Republic to be and remain a colonial power. Missionary work – the spreading of the true religion – was an indispensable part of the Dutch self-image, but whiteness and freedom was also’ (2025: 7). This theological framework reinforced the broader Dutch self-image, becoming particularly dominant in the nineteenth-century (Aerts 2022). Abraham Kuyper, involved in the NZAV’s founding and later Dutch Prime Minister, was central to shaping both Dutch and Afrikaner identities through this religious-nationalist vision, carried out via the Dutch Reformed Church and the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. His framing of the South

African War cast the Boers' struggle as a divine and racial mission. In 1884 he even imagined the Transvaal as a spiritual refuge for Dutch Calvinists (Schutte 1986: 176-178). This rhetoric reflected Calvinist nationalism, in which political sovereignty and religious purity were mutually dependent. It strengthened Dutch nationalism at home while reinforcing the idea of Boer-Afrikaners as a continuation of the Dutch nation abroad – thereby justifying Dutch colonial and economic ambitions in southern Africa.

Making the Afrikaner through the blood of Dutch women

The Dutch claim to *stamverwantschap* with the Boer-Afrikaners relied heavily on gendered notions of racial inheritance and purity. This is particularly evident in the first chairman of the NZAV, Prof. Harting's inaugural speech (1881), where he advanced a striking argument about blood relations. Responding to claims that Boer-Afrikaners were primarily of German, French, or English descent – which he attributed to German colonial ambitions in southern Africa – Harting acknowledged their diverse European ancestry but introduced a crucial gendered distinction. Surnames, he argued, reflected only the 'male element' of ancestry, while the 'female element' left 'the truest imprint on a population' (ibid.: 11-12). To substantiate this claim, he pointed to the early Cape Colony, where 'shiploads of orphaned girls from Amsterdam' (ibid.: 12) had been sent by civic leaders to redress the gender imbalance. These women, framed as the true vessels of Dutch identity in South Africa, were positioned as biological carriers of Dutchness. Harting concluded that even if a foreign man ('so long as he is European') married a Dutch woman, by

the second generation 'the Dutch blood of the woman has already become dominant', producing 'true old Dutchmen' loyal only to Holland – a logic he extended to the Afrikaners (ibid.: 12).

This rhetorical move served several functions. It directly countered competing European claims to cultural influence over the Boers during the 'scramble for Africa'. More significantly, it reflected nineteenth-century nationalist and racial ideologies that framed the Dutch as blood-kin within Afrikaner identity while erasing the 'creole dimensions of the settler colonial encounter and its aftermath' (Van der Waal 2023: 77). As feminist scholar Elleke Boehmer observes (2013: 22), 'gender forms the formative dimension for the construction of nationhood'. Nations were often imagined as masculine enterprises, yet maternal figures became symbolically central to origin, homeland, and linguistic heritage. In this context, Dutch women were positioned as the reproducers of Dutchness in southern Africa, both biologically and culturally. The implications of this gendered kinship construction were profoundly political. By casting Afrikaner identity as essentially Dutch, Harting and the NZAV could justify Dutch claims to influence in southern Africa. *Stamverwantschap* was not a natural expression of closeness but a strategic racial project, shoring up whiteness across imperial contexts (Van der Westhuizen 2024). Harting's emphasis on Dutch blood transmitted through women exemplifies how kinship ideologies naturalised racial solidarity while masking the colonial entanglements that destabilised such claims. The portrait of Kruger and the Wilhelmina tile tableau in the ZASM meeting room materialise this logic, visually enacting the gendered narrative of *stamverwantschap*.

A moral duty to civilise the *stamverwanten*

Despite the rhetoric of *stamverwantschap*, Dutch elites held a paternalistic attitude toward Boer-Afrikaners that revealed deeper hierarchies within this imagined white solidarity. As Harting's speech shows, while celebrating Dutch-Afrikaner kinship, he cast it as imposing a 'moral duty' on the Netherlands – not only to preserve Boer independence but also to 'develop' the region. This civilising mission presumed that the Boer-Afrikaners themselves required refinement and guidance. Harting's praise was thus ambivalent: they had preserved the 'blood and language' of their ancestors, but in forms 'somewhat maimed and corrupted' (Harting 1881: 13). Boer-Afrikaners could be acknowledged as Dutch in origin, yet their isolation in southern Africa was seen to have left them culturally diminished – a kind of 'noble savage' who needed reintroduction to civilisation through Dutch tutelage.

This attitude was not unique to Harting. The NZAV actively debated 'how to devise measures to promote civilisation in the Transvaal in the most appropriate manner' (Schutte 1986: 43). For these elites, the question was never whether the Transvaal should bear the stamp of Dutch civilisation, but how this should be achieved. Such discourse had deep roots: since the eighteenth-century Dutch (and European) observers had described Boer-Afrikaners as 'backwards' and 'culturally eroded'. Dutch paternalism thus mirrored British critiques, which likewise framed Boer-Afrikaners as primitive and closer to indigenous Africans through the lens of social Darwinism (Magubane 2004; Sonnekus 2021). This persistent framing of Boer-Afrikaners as 'lesser whites' exposes the hierarchical nature of whiteness itself. As Garner (2006: 268) argues, the 'hierarchies

within the groups referred to as "white" reveal the situational and intersecting nature of power'. Whiteness is often defined in opposition to racialised others, but its internal boundaries are equally significant (ibid.: 264). His framework clarifies how whiteness functions as a contingent hierarchy, allocating access to cultural and social capital differentially, intersecting with class, ethnicity, and gender.

The Dutch-Boer relationship exemplifies this dynamic. Boer-Afrikaners could be embraced as part of an imagined 'Dutch race', but always within limits. Black Africans remained the primary racialised Other, yet distinctions within whiteness itself positioned the Boers as kin and simultaneously subordinate – related, but in need of civilisation. This ambivalent kinship was not only discursive but also materialised in the ZASM room, where the portrait of Kruger and other displays staged Boer-Afrikaners as kin while the absence of Black South Africans reinforced their place as the ultimate Other. In the next section, I turn to the role of racial capitalism and how it intersects with these racial hierarchies, materially shaping the ZASM's foundations.

From bloodline to railway line: The NZASM through the lens of racial capitalism and coloniality

While the portrait of Kruger illustrates how *stamverwantschap* was mobilised by groups like the NZAV, using Kruger to embody Boer-Afrikaner identity and promote Dutch nationalism infused with Calvinist values and imperial ambitions, I now return to the Zulu shield with spears and knobkerries (see Photo 4).



Photo 4. Zulu shield with spears and knobkerries.
Artist unknown (Nguni cattle hide, wood, and steel),
date unknown, location unknown. Photograph by
Sean Fitzpatrick, 2023, ZAH, Amsterdam.

Unlike the portrait, its provenance is unclear – just like it is out of our view when we enter the room. It is unclear who made it, how it arrived in the Netherlands, or what it originally signified. Objects like these are commonly sold today in South African markets and

cultural villages that, as political scientist Aurelia Wa Kabwe-Segatti (2009) notes, often stage essentialised images of Africa for non-African tourists, reproducing colonial imaginaries of ‘primitiveness’ and ‘wilderness’, especially when objects are removed from their contexts. It could have been acquired through such circuits. At the same time, world exhibitions, often featuring ethnographic displays of colonial objects and people, were popular in the early twentieth-century, and the Transvaal’s participation suggests another possible route into the ZAH.

The shield might represent a Dutch imaginary of South Africa, particularly of ‘Zuluness’, otherwise absent in the ZAH. Its presence gestures to the archival erasure of Zulu and broader Black South African voices in the *stamverwantschap* narrative. Yet it also signifies a deeper coloniality: materialised not just in this object, but in its relation to the Kruger portrait and the Wilhelmina tile tableau, all anchored in a cultural system of racial-ethnic kinship. More than symbolic, this coloniality is economic and material. The purchase of the very building housing the ZAH was financed through capital accumulated from the liquidation of the NZASM and its associated investment fund after the South African War (De Graaff 1993). This capital, rooted in railway projects built on the exploitation of Black African labour, ultimately helped finance not only the establishment of the ZASM, but this purchase. The black-painted NZASM steel canister, referenced earlier, reinforces this link (see Photo 5). Positioned diagonally across from the shield, the canister holds stubs linked to railway bond dividends – evidence of a bureaucratic infrastructure that profited from African labour while rendering it invisible. It references the



Photo 5. NZASM canister containing numbered stubs related to the dividend payment of NZASM bonds.
Photograph by Sean Fitzpatrick, 2023, ZAH, Amsterdam.

NZASM's late nineteenth-century railway projects in the Transvaal, framed as modernising investments for European shareholders. Its modest form belies its function as a vessel of financial conquest, materially tied to the ZAH's foundation. Read together, the

shield and canister expose the Black labour behind the Eastern Line's construction, the NZASM's flagship project.

These objects serve as an entry point of the NZASM's history, its labour regimes and capital accumulation, through the concepts of racial capitalism and coloniality. Both help illuminate the material and epistemic links between the NZASM's railways and the seventeenth-century canal house: products of a global colonial matrix where capitalism acted through racialised hierarchies (Grosfoguel 2022: xv). Racial capitalism, a concept emerging from South African anti-apartheid thought, speaks to how race and class were inseparable in shaping Black precarity (Levenson and Paret 2023). Anti-apartheid activist and intellectual, Neville Alexander (1979, cited in Drew and Binns 1992: 257) traced capitalism's evolution in South Africa from systems of slavery and conquest, reconfigured in the nineteenth-century to extract surplus labour in racialised forms. His contemporary, Bernard Magubane (1983) emphasised how conquest and dispossession created a landless proletariat, forcibly dependent on wage labour. Political philosopher Cedric Robinson (2000) extended this analysis globally, arguing that capitalism was racialised from the start – emerging from Europe's feudal structures of whiteness, which racialised populations for labour. This aligns with decolonial theorist, Aníbal Quijano's conceptualisation of coloniality: the hidden side of modernity. For Quijano (2000: 533-535), colonial conquest encoded race as a system of classification based on phenotypical and cultural difference, justifying white European supremacy and the control of racialised labour through slavery, wages, and other extractive modes.

Reading racial capitalism and coloniality together enables a critical understanding of the NZASM's material afterlives. Narratives of a 'new Netherlands' were tied to the NZASM's modernising ambitions in southern Africa, promising civilisation not only to Boer-Afrikaners but also to Black Africans – figured at the time as 'children of nature'. Photographs in the ZAH archive depicting NZASM labourers offer visual evidence of racial capitalism in formation (see Photos 6 and 7). Read contrapuntally, they reveal both the slavery-like labour practices in the Transvaal (Morton 1994; Bergh 2010) and the capital accumulation that financed the Keizersgracht building. These images render visible the racialised labour that the Zulu shield, despite its symbolism, cannot fully capture in combination with the NZASM canister.

A railway to modernity

The NZAV sought to integrate Boer-Afrikaners into a Dutch-led economic network, leveraging an imagined 'bond of whiteness' to promote both profit and the vision of a 'new Netherlands'. Keen to modernise and secure independence from Britain, Kruger encouraged Dutch investment and migration – most notably through the construction of a railway linking Pretoria to the port of Lourenço Marques. By 1887, the NZASM was established with European investments, bolstered by the discovery of gold and other minerals (Van Helten 1978). The railway formed part of an imperial capitalist network involving collaboration with Portuguese authorities in Mozambique and the displacement of African communities resisting colonial encroachment (Rodney 1971). This transition from an agrarian to an industrial economy further entrenched racial and social inequalities in the region (Van Onselen 2019).

The NZAV's support for the NZASM thus illustrates the entanglement of Dutch imperial ambition, global finance, and local political struggles. As Fourie and Herranz-Loncan (2015) note, railways enabled global capitalism to penetrate peripheral regions. In southern Africa, their expansion after the discovery of diamonds and gold integrated the region into global circuits of capital while reinforcing racial segregation and the exploitation of Black African labour. Railways not only connected mining hubs but also reshaped South Africa's economic geography, laying the groundwork for apartheid-era segregation (ibid.: 15). They also facilitated the migration of Black African labourers to the mines, creating enduring patterns of exploitation. Historian Charles van Onselen's *The Night Trains* (2019) shows how the Eastern Line, originally built for freight, became a conduit for millions of Mozambican miners travelling to the Witwatersrand, a system of labour transport that fuelled economic growth while embedding racialised labour regimes.

Commemorating the NZASM

Accounts of the NZASM and the Eastern Line, as Luirink (2024) notes, remain largely celebratory, especially in works drawing on NZASM archives. These narratives foreground the ingenuity of Dutch engineers while erasing the thousands of Black African labourers who made the railway possible (Barker 2015; Clarke and Fisher 2016). As Clarke (2014) shows, white architects and contractors profited, while Black workers were coerced, underpaid, and subjected to harsh conditions. This celebratory framing enshrines the railway as a symbol of Dutch and Boer-Afrikaner modernity, while obscuring the racial exploitation that sustained

it. Whiteness here operates not only in material form but also in historical narration, as commemorative practices that fix certain stories of progress, civility, and modernity, render others invisible.

De Jong (1989) provides detailed accounts of white engineers and officials, yet the labour of Black African workers remains marginal. It is only noted, for example, that the Transvaal government supplied 3,000 Black African men to NZASM contractors, many recruited through coercive methods (De Jong 1996). These practices resonated with earlier systems of labour control, such as the *inboekstelsel* ('indenture system'), whereby African children and youths were bound to settler households as indentured labourers under the guise of apprenticeship (Breckenridge 2008). Such omissions matter. They reveal how the Eastern Line was materially constructed through racialised labour regimes even as official histories cast it as a monument of white achievement. The silences surrounding Black African workers are thus central to understanding how the NZASM railway functioned as both infrastructure and archive: a technology of racial capitalism whose commemoration actively reproduced whiteness by celebrating progress while erasing exploitation.

Visual relics of racial capitalism

Van Onselen highlights two fatal train derailments in 1918 and 1949 near Waterval Boven (Emgwenya) and Waterval-Onder, where Black Mozambican workers, crammed into overcrowded compartments while returning home, lost their lives. These deaths were not accidents but structural outcomes of a system that had treated Black African labour as disposable since the inception of railway construction. A photograph

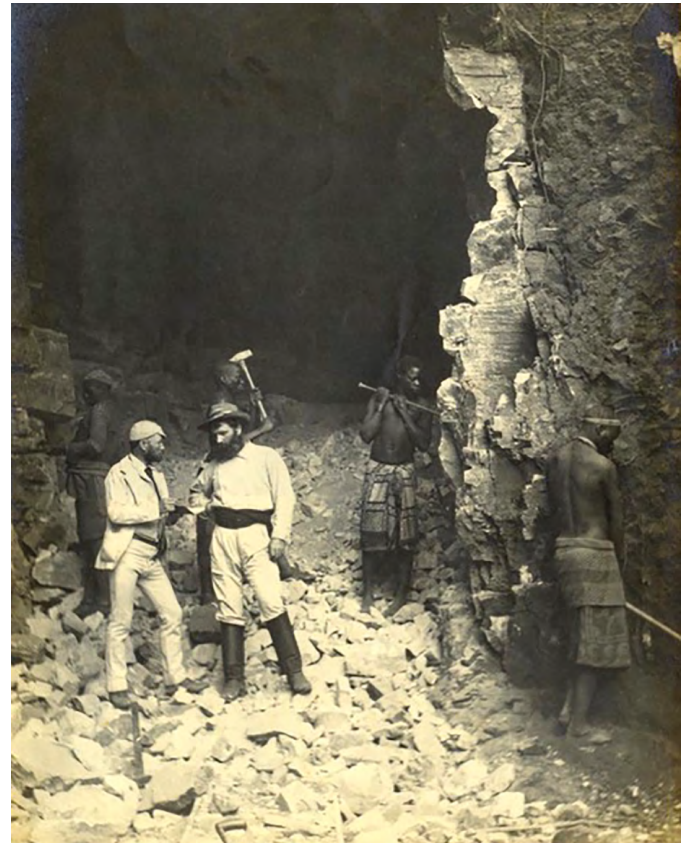


Photo 6. Zuid-Afrikahuis Beeldbank. (1892). *Oostelike ingang van die tunnel gedurende die bou / Oostzijde ingang tunnel tijdens de bouw, Waterval-Onder, Delagoalijn / Oosterlijn* [Photograph]. E. Buchner Collection, Identification number: 1372. MAP 75-4.

(see Photo 6), likely taken by a Dutch NZASM staff member in 1892, offers an early glimpse into this system. It depicts the excavation of a railway tunnel on the Eastern Line at Waterval-Onder, capturing both the racialised hierarchies of labour and the pursuit



Photo 7. Zuid-Afrikahuis Beeldbank. (1895). *Werkzaamheden opzichters met k* (omgeving Kaaprivierbrug)*
[Photograph]. Roostee, H.C. Collection, Identification number: 1281. MAP 72-11b

of infrastructural modernity in the late nineteenth-century Transvaal.

At the centre-left, two white men, likely Dutch or Afrikaner, stand atop a pile of excavated rock, apparently engaged in technical discussion. One holds a notebook, possibly with construction plans. Their attire marks authority and oversight, emblematic of the celebrated white engineer in contemporary accounts.

In stark contrast, Black African workers, three behind the men and one to the front, labour manually at the rock face, dressed in minimal clothing. The photograph vividly illustrates the racialised division of labour that underpinned the Eastern Line: white supervisors as planners and experts; Black labourers as expendable muscle. This stark visual contrast testifies to the racial capitalism embedded in railway construction.

In connection with Nobungcwele Holiness Mbem's (2018) argument about pluriversal modernity, the photograph can be read both as reflecting and contributing to an epistemology of modernity that erased Black African experiences. Drawing on Walter Mignolo (2011), Mbem identifies such images as depicting the 'underside' of modernity: industrial progress built on the exclusion and dehumanisation of non-European bodies, rendering them ahistorical (Mbem 2018: 55). Like the NZASM archive itself, the photograph participates in selective commemoration, reinforcing a Euro-modernist framework that locates historical agency in European ingenuity while denying it to the Black labourers who made the railway possible.

The image of white supervisors elevated above Black workers (as seen above in Photo 7) reflects Achille Mbembe's (2001) notion of colonial sovereignty as organised through spatial hierarchies. European authority was asserted symbolically and physically over both landscape and labour force. The white figures, raised above the Black workers, exemplify what Mbembe terms the commandement: the assertion of European rationality over space, time, and bodies. His later work on necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) helps illuminate the systemic disregard for Black lives in the railway industry. The fatal derailments Van Onselen describes were not anomalies but predictable outcomes of a racialised system in which Black bodies were treated as expendable. In the colonial context, death – whether through forced labour, neglect, or industrial accidents – was structural, not exceptional. Moreover, the paternalistic views held by NZASM engineers, who described Black Africans as 'untainted natural children' to be educated for the 'good use of them' (De Jong 1989:

197), reveal the racial logic embedded in this colonial vision of modernity. Mbembe (2019) identifies such views as central to racial capitalism: a system reliant on Black labour while denying Black workers historical agency or dignity. As Blakely (1993: 35) notes, nineteenth-century Dutch racial imaginaries often infantilised Black Africans, depicting them as childlike and suited only for manual labour. This infantilisation, as Frantz Fanon (1986 [1952]) argues, was fundamental to the affective and economic structures of colonialism.

While these railway photographs function as colonial artefacts, visualising racial hierarchies, they also provide entry points for decolonising historical narratives and unpacking the Dutch colonial cultural archive. As Edwards (2001) reminds us, colonial photographs are never neutral: they encode ideological frameworks that must be critically interrogated. Despite their apparent erasure of Black African agency, they inadvertently reveal the labour conditions and exploitation upon which infrastructural modernity was built. Reading them 'against the grain' exposes layered histories of violence, exploitation, and resistance. As Landau (2002: 2) notes, colonial histories were shaped by the European gaze, which defined itself against the racialised Other. The colonial archive thus functioned both as a repository of power and as a producer of collective memory and racial imaginaries. Yet these very afterlives, whether in the NZASM collection, or in the Zulu shield and canister displayed in the ZASM room, paradoxically hold the potential to open a more inclusive historiography, one that unsettles white innocence and challenges the structures of racial capitalism and colonial memory. Here Wekker's (2016) insight is crucial: the archive is not simply a repository

of the past but a living structure of feeling, organising Dutch national identity through silences, innocence, nostalgia, and whiteness. Reading the ZASM room and archival materials contrapuntally, as Said (1993) suggests, brings into view the absences and silences that scaffold a white imagined community: the erasure of Black labour, the celebration of white engineering, the spatial elevation of whiteness. These are not incidental omissions but the very grammar of the cultural archive.

Conclusion

Following Mbembe's (2002) reminder that archives are both material collections and physical sites that institute imaginaries, the ZAH can be seen not only as a repository but as an active producer of history. Its rooms and displays shape how the past is remembered, and whose histories are rendered visible or erased. Decolonising the narrative of a naturalised *stamverwantschap* between Dutch and Boer-Afrikaners, resurfacing in recent years through right-wing Dutch politicians, requires not only recovering marginalised experiences but also dismantling the racial and temporal frameworks embedded in the archive itself and in the ways objects are displayed.⁴ The implications extend beyond this single institution. The ZAH exemplifies how heritage sites can naturalise colonial narratives through practices that seem neutral or antiquarian. Decolonial work, therefore, is not about cosmetic gestures but about fundamentally reimagining how knowledge is organised, displayed, and shared. Collaborative curation and critical recontextualisation are necessary steps toward unsettling inherited frame-

works and opening space for more inclusive ways of remembering. At stake is not only how South Africa is remembered in the Netherlands but how Dutch whiteness and belonging are negotiated in the present.

As Wekker (2016) argues, whiteness is reproduced through discourse, affect, and material culture. Through the objects in the ZASM meeting room, this took shape in the narrative of *stamverwantschap* and civilisation, the affective charge of Kruger and Wilhelmina's presence, and the spatial choreography that elevated these objects while marginalising the Zulu shield and detaching NZASM bonds from the Black labour that produced them. Read contrapuntally (Said 1993), these silences become audible: the erasure of African labour, the hierarchical positioning of Afrikaners as 'lesser whites', and the transformation of colonial profits into the very foundations of the ZAH. This analysis contributes to debates on the cultural archive by showing how whiteness is not only sustained discursively and affectively but also materially and relationally, and how attending to these material histories can unsettle the narrative of white innocence. The ZASM room shows that cultural heritage does not simply preserve the past but actively constructs it. To unsettle white innocence requires transforming the cultural archive itself, the discourses, affects, and material arrangements through which whiteness is reproduced, so that more just futures of heritage and memory can emerge.

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Notes

- 1 Throughout this article I capitalise the term ‘Black’ to denote a broad category of racialised and historically oppressed peoples in South Africa, including but not limited to African, Indian and Coloured groups, as shaped by colonialism and apartheid. I do not wish to conflate these groups and broader experiences with one another. When I write about Black Africans, I also do not wish to conflate various ethnic group with one another. Conversely, I use white in lowercase to reflect its conventional – and problematic – status as a normative identity category.
- 2 The phrase *bekennen kleur* literally means ‘to admit/acknowledge colour’ but in Dutch also carries the idiomatic sense of ‘showing one’s true colours’ or ‘taking a clear stand’. The title’s wordplay thus gestures both to race and to a demand for visible political commitment, highlighting the initiative’s call for public accountability in embedding diversity and decolonial practice.
- 3 A knobkerrie is a weapon consisting of a stick with a large wooden knob on a long wooden handle.
- 4 See for example the online article ‘Bosma en Baudet shoppen in geschiedenis Zuid-Afrika’ (2021) <https://www.nporadio1.nl/nieuws/opinie-commentaar/018e1a37-a9fe-43bb-81ed-2b5b9d4584bd/bosma-en-baudet-shoppen-in-geschiedenis-zuid-afrika>. Accessed 27 May 2025. Also see the NPO Start Frontline Documentary: *De Vrienden van Apartheid* (2024). https://npo.nl/start/serie/frontlinie/seizoen-4/frontlinie_12/afspelen. Accessed 27 May 2025.

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Where Ethnographic Museum Collections and Archives Meet:

Conducting Provenance Research at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam

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In recent years, European ethnographic museums have increasingly turned attention to the colonial origins of their collections, with provenance research emerging as a key method for tracing how objects were acquired. In the Netherlands, the *Wereldmuseum* is responsible for the country's largest public ethnographic collection, comprising approximately 450,000 objects. The contents of this varied collection range from manuscripts and jewellery to ancestral figures, masks, and architectural elements. This article focuses specifically on items of weaponry and clothing and their role in recent provenance research. For several years, the museum has actively engaged in this form of research, focusing on the unequal power dynamics that shaped the collection of objects amidst European colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Beyond investigating its own collection, the Wereldmuseum has also contributed to the broader development of

provenance research as a discipline, helping to shape its goals, methods, and ethical foundations on both national and international levels.

In 2023, three formerly independent ethnographic museums in Amsterdam, Leiden, and Rotterdam¹ started operating under the single name 'Wereldmuseum'. The museums in Amsterdam and Leiden, both national museums, merged in 2014 into a foundation called *National Museum of World Cultures*. In 2017, this foundation entered into a close partnership with the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, a municipal institution with a collection owned by the Municipality of Rotterdam. The joint collection of all three museums has been the subject of ongoing provenance research. Between 2022 and 2025, the two of us worked as part of the investigating team and were tasked specifically with researching the collection of Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, which amounts to 80,000 objects. In this

article, we reflect on the methodologies involved in provenance research, with specific attention to how archival research has been both indispensable and obstructive in tracing object provenances.

Our work should be considered in relation to broader developments in provenance research as carried out by the Wereldmuseum. While ongoing projects have resulted in several concrete outcomes – such as the return of objects to Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and Nigeria, or the introduction of the magazine *Provenance* of which six editions have been published between 2020 and 2025 – the broader discipline is still in its infant years, and its goals and research methods are continuously developing. Through its various projects, the Wereldmuseum helps shape research practices. Two primary examples are the *Pilotproject Provenance Research on Objects of the Colonial Era (PPROCÉ)* (2019–2022) and *Pressing Matter – Ownership, Value and the Question of Colonial Heritage in Museum* (2021–2025).

The Pressing Matter project departs from the idea that provenance research should be concerned with ‘histories of acquisition, the relations that informed [object] biographies, the processes and discourses that have seen their conversion into heritage objects, and how they have been interpreted over time’ (Cabrita da Palma 2023: 7). In this way, provenance research can reveal complex histories, rather than producing single, linear narratives. The PPROCÉ project follows a similar approach: provenance research is considered ‘microhistorical research’ focused on the production of knowledge and ‘rewriting histories’ (Mooren et al. 2022: 17). The project also developed a set of ‘methodological recommendations’ that identify public and private archives, as well as analogue registration systems at

museums (such as correspondence or photo archives), as important primary sources (Mooren et al. 2022: 25).

Projects such as PPROCÉ or Pressing Matter reveal great ambition. However, recent critiques have emphasised the limitations of provenance research in its current form, particularly its lack of truly collaborative efforts. Jos van Beurden (2023: 63–80), for example, argues that knowledge needs to be co-created with communities and countries of origin and criticises institutions that remain reluctant to hand over or share authority in doing provenance research. Likewise, Laetitia Lai (2023: 30) has warned that provenance research risks ‘becoming a performative act filled with empty promises of lasting collaborations and a decolonised museum’ without genuine collaborations.

Part of this critique targets the strong reliance on archival research as an inherent product of colonialism. As explained by Sarah van Beurden, Didier Gondola and Agnès Lacaille (2024: 26–27), archives often provide limited insight into the provenance of objects, as such information was often excluded from documentation altogether. Rather than conveying a timeless historical truth, archives reflect the logics of colonial and imperial power and require critical readings that question their silences (Stoler 2002; Burton 2005). Charles Tshimanga-Kashama (2022: 9) refers to these as ‘blind spots, ergo everything the archives cannot show us, including the feelings, emotions, psyche, etc. of the colonial agents’. In this article, we call for a methodological shift that helps to redefine provenance research and creates space for such critical engagement with the archives in question.

In its current form, provenance research largely revolves around the question of *involuntary loss of posses-*

sion. This idea is also embedded in Dutch national policy on the return of objects, adopted by the Ministry of Education, Culture and Science in 2021. Alongside this policy, the independent Colonial Collections Committee was established to advise the Minister on restitution requests for collections in ownership of the Dutch State. Their advice is based on provenance research conducted by the museum responsible for the collection and primarily concerns the question whether involuntary loss of possession occurred. We believe that this approach risks presuming both the traceability of ownership of objects, as well as the neutrality of archival records, as places to turn to for proof. Additionally, this approach centres ideas and legal frameworks on ownership and (dis)possession that are grounded in western epistemologies. Provenance research at ethnographic museums rarely leads to clear ownership genealogies or proof of theft. While we see the importance of legal categories for restorative justice, we argue that provenance research should instead focus on interrogating the institutional and epistemic conditions under which collections were assembled.

Based on our work at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, we argue that provenance research should be concerned with *attending* to archival silences – a practice that involves reading archives both *along* and *against* the grain (Stoler 2009). Reading along the grain helps us to understand how and why collections were created and classified. As we will demonstrate below, this includes inventorying and bringing together existing archives as a roadmap to tracing object provenances. Reading against the grain reveals the silences that obscure colonial violence and indigenous perspectives. Attending to these silences could eventually make

room for alternative ways of knowing and remembering history. More directly related to museological practices at the Wereldmuseum, this may result in fruitful restitution requests, but also in a renewed, more accurate, and respectful presentation of the collection at the museum. We situate this approach within the broader framework of critical archival theory, by also exploring what *filling* archival silences could look like. This emphasises the need for collaborative research efforts and fits within the work of scholars such as Saidiya Hartman (2008) or Marisa J. Fuentes (2016). These questions are addressed in an extensive section on the methodology of provenance research, and through the analysis of two case studies based on our research into the Africa collection of the Wereldmuseum.²

Methodology in provenance research

In this section, we will elaborate on our methodological approach to researching the collection of Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. Research into specific objects usually departs from a defined set of questions, which stem from the (un)available information in the museum's collection database. Following this initial enquiry, there is a broad range of sources to consult, with archival records usually being the most prominent.

The questions we pose can be summed up as follows: Where is an object from (both culturally and geographically speaking)? How, by whom, and from whom was that object collected, and what did its trajectory into the collection look like? What was the function and meaning of objects prior to them being collected? How has an object subsequently been used

Afrika
WM-3487
Eigendom Gemeente Rotterdam

☐ Gevalideerd ☐ Niet voor publiek ☐ In opstelling of te zien als repro ☐ RAVI-licentie ☐ Virtueel

Deelcollectie
Materieel cultuurobject

Periode (NB: ook thesaurusterm aanpassen) Datering ca 1900 Cultuur (NB: ook thesaurusterm aanpassen)

Persooninstellingen
Vererving: E.A. (Ernst August) Brunner, (Afkomst 1853 - Haarlem 1920) - 1920-11

Groepsinformatie

Titel (1 Titel) Objectnaam
Schild schild

Fysieke kenmerken Opmerkingen Documentatie Media Thesaurus Relaties Overige Literatuur Flexibele velden Vertalingen

Verzameling(s) (toelichting)
Buitenen 1886

Tentoonstellingsgeschiedenis

Figure 1. An entry in the digital collection database, for the object with inventory number wm-3487. It shows the often-limited information available to researchers prior to the further study of objects. A screenshot of the digital object record, taken by Daantje van de Linde (2025).

and interpreted by the museum? And what role has the museum played in international networks of collecting cultural heritage during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? These questions reflect the institutional responsibility of the museum, which has a duty to gather knowledge on the constitution of the collection it cares for.

Such knowledge often appears to be limited when looking more closely at the collection database (called *The Museum System*, a rather complex programme that requires considerable skill on behalf of the user). Basic provenance information of objects in the collection is usually restricted to the year and manner of acquisition, the identity of the person it was acquired from, and a rough indication of geographical or cultural origin. The latter, however, may be as broad as ‘Africa’ or ‘North America’ – leaving little to work with. As can be observed in Figure 1, certain fields in the database are occasionally left blank. The main reason for this, is

the lack of interest paid to questions of provenance at the time of collection and acquisition. Museums had different priorities, such as the rapid expansion of their collections through the pursuit of prestige-seeking donors and collectors, whose names would be published in exhibitions, year reports and ledger books. In recent years, more ethnographic museums have encountered similar complexities, demonstrating that this is not an issue unique to the Wereldmuseum (see for example Grimme 2020 or Vanhee 2023).

This strong focus on the benefactors of the museum inevitably led to the concealment and omission of the violence and unequal power dynamics involved in the collection of objects, as well as in the fragmented and undetailed descriptions of objects. Documentation sent with the objects reflected the dominant colonial discourse, rather than actual reality. This means that the information available today is limited as well as unreliable, making it difficult for communities and

countries of origin to trace their heritage in European museum collections.

From object to archive

There is a wide variety of sources provenance researchers can turn to. Generally, research starts with the objects themselves, which may reveal clues and traces about their function, materiality, or ownership through old inscriptions or attached labels. In addition, relevant primary and secondary literature may be available in the Wereldmuseum library, or elsewhere. In some cases, there are photograph collections to consult, while material-technical research may also reveal new insights.

Next to the abovementioned sources, we largely rely on archival research to seek information. This includes inventory cards, ledger books, letters of correspondence, restoration and condition reports, exhibition catalogues, and research and travel documentation of previous employees of the museum. Part of the archive is kept at the Wereldmuseum, while the rest is looked after by the Rotterdam City Archive. Archives related to the Wereldmuseum's photo collection – which often overlap with the collection at large – are stored at the Netherlands Photo Museum in Rotterdam. Other relevant archival records are held at institutions such as the Wereldmuseum Leiden and Amsterdam. Names of donors or collectors, for example, may reappear in relation to the different collections, both inside and outside the Netherlands. It is therefore also relevant to consult collections of other European ethnographic museums. Subsequently, we crosscheck these records against state, provincial and municipal archives, such as the National Archive in the Hague, and private archives stored at universities or art galleries.

After compiling all existing records in the collection database, the next step involves the interpretation of the available data. According to Ann Laura Stoler (2009) this first requires a reading *along* the archival grain. Following this approach, we seek to adopt an ethnographic engagement with the documents, rather than an extractive one (Stoler 2009: 47), allowing an understanding of the documents as historical objects of study in and of themselves. Our aim is to understand how the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam functioned and positioned itself within the colonial project, how it classified cultures and peoples through its collections, and how it contributed to a system that extracted cultural heritage from its owners and afforded the circulation of objects across continents. Reading *against* the archival grain, on the other hand, shifts attention to the gaps and erasures in the record due to the exclusion of undesirable and opposing voices – a process Achille Mbembe (2002) has referred to as being 'unarchivable'. This demands us to ask questions about the identities of the makers, users and owners of objects, as well as what can be understood about their function when the only available information comes from colonial administrators.

Finally, we wish to address that tracing relevant archives also requires an in-depth understanding of colonialism as a European project and its common legacy of 'displaced archives' (Hiribarren 2017: 74). The term 'displaced archives' is used to address the structural ways in which (parts of) colonial archives have been destroyed, displaced, lost, hidden, or otherwise kept out of reach by former colonial powers (Bailkin 2015; Elkins 2011). For instance, in February 1962 – eight months before Britain's withdrawal from Uganda



Photos 1 and 2. *One of the storage rooms at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam, where part of the archives is kept.*
Photos taken by Daantje van de Linde on 12 September 2024.

– three Land Rovers transported confidential records dating back to 1900 from the Entebbe Secretariat Archives, which were then sunk into Lake Victoria (Tuck and Rowe 2005: 404). Similarly, the archives of colonial French West-Africa remain in Dakar (Senegal), while those of Algeria – legally a French

protectorate rather than a formal colony from 1830 to 1962 – were transferred to Aix-en-Provence (France), causing an ongoing dispute between the two nations (Shepard 2015). Belgium only opened its archives on Belgian rule in Congo to the public in 1997, but it was not until the late 2010s that a dedicated employee

‘rediscovered’ the existence of the colonial military court files (Piret 2015; Henriët et al. 2023). Hiribarren (2017: 87) characterises this phenomenon of displaced archives – of which there are countless examples – as the physical trace of the ‘culture of secrecy’ adhered to by most European governments, or rather a ‘culture of neglect’.

While perhaps less extreme, we recognise similar issues in relation to the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam archives. In some cases, the existing records have been included in the museum’s collection database. However, the majority of archives have not yet been properly inventoried and/or digitised. It is not exceptional to find relevant information stored away in boxes, scattered across the various museum buildings and depots (see Photos 1 and 2). Navigating this fragmentary state of different sources requires a constant moving between different spaces, both virtual and physical, eventually linking the various sources in the database entries of objects (Oswald 2022: 206–207).

Positionality

As white European women with a Belgian and Dutch nationality, trained and educated at European universities, we engage in provenance research from positions shaped by colonial legacies that continue to structure knowledge production and access to resources. Our work draws on three years of employment at the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam where we conducted provenance research into collections deeply entangled with European colonialism. While we are committed to critically examining these histories, we do so as individuals who have not personally experienced colonial violence, and whose ability to access, interpret and

write about colonial archives is in part enabled by institutional affiliations and language proficiencies.

In this paper, we argue that provenance researchers must attend to archival silences by reading both along and against the grain. However, we also recognise that many of these silences concern histories, voices and experiences that do not belong to us. As such, we do not claim to ‘fill’ these silences but rather advocate for more collaborative research practices that make space for communities of origin to shape the narratives being told.

Additionally, drawing on the work of Mirjam Shatanawi (2022: 21) on the museum as a research site, we acknowledge how ‘working in a museum shapes your identity in such a way that you become a museum person’. While this provides increased access to and familiarity with the collection and archives, it also accounts for some ethical implications. As Shatanawi clearly formulates, working as a researcher at the museum means you are ‘not only studying the archive, but also co-creating and co-constructing the archive’ (Shatanawi 2022: 21). This is particularly true in our case, as we enter our findings into the collection database, creating new connections between people, objects, and archival records.

Two case studies from the Africa collection

To exemplify what our engagement with colonial archives looks like in practice, we will expand on two case studies based on our research into the Africa collection of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. This collection consists of some 13,000 objects, collected across

the entire continent during a time span of 150 years. Authors like Larissa Förster (2016) and Hein Vanhee (2023) have warned that ‘provenance research should not be reduced to interesting anecdotes on a select (group of) objects, but rather systematically inquire about the making and unmaking of museum collections’ (Förster 2016: 51-52). At the Wereldmuseum, several ongoing research projects engage with this approach.³ Emerging from these studies are insights into the provenances of individual objects, which we will present in this paper. Both cases presented here discuss a context in which the Netherlands was not the main colonising power, but where Dutch individuals nevertheless contributed to colonial violence and the collecting of people’s cultural heritage.

The first example concerns provenance research into a group of objects donated to the museum in 1886, by Ernst A. Brunner. They were registered into the collection as being ‘Zulu’ and from South Africa; an attribution which has not been questioned nor further contextualised by the museum since. The case will expand on the complexities that arise when trying to make sense of such cultural designations. In the second case study, we look more closely at an outfit of a Swahili-Arab trader, collected by Evrard van Hees. He was one of the more than 65 trade agents of the New African Trading Company (*Nieuwe Afrikaansche Handels-Vennootschap*, NAHV) who collectively contributed some 6,000 objects to the current collection of the Wereldmuseum. This particular provenance research highlights the position of an individual collector in a broader network of colonial collecting and exchange between Europeans.

An early ‘Zulu’ collection from South Africa

The *Museum voor Land- en Volkenkunde* (now Wereldmuseum Rotterdam) officially opened its doors to the public in 1885. One year later, the museum received 145 objects from a private individual named Ernst August Brunner. These objects therefore belong to some of the earliest contributions to the collection and primarily include spoons, baskets, jewellery, ceremonial staffs, spears, and shields – the latter being best referred to as *isiHlangu* (Cele and LeGall 2024). The objects were registered into the collection with the following inventory numbers: WM-3409 to WM-3512, WM-4052 and WM-4718 to WM-4760.⁴ The available ledger books describe the objects as South African, with an occasional mentioning of the word *Zulu*. In the museum’s year report on 1886, the acquisition was mentioned as a collection from ‘Zululand (South-Africa)’. The inventory cards for each object provide similar information, although in some cases ‘Natal’ is added as a geographical indication.

As becomes evident here, the provenance information documented with the objects is often limited. Important clues for further research are cultural and geographical names mentioned with objects, in this case ‘Zulu’ and ‘Natal’. At the same time, however, it is hard to rely on such names referring to peoples and cultures as facts. In their book *Tribing and Untribing the Archive*, Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer (2016: 13) propose that these attributions are inherently related to the process of ‘tribing’, the categorisation of African peoples into distinct groups supposedly sharing a common descent and a homogeneous cultural identity. Scholar John Wright (2016) further elaborates on the process of wrongly attributing ‘Zulu’ to people from

the area which is now the KwaZulu-Natal province in South Africa. The Zulu identity is assumed to date back to the 1820s, when the Zulu kingdom greatly expanded under the rule of chief Shaka. However, not everyone who was part of that kingdom self-identified as Zulu. This assumption thus wrongly rules out the existence of a wide range of communities in the region, who 'have been shaped and reshaped in a series of complex historical processes' (Wright 2016: 183). On the other hand, the term 'Zulu' was abused and misused by European colonists, who applied it differently than the indigenous people of Southern Africa did. From the 1840s onwards, within colonial spheres, the belief that 'all African people in Natal and the Zulu kingdom were "Zulu" started to emerge' (Wright 2016: 202, 210-213). By the 1880s, this assumption was no longer questioned and the process of tribing further intensified during the 1920s and 1930s.

This tribing of people is still visible in the collection today and comes with implications for provenance research, as it complicates reliance on the cultural labels assigned to objects. Archives should be considered spaces where colonial narratives were communicated, sustained and reproduced. While the cultural attributions they provide often pose one of the few leads for further research, they also signify an important archival silence as they represent a colonial categorisation imposed on people. Consequently, doing provenance research based on information in museum archives often consists of confronting and dismantling colonial knowledge and behaviour rather than providing concrete traces of ownership.

Another entry point for provenance research is the examination of biographical information about the

collector or donor (which may be, but are not necessarily the same person) – in this case, Ernst Brunner. In this context, information provided by city and municipal archives, as well as newspaper archives managed by the Dutch Royal Library on the platform *Delpher* proved particularly relevant. These showed that Brunner travelled to South Africa in 1872, where he eventually ended up fighting alongside the British during the Anglo-Zulu War of 1879. The Zulu king Cetshwayo and his army had strongly resisted the British military in 1879 but eventually lost after which Cetshwayo was taken prisoner and exiled to Cape Town and London. The Zulu kingdom was then divided by the British into thirteen chiefdoms, one of them led by John Robert Dunn, a British colonial officer who had fought during the war. Brunner became employed as administrative official under Dunn's directorship.

This biographical information casts a different light on the archival materials already present at the Wereldmuseum, pertaining to two sources in particular. First of all, already in August 1884, the museum received a letter from a cousin of Ernst Brunner (whose name is illegible). In it, he offered a list of objects (which is missing from the letter) that Brunner had taken from South Africa as the 'then administrator of Zululand under John Dunn' (Rotterdam City Archive 563, inv. nr. 2). This letter confirms Brunner's position as administrative official under Dunn but, more importantly, suggests that he most likely acquired these objects in South Africa while holding that position. Secondly, Brunner is mentioned in the museum's annual report of 1891, which records his loan of another object to the museum. In this case, a more precise location as to Brunner's whereabouts in South Africa is given, namely

a 'Native Reserve, Zululand, South-East-Africa'. In 1882, the British decided to create a Native Reserve in re-organising the former Zulu kingdom. King Cetshwayo was returned from exile a year later, to be reinstated as the ruler of the kingdom in its new form: heavily reduced in terms of territory and under British surveillance. In this process, the thirteen chiefdoms were abolished, and Dunn's land largely became part of the Reserve. During the first decade of the twentieth century, the British turned more areas into Native Reserves and the reference made in the museum's annual report can be read against the backdrop of these developments. It is likely that Brunner lived amongst or in close proximity to the African peoples he considered 'Zulu', through which he may have been able to access objects for collecting more easily

Drawing on a combination of birth and death certificates from Dutch city archives, historical newspaper articles, and the Wereldmuseum's annual reports and inventory books, allowed for a reconstruction of relevant biographical information about Ernst Brunner. Admittedly, an emphasis on the donor/collector of objects risks producing historiographies largely revolving around the coloniser. At the same time, it allows for the addressal of colonial violence and the role individuals have played in this, through a critical reading along the archival grain. On the one hand, the provenance of objects can now be situated within broader historical developments. In this case, they may even be linked specifically to military activity in the current KwaZulu-Natal region. On the other hand, it tells us something about the network within which the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam had positioned itself as it sought to expand its ethnographic collec-

tion. Simultaneously, it attends to archival gaps by questioning what can – and cannot – be said based on the archival record.

The provenance of the 145 objects in the Wereldmuseum's collection, donated by Ernst Brunner, may directly be linked to the 1879 Anglo-Zulu War and the subsequent colonisation of the Zulu kingdom by the British. Additionally, with this new information, the attribution of 'Zulu' to the objects can be reconsidered. It is crucial that this information can be put together with historical works such as King Cetshwayo's own testimony on Zulu history, law and culture, as well as his perspective on the Anglo-Zulu War, put together in the book *A Zulu King Speaks* (1987). The research should also engage with work of scholars such as Mwelela Cele; an archivist and historian based at the KwaZulu Natal Amafa and Research Institute. In a conversation with postdoctoral researcher Yann LeGall, for example, Cele explained the importance of *isiHlangu* to the Zulu identity and critiqued the (often problematic) display of such shields in museums (Cele and LeGall 2024: 52-53). Cele refers to the work of Herbert Isaac Ernest Dhlomo, who describes how *isiHlangu* were not mere defensive weapons, but functioned as an extension of the body and Zulu identity: weapons like these were involved in certain cleansing ceremonies, the *isiHlangu* 'was a kind of flag or coat of arms of the tribe', and they were 'known to have medical efficacy' – to name just a few examples of the complex and political meanings and use of the shields (ibid.)

Outfit of a Swahili-Arab man from the Congo region

The second case study starts from an archival file at the *Conseil de Guerre* records of the Belgian State Archives

on an employee of the Dutch New African Trading Company (NAHV), called 'Evrard van Hees' (State Archives of Belgium, Conseil de Guerre, Stanleyville 38, Van Hees Evrard, 16/11/1901).⁵ Initially, the file could not be linked to the Wereldmuseum collection; it only became relevant after consulting the Dutch National Archives on the NAHV.

Evrard van Hees started working as a trade agent for the NAHV in 1899, at barely twenty years old. In 1900, he became head of a factory called 'Albert' at Yambinga, near Stanley Falls (today Boyoma Falls). All mentions of his behaviour and work are positive in nature, until a reference is made to his 'scandalous' behaviour in December 1901. The last communiqué to Van Hees in the correspondence books of the NAHV is a letter of dismissal, in which the costs for his trial before the *Conseil de Guerre* are noted as the first of ten reasons for why his services are no longer needed. Each reason concerns finances: fiddling with the book-keeping, embezzlement, and overspending company money. Other wrongdoings such as violent and racist behaviour, or disrespecting the authorities themselves, are not explicitly mentioned, and are only considered a problem insofar as they caused extra costs (NL-HANA 2.18.10.09, inv.nrs. 148 and 149).

Number seven on the list of reasons for dismissal makes it possible to connect Van Hees to the museum collection: 'You bought an Arab-costume from the SAB for 435 fr., but I do not see this amount on your private account'. This information could be cross-referenced with a letter from the museum archives kept at the Rotterdam City Archives (563, inv.nr. 20). In 1902, the museum's then director, Johannes Snelleman (1852-1938), mentions this 'costume', an almost complete

outfit of a Swahili-Arab man, in detail in a letter to the museum's supervisory board:

The Museum was just offered for sale the costume of an Arab merchant in the Upper-Congo, consisting of an undergarment, a coat, two vests, a fez and a horse rug. All (except the undergarment and fez) are made of matte blue cloth with richly decorated gold braid and soutache featuring gold eyelets, mother-of pearl buttons, and red silk lapels. This was brought by Mr. Van Hees, who was there on trade and business, and purchased by him from the gypsy, an Arab slave trader.

The details provided in this enthusiastic sales pitch to the museum's board, who were responsible for approving the director's strategies and acquisitions, are sufficient to link Van Hees to objects WM-19258 to WM-19262. This six-part outfit, of which the shirt (WM-19257) went missing, was registered into the collection in 1902 without any reference to Van Hees as the seller.

Director Snelleman's description conflicts with that of the NAHV: while Snelleman writes it was purchased from a slave trader, the NAHV indicates Van Hees bought the pieces from an SAB agent (*Société anonyme belge pour le commerce du Haut-Congo*, a competitor to the NAHV in the rubber trade). Importantly, Snelleman frames the Arab man as a slave trader, whereas the NAHV records make no mention of this. The NAHV version of the story likely carries more credibility, as Snelleman had to create a story for the board and therefore had greater incentive to exaggerate the provenance to create interest. The information that the outfit was bought from an SAB tradesman, while leaving the profession

of the Arab man in the middle, avoids feeding into reductive stereotypes about Swahili-Arab people in Congo, in which they were typically framed as either slave- or ivory traders. To Snelleman, however, this was precisely the narrative he sought to convey through these objects.

Indeed, Snelleman's framing of the Arab man as a slave trader is not a coincidence. In this way, the museum could use this outfit to illustrate a narrative in which Europeans brought both liberation from the slave trade as well as 'civilisation' – a narrative the Congo Free State (CFS) eagerly adopted. Similarly, the Wereldmuseum collection includes a surprising number of *chicottes* which were purchased around the same time as the clothes.⁶ *Chicottes* were a type of whip with twirled ends, made out of raw, sundried rhino hide, often used with horrific, often fatal effect. Through campaigning of the Congo Reform Association in England, these became a symbol of the 'Congo Atrocities' in Europe through the distribution of photographs and tours across the UK displaying this instrument of torture (Hochschild 1998: 120; Arzel 2020). This depiction of the *chicotte* later became a recurring theme for artists of the Zairian popular school such as Thsibumba Kanda Matulu (1947-1981) (Dembour 1992). In one of the scenes in Matulu's well-known work *Colonie Belge 1885-1959*, the artist depicts the use of the *chicotte*. There is a great deal to unpack in this image, an analysis which unfortunately falls beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the artwork illustrates well the enduring symbolic resonance of *chicottes* as emblems of the violent colonial era in Central Africa and of Congo in particular.

The collecting of *chicottes* in the late nineteenth

century by Dutchmen, however, functioned a different goal. Based on object descriptions by collectors, they were used to portray violence enforced by Swahili-Arab slave traders, to a Dutch and European audience at the time. In this narrative, the *chicotte* – an object that had not been used so violently in precolonial Africa – was said to be an 'African' invention, without any European involvement in its usage thereafter (Dembour 1992). In short, the presence of *chicottes* in collections like those at the Wereldmuseum can be explained by their function as a means of propaganda, justifying white presence in Central Africa as a form of 'salvation', for example from the Swahili-Arab slave traders.

Besides using the objects for propagandic purposes, European museums showed little interest in heritage from Islamic Swahili traders from the Maniema region of eastern Congo. This resulted in little to no research into the objects, as well as an absence from display exhibitions. Swahili cultures were not considered indigenous to the region of Central Africa, and Arab-Swahili stories and objects quickly became reduced and marginalised in European – and especially Belgian – institutions.⁷

It is imaginable that the aforementioned SAB agent – who would later sell the clothes to Van Hees – came in possession of the pieces through a fair bargain with an Arab-Swahili man.⁸ The latter may have had the upper hand in the existing power dynamics at play during most of the second half of the nineteenth century, up until the Congo-Arab Wars (1892-1894). This series of military operations by CFS troops in the area under Swahili-Arab control eventually broke the Swahili-Arab hegemony. Given the timeframe and similar collections in Belgian institutions, however, another

possible scenario could be that the outfit was taken as a war trophy (CAHN Project).

This case highlights the importance of archival research in working against the ‘culture of neglect’ in museums as well as in archives (Hiribarren 2017: 83). Objects that remain silent and anonymous, or in other words, unintentionally hidden or ‘displaced’, show similarities with how European colonial archives were made inaccessible. Due to poor or lacking descriptions, objects gradually become untraceable and anonymous. Selecting objects for research or exhibitions, for example, is a process that is inevitably based on available knowledge, usually through a museum’s collection database (Cheung 2023). Eventually, this may lead to a circle of research and display that follows the beaten path, and, while perhaps unintentionally, hundreds of thousands of objects remain undescribed and thus become less accessible.

The case also exemplifies the practical consequences of European colonialism for locating and connecting archival sources. Colonies have often been portrayed and understood as nationally oriented enterprises, a perspective that continues to shape both the material and immaterial responsibilities associated with the colonial past – for example in discussions on restitution policies. Recent historical research (Antunes 2020-2025) highlights the involvement of non-national colonial actors, such as Dutch tradesmen active in the Congo Free State. Recognising colonialism as a fundamentally European project necessitates a transnational approach to museum collections and provenance research, one that systematically considers archival sources and documentation preserved across different European countries.

Let us now circle back to the start of this second case study, namely the file on Everhard Van Hees in the *Conseil de Guerre* files. In 1901, Van Hees was brought before the *Conseil de Guerre* of Stanleyville (today Kisangani) for violence against soldiers of the *Force Publique*, the military of the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo from 1885 to 1960. During the trial, corporal Tembora of Kulambuya (who carried the military registration number 1446) offered the main statement, concurred by soldiers M’Benghe from Bakoka and Sirika from Paonga. All three belonged to the indigenous staff of the *Force Publique*. Part of corporal Tembora’s statement reads as follows:

Upon Arrival at Yambinga, I headed towards the place where I heard the screams. Along the way, I met a man mistreating his wife. I told them that I was sent by the Commander to impose silence and that they should come along for a palaver. They refused with the excuse that they would first talk to their white. I agreed and we went to Mister van Hees, director of the Dutch factory. When he saw me, he asked me what I was doing there at that hour and he requested a document, to which I replied that, being on duty, the commander had sent me to silence the people who were causing an uproar at night. Since I did not have the requested documents, the white took me by the arm and punched my face: ‘You are not on cfs territory here.’ He then told me: ‘And you have no business in my house.’ After that he snatched my rifle from the (?) and those of the soldiers who accompanied me. I offered no resistance when the white took weapons. I just said that it was the commander’s palaver.

There is plenty to unpack in this short archival fragment, more than what this paper allows us to do, but it does raise several questions worthy of note. First of all, this fragment documents the behaviour of a Dutch trade agent towards indigenous people, employed by the cfs. Aside from repetitive complaints on laziness, lack of education or alcohol abuse by employees, NAHV records generally omit or describe only superficially the racist and violent behaviour of their agents. Whereas large-scale ‘spectacular’ moments of violence have received far more attention in the context of colonial history in Central Africa (Henriet et al. 2023: 267), these archival records highlight more insidious and small-scale forms of violence. Paradoxically, even though Van Hees was eventually released on a fine of 300 francs and 30 francs of legal costs, which was renegotiated after the official trial (NL-HANA 2.18.10.09, inv.nr. 149), this case also shows that Europeans did not benefit from a blanket impunity, even under the infamous cfs (Henriet et al. 2023: 259), or at least, that was the image the cfs was trying to push. Racist abuse by colonial agents generated sufficient anxiety within the cfs government about potential damage to its international reputation and the threat of anticolonial uprisings to advance the judicial repression of white violence. Cases in the *Conseil de Guerre* files on these topics became particularly prominent around the time of this trial, coinciding with the peak of the global humanitarian campaign against the atrocities of the cfs (Henriet et al. 2023; Lauro 2021).

Secondly, the presence of corporal Tembora’s voice, one of the indigenous persons that appear in the *Conseil de Guerre* files, is actually quite rare in colonial archival records.⁹ The involvement of indigenous people in the

Force Publique was crucial to the cfs in maintaining colonial order, but put them in a complex position of being both an actor of violence as well as a target of repression: since they carried European weapons and were instructed on European military strategies, potential mutinies posed a threat to the very rules they were supposed to safeguard as soldiers (Henriet et al. 2023; Lauro 2021). Corporal Tembora and soldiers M’Benghe and Sirika may have chosen to be part of this force, but it is more likely that they were forcefully recruited (Henriet et al. 2023). How did they experience their role in the *Force Publique* and the enforcement of their position by the cfs judicial system? How well was corporal Tembora’s voice maintained in this trial, considering that it was mediated by translation to French and transcription by a Belgian registrar?

Digging into these various aspects may prove relevant in further provenance research, as it contributes to a better understanding of the circumstances under which the Dutch trading agent Evrard van Hees operated and potentially acquired the objects he would later sell to the museum. Simultaneously, the research addresses the neglect and framing of Swahili-Arab heritage which often remains unattested to this day.

From attending to filling archival silences

Through the presentation of these two cases, we wish to demonstrate what it means in practice to have colonial archives as a primary source in provenance research. Critically reading these archives allows us to unpack colonial epistemologies, for example concerning the framing of Swahili-Arab heritage in

Congo or the tribing of Zulu people in South Africa. Simultaneously, it gives us the opportunity to attend to archival silences by highlighting interactions between indigenous people active in the crs's *Force Publique* and Dutch trade agents like Van Hees, and by questioning the relationship between colonial administrators like Brunner and the people he lived amongst in a Native Reserve.

A second, equally urgent aspect of provenance research is to consider how (and whether) to 'fill' these silences. Answering this question requires alternative modes of knowledge production, foregrounding agency, memory and epistemologies of communities historically dispossessed of their heritage. Building on Stoler's (2002; 2009) critical approach to archival theory, this aligns with the work of other postcolonial scholars. In exploring creative, methodological approaches to reimagine archival silences, it is worth looking at the work of Marisa J. Fuentes (2016). She opts for an archival reading 'along the bias grain', as a critical and interrogative way to address whose voices were silenced or distorted. As Fuentes (2016) proposes in her work *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archives*, this method allows for a partial reconstruction of the lives of those who are excluded from the archival record. Similarly, Saidiya Hartman (2008) coined the method of critical fabulation in her work *Venus in Two Acts*; an imaginative approach to writing history that combines archival research with speculative narration. Such methods may be applicable to researching objects and their biographies as well.

These are only two examples of existing scholarship on expanding the colonial archival. In essence, however, it is about a shared authority in researching, (re)writing

and re-presenting ethnographic collections, such as those at the Wereldmuseum. To arrive at that point in provenance research, archival records should be put in dialogue with other ways of knowing, which in turn need to be recognised as proper historical sources. This may involve, but is not limited to, oral history, community-led storytelling, performance, rituals, speculative writing, or photography. It must be mentioned that, while the Wereldmuseum actively seeks engagement with stakeholders who wish to be involved with the collection – such as diaspora groups, or experts and community representatives from countries in the global south – we as provenance researchers have not yet been able to enter in any such form of doing research.

Finally, we want to emphasise that such an approach should not require archival research to be conducted first. These different methods should co-exist and inform each other, or it will risk turning archival research into a prerequisite of engaging in collaborative means to write history. Bringing together different ways of knowing, will turn provenance research into a discipline less concerned with determining whether involuntary loss occurred, and more focused on building durable relationships grounded in repair and restorative justice.

Conclusion

In this article, we have demonstrated how we consult colonial archives when conducting provenance research into the collection of the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam. This specific collection comprises more than 80,000 objects, a large part of which was collected during the

period of European colonisation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In recent years, provenance research has become an important method to retrace the ways in which objects entered the museum, by asking questions such as where, how and from whom objects were collected. Currently, however, the research largely revolves around the concept of *involuntary loss of possession*, pushing the discipline to answer a binary question framed within western frameworks on ownership and (dis)possession. Not only does this assume the traceability of ownership, but it also risks framing colonial archives as neutral repositories for the retrieval of information. Consequently, we propose a redirection of provenance research which allows for an alternative, critical reading of the archives in question.

Ultimately, our work embraces an ethnographic rather than an extractive engagement with colonial archives, following the approach articulated by Ann Laura Stoler (2009). Rather than seeking proof of involuntary loss, provenance researchers need to critically read archives both along and against their grain. First and foremost, this makes room for understanding and addressing colonial epistemologies and attitudes that shape the Wereldmuseum's collections to this day. It helps us to understand the geographic and cultural attributions of objects, as well as the stereotypical and often racialised framing of people and their heritage. Moreover, this approach emphasises the transnational nature of colonialism and the need for countries and institutions to share and cross-reference databases for more fruitful outcomes. In both case studies presented in this article, objects were collected by a Dutch man in regions formally colonised by the UK and France. Strongly related to this is the existence of 'displaced

archives', which have been destroyed, purposefully hidden, or simply forgotten through a lack of structural care by European (post-)colonial governments. This has resulted in a contemporary archival culture that navigates between secrecy and neglect when it comes to colonial records. Provenance research can contribute to making these archives more traceable and accessible.

Secondly, by reconstructing the historical contexts in which objects were used, collected and eventually musealised – even from fragmentary or seemingly problematic sources – we can begin to uncover systemic silences and inaccuracies in both the archive and the museum collection. Such silences may be expressed in the form of empty fields in the collection database, generic cultural attributions to objects such as 'Zulu', or a structural disregard for certain objects such as those of Swahili-Arab heritage. Colonial archives hardly mention relevant information on provenance – nor on the violence and unequal power dynamics involved at the time of collecting – simply because that information was deemed irrelevant at the time. Provenance researchers therefore have the opportunity to attend to these silences by asking what was omitted in the first place.

By stirring provenance research away from the idea of *involuntary loss of possession*, it becomes a discipline concerned with building durable, equitable relationships with stakeholders from the global south. In this way, provenance research serves not only as a method of historical inquiry, but also as a means of opening up the collection and creating opportunities for renewed contact with the individuals, communities, and institutions connected to its contents. Archival research needs to be put in dialogue with other ways of knowing

and telling history, because only then can it function as a pathway towards reparative justice, shared authority, and the co-creation of more inclusive narratives about cultural heritage and the colonial past.

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Notes

- 1 The 'Tropenmuseum' in Amsterdam ('Museum of the Tropics'), the 'Museum Volkenkunde' in Leiden ('Museum of Ethnology'), and the 'Wereldmuseum Rotterdam' ('Museum of World Cultures Rotterdam').
- 2 We wish to emphasise that the views expressed in this paper are our own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Wereldmuseum as an institution.
- 3 For example, provenance research into the collection brought in by agents of the Dutch *New African Trading Company* (NAHV), which amounts to approximately 6,000 objects, initiated and led by curator Annette Schmidt in collaboration with Karolien Nédée; or research into the Africa collection at Wereldmuseum Rotterdam (almost 13,000 objects in total) based on the profiles of each collector, set up in 2023 by Daantje van de Linde.
- 4 In the current collection, objects with inventory numbers WM-3507 to WM-3512 and WM-4757 to WM-4760 are missing. These may have been sold, traded or lost over time.
- 5 We wish to thank Dr. Reinout Vander Hulst at the Belgian National Archives, for his help in tracing the record.
- 6 See for instance objects RV-387-2, RV-1307-27, RV-1320-3, WM-4788, WM-7322, WM-10656 or WM-20225.

- 7 In 2020, the Africa Museum and the War Heritage Institute in Belgium launched the *Congo-Arab Heritage in Historical Narratives* (CAHN) project, focused on research into Arab-Swahili Congolese collections held in the two institutions. The project involved provenance research, combined with dialogues between source communities in the DRC and Tanzania, the Congolese diaspora, the research community and civil society.
- 8 A possible place for further research are the archives of the Africamuseum in Tervuren, for example by examining Harry Bombeeck (1876-1960), an SAB agent who was posted at Yaminga in the same time period (HA.01.0233).
- 9 Dr. Vander Hulst, at the Belgian State Archives, compiled a comprehensive list of indigenous people appearing in these archival records.

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Producing the Neighbourhood-as-Archive

Urban Transformation and Memory Work in Barcelona's SEAT Neighbourhood

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I met Manuel, a retired SEAT worker in his early 60s, soon after I arrived in the neighbourhood of La Marina – Zona Franca (LMZF) in Barcelona.¹ During twelve months of fieldwork in the city, I spent considerable time with Manuel and others engaged in what they call *trabajo de memoria* (memory work) in Spanish or *treball de memòria* in Catalan. In LMZF, *trabajo de memoria* comprises various neighbourhood-based community projects that bring aspects of the area's past to light through activities such as talks, exhibitions, walking tours, the installation of commemorative plaques, and the naming of the new roads and public spaces currently under construction. In fact, it was Barcelona's largest urban expansion in decades that first drew me to the neighbourhood. On the city's western fringes, on land rezoned from industrial to residential use, a new residential quarter is being constructed, comprising more than 10,000 homes, commercial spaces, parks,

squares, and public facilities. I will refer to this plan, which started around 2018 and is expected to continue well beyond 2030, as the Project.

In this article, I examine how memory work intertwines with the temporalities set in motion by urban transformation – particularly what some of my interlocutors call the 'meantime of construction,' the period during which the Project is underway but not yet complete. I argue that the production of the *neighbourhood-as-archive*, grounded in local memories of industrialism, Francoism, and the history of the national car manufacturer SEAT, is mobilised not only to contest the past but also as a tool through which residents navigate urban transformation and converse with the future. In this sense, expectations of the future and reflections on the past unfold in tandem.

Manuel's life has always been intertwined with SEAT, Spain's national car manufacturer, established

in the neighbourhood in the 1950s by the Francoist regime (1939–1975). Like hundreds of thousands of others seeking employment in the booming industrial sector, Manuel’s family migrated from southern Spain to Barcelona in the early 1960s, when he was still a child. His father and uncle secured jobs at SEAT at a time when the company’s workforce was expanding rapidly, and Spain was becoming a net exporter of cars. They initially rented a modest single-story house (*casa baja*) before eventually relocating – following a protracted and contentious process I will discuss later – to an apartment in the company’s housing estate. Like his father and uncle, Manuel joined the company’s workforce, first as an apprentice at the age of fourteen and later as an employee until his retirement. Manuel also served as a representative of an anarchist trade union within the factory. When, in one of our conversations, I asked him why he is involved in memory work, he replied:

History is something we should not lose as it has always been manipulated (*siempre fue manipulada*). The victorious have always manipulated history and they have ensured that their *relato* (narrative) won.² So, we must maintain our own narrative of experiences, of struggles, of the neighbourhoods. How [the neighbourhoods] were constructed, how they were urbanised, how their peoples were, how they lived and how they worked. It is fundamental so that the coming generations may have at their disposal a narrative made from the people of the neighbourhood, not the official narrative from the textbooks.

Manuel’s effort to craft a counter-hegemonic narrative through *trabajo de memoria* forms part of the intense debates and political conflicts over memory in contemporary Spain – particularly, though not exclusively, regarding the legacies of Francoism and the Civil War (1936–1939). After all, SEAT and the housing estate are one of the most visible remnants of Francoism in the neighbourhood and their contested legacies reflect a broader dispute within the country about its unsettled dictatorial past. Resonating Manuel’s anxieties, the ‘archival turn’ of the 1990s has demonstrated that throughout modernity archives have exerted an authoritative grip over the production of knowledge, the selection and organisation of information, and, ultimately, the making of a hegemonic narrative about the past (Burgum 2022). Indeed, it is a well-established argument that practices of history-telling, archiving, and remembrance are not politically neutral acts (Trouillot 2015[1995]) and Manuel is very much aware of this.

Manuel’s suggestion that an alternative historical narrative might be forged upon the neighbourhood, prompted me to explore the interplay between memory work and the shifting landscape of LMZF. Scholars have drawn attention to the ways in which urban space – its materiality and the everyday practices of the people producing it – can be apprehended as a form of archive that enables communities to construct counter-narratives (Burgum 2022). The archive is thus understood not only as a set of records or documents but also as ‘an everyday materiality and lived practice’ (Hetherington 2013: 18) which enables ‘the past to inhabit the present in the urban setting’ (*ibid.*). Beyond representing the past and creating evidence for history-making, the city-

as-archive offers a dynamic reordering and interpreting of information as a means 'to navigate the voids of the present' (Rao 2009: 381) created by unsettled histories and yet-to-come futures. What intrigues me the most in Manuel's account of history is the way he directly links the experience of urban space with the political objective of safeguarding a partisan narrative that, for him, includes the labour struggles at SEAT during late Francoism as well as the mobilisation of residents for better living conditions in the surrounding area.

In this article, I explore what happens when memory work is mobilised to 'prepare' the transformation of the neighbourhood by imprinting or removing certain traces of the past within urban space. I argue that memory work becomes a tool through which the residents assert their position and political identity during a period of reordering of the neighbourhood. The article is methodologically informed by twelve-months of fieldwork conducted in 2022 in Barcelona and LMZF. Over almost a year, I actively participated in a neighbourhood group working on memory that met periodically, organised public events relating to memory, and negotiated with other actors in the neighbourhood on different memory issues such as the commemorative plaques that I will be discussing later. Moreover, I had the chance to attend events organised by other groups such as the *Memorial Democràtic del Treballadors de SEAT* (Democratic Memory of the Workers at SEAT) in the neighbourhood and other areas of Barcelona. In addition, I conducted semi-structured interviews with key interlocutors engaged with *trabajo de memoria*, including residents, community officers, and officials from the municipal authorities. Finally, I photographed various memory markers in the neigh-

bourhood, such as memorial plaques and street names, some of which are presented here.

Below, I employ the concept of *mentrestant* (the 'meantime') to address memory work in its capacity to function as a 'time-tricking device' (Ringel 2016), that is, as a tool that residents employ to navigate the temporalities and spatialities set in motion by urban transformation. I explore how the production of the *neighbourhood-as-archive* serves as a means to engage with both the past and the future. I will then delve into the ways in which the country's contested past haunts the neighbourhood. SEAT's memory, suspended between Francoist and partisan legacies, provides a useful window into how the neighbourhood becomes a site of political contention in the present. Finally, I turn to the material practices of memory work that shape the neighbourhood's landscape through both remembering and forgetting. This article thus contributes to an understanding of how urban transformation is rendered political in the neighbourhood through the negotiation and enactment of memory.

Urban transformation 'in the meantime': Creating the archives of the future

During a public information meeting on the progress of the Project back in 2022, a local councillor referred to the period of construction as the 'meantime' (*el mentrestant*). The councillor emphasised the importance of this stretch of time, during which newcomers integrate into La Marina – Zona Franca and existing residents make the new quarter a part of their social worlds. The councillor stated that 'the people who come to live here

should know your history'. In this framework, local associations, together with the municipality, promoted memory work as a practice through which to intervene in the *mentrestant*, to engage with the community, and to create some of the identity markers that would ostensibly help the newcomers 'integrate' (as they say) in the neighbourhood. As new roads and public spaces were constructed and inaugurated, participatory processes were organised to select their names. Residents and neighbourhood associations submitted proposals which were then put on a popular vote through the municipality's digital platform of participation. In addition, commemorative plaques referencing significant events in the neighbourhood's history were installed. Some residents actively promoted names derived from the partisan histories of the country and the neighbourhood, such as the gardens of *la Pasionaria*, named after the historic figure of the Spanish Communist Party; the park *las Treze Rosas*, in reference to a group of women executed by the Francoist regime; and the road *Micaela Chalmeta*, honouring an early twentieth-century feminist socialist from Barcelona. Others advocated for a seemingly less politicised urban nomenclator, which nonetheless incorporated references to the neighbourhood's working-class past and history of migration. These practices appear to 'prepare' the landscape for the newcomer's arrival and to create, in the present, the memorial narratives for the future neighbourhood.

Preparing the landscape for the future by imprinting on it traces from the past, raises questions about the relationship between memory, urban transformation, and the 'urban archive'. What does it mean that Barcelona's newest residential neighbourhood – presented as smart, upcoming, green, and sustainable – becomes

narrativised through markers of partisan histories and urban struggles? How does the archive shape the city of the future? Such forms of temporal politics have been described as 'time-tricking devices' (Ringel 2016: 26). With regards to the past, what may be tricked is the way we know it and access it, that is, its epistemic dimension. In LMZF, this is evident, for example, in the diverse representations of SEAT in today's mnemonic practices and the conflicting interpretations of its legacies. At the same time, memory work can be construed as a form of 'temporal agency' (ibid.) which enables people to experience the future as something malleable – that is, to recognise the possibility that future events and their 'contents' can be shaped or brought into being.

As Manuel suggests, the character of the future neighbourhood may be shaped by constructing partisan narratives that the next generation will inherit. Perhaps such distinction may appear self-evident from an everyday perspective – the past cannot be changed; the future is unwritten. Analytically, however, distinguishing between the two allows us to consider how the ideals, imaginaries, and expectations of urban transformation intersect with the experience of time in the neighbourhood. In other words, temporal agency is not only a matter of observing that the future is ontologically open (Ringel 2016); it is also a matter of realising and actualising such openness in the 'present time' of the neighbourhood through localised political action. These are the kinds of agency mobilised in the *mentrestant*, where the *neighbourhood-as-archive* becomes a device through which residents shape the contents of the future by forging the memorial narratives of the new neighbourhood.

Scholars have highlighted that temporalities – such as the *mentrestant* – are central in how people enact political agency. In the book *In the Meantime*, Sarah Sharma (2014: 4) defines temporality as the ‘awareness of power relations as they play out in time’. Emphasising the political weight of time, Sharma argues that ‘temporalities do not experience a uniform time but rather a time particular to the labor that produces them’ (Sharma 2014: 8). In this sense, time is neither uniform nor simply an interface upon which human action unfolds. Like space, time can also be produced within the urban realm (Hristova et al. 2020; Lefebvre 2022[1992]). In his ethnography on post-war Sarajevo, Stef Jansen (2018) conceptualises the *meantime* as a form of ‘temporal reasoning’ through which people navigate political situations that they perceive as stagnated in time, situations that continually frustrate their hopes for something better. In the context of urban planning and transformation, temporality often appears as an elusive promise (Abram and Weszkalnys 2013), that is, as a particular way of regulating the relationship between the present and the future.

In LMZF, the *mentrestant* is rendered a political bridge between the present and the future. In the *mentrestant*, residents forge demands to the authorities for a just and inclusive urbanism and claim their right to participate in shaping the plans of transformation. Ensuring the construction of adequate social services such as schools, medical centres, and public facilities – in a *timely* manner as some of them say, that is, with the same rhythm that residential blocks are filled with new people – is at the top of the agenda at the participatory meetings organised by authorities. In this framework, the story of how LMZF residents achieved basic social

services back in the 1960s and 1970s – especially those living outside the SEAT estate – is often evoked by some as reminder of the value of collective organisation today. While some residents contest participatory processes and consultations as lacking genuine influence over the Project’s plans, *trabajo de memoria* emerges as significant – not only as a mnemonic practice but also as a node connecting present-day urban struggles aimed at shaping the city’s future with the legacies of the ‘urban dissent’ (Sendra Ferrer 2022) and the *movimiento vecinal* (neighbourhood movement) that emerged in Barcelona’s peripheral neighbourhoods during late Francoism (López Espinosa 2015).

By enacting the *neighbourhood-as-archive* and embracing the promises of a more inclusive urbanism, participants in the memory groups navigate the *mentrestant* as a productive rather than a stagnated temporality. Within ‘the temporal and spatial gap between the plan and its manifestation’ (Smith 2017: 31), an array of political entanglements and possibilities arise among residents and institutional actors of the city. In this framework, memory work becomes not only a matter of justice, remembrance, or reconciliation with the past, but also a tool through which to engage with the process of urban transformation and to shape the future neighbourhood by determining some of the historical markers that will postulate its spaces. As the area’s population is projected to double – from 30,000 to 60,000 – in the coming years, new discussions around memory are emerging, and the *neighbourhood-as-archive* is mobilised to converse with the ongoing process of urban transformation. Memory work produces moments in which the neighbourhood is enacted as a political site with a distinct temporal

scope, defined by the rhythm of urban transformation. As memory work claims the past, it simultaneously seeks to reshape the conditions under which the neighbourhood, as a site of politicisation, will be enacted in the near future. Below, I turn to the politics of memory in Spain to examine how the remembrance of SEAT's multiple legacies renders the neighbourhood a contested archive.

SEAT: Contesting national histories in the neighbourhood

In the 1950s, the dictatorship was taking its first steps out of post-war international isolation and autarchy by attracting foreign investment and re-industrialising the country. This period is known as *desarrollismo* (developmentalist). SEAT was established in 1950 as a model national company, 'a national champion' (Delgado and Ferraz 2010). Within a few years, especially after the introduction of the iconic model 600, SEAT contributed decisively to Spain's industrialisation (Catalán Vidal 2006) as well as to its motorisation and the gradual establishment of a consumer society (Tappi 2010: 45). Beyond its economic significance, SEAT also served the regime as a symbol of modernity (Rosich Argelich 2022). As the demand for workers grew exponentially in the 1960s and workforce screening relaxed, a 'permanent dispute' was gradually established within the company (Tappi 2010). Discontent over internal organisation and wages, combined with growing political unrest across the country, turned SEAT into one of the epicentres of anti-Francoist activity – a process that culminated in the 1971 occupation of the factory,

the subsequent police assault, and the killing of one of the strikers (ibid.). In fact, these historical events and the contrasting interpretations they have generated, continue to inform present-day debates on memory in LMZF.

Soon after the establishment of the factory, SEAT began constructing a housing estate in what is now LMZF, comprising about 1,500 homes. The estate, which was inaugurated by Francisco Franco himself, exemplified the regime's policy to transform a nation 'of proletarians to home-owners' (*de proletarios a propietarios*) and its broader strategy of state-making through large-scale housing projects that could house the rapidly expanding working-class migrant population arriving from the South to Barcelona (García-Lamarca and Kaika 2016). In fact, the estate was conceived not merely as a housing complex, but also as a model micro-society embodying the national-catholic ideology that the regime promoted. It included schools, sports facilities, shops, a police station, medical facilities, and a church. At the time, such urban facilities were largely absent from the slums and self-constructed neighbourhoods surrounding the peripheral areas of Barcelona (Larrea and Tatjer 2011). In the 1980s, SEAT was acquired by Volkswagen and the factory relocated outside of Barcelona, with only a small part of it remaining on the original location. At the same time, the new management started selling the flats and the facilities of the estate. Whilst the flats, in their majority, were bought by the existing residents at favourable prices, many of the facilities such as the sports centre, the cinema and others were abandoned. When I conducted fieldwork in 2022, the future of some of these sites remained uncertain, while

their past was remembered with nostalgia by some of the older residents.

Scholars have long explored the capacity of violent pasts to infiltrate the present – sometimes in subtle and ambiguous ways, other times more abruptly. Hite and Jara (2020), in their studies on memory and transitional justice in Latin America, argue that the past haunts the present through ‘fissures’ that enable the emergence of subaltern histories and destabilise the rigid chronological demarcations between past and present produced by triumphalist narratives. Whereas haunting can be theorised in diverse ways, in the case of SEAT such fissures seem to appear in the form of ‘contested urban memories, denied histories, and (im)possibilities [that are] congealed in the very fabric of the city, its buildings, architectures, and infrastructures’ (Burgum 2022: 512). The ruins of the past in urban space are marked by a dialectic between dominant regulatory strategies that seek to produce reified and codified versions of history across the city, and the ‘ghosts [that] haunt the regulated city and the impossible dreams of totalisation’ (Edensor 2005: 835). In this sense, haunting can be understood as a dialectical relationship not only between the past and the present but also between contending forces in the present that seek to alter events in the future (Ringel 2016). Building on this tension between the regulation and unruliness of memory, Meghan Tinsley (2021) explores the distinction between sites of mourning and melancholic sites of memory. Whereas mourning achieves to create coherent national narratives by projecting the (political) conditions of the present onto the past, melancholic sites appear to have the opposite effect: they ‘unsettle the relationship between past and

present [by] embracing all of [their] contradictions and omissions’ (Tinsley 2021: 537).

The contrast between mourning/regulation and melancholia/unruliness informs the politics of memory in Spain and in LMZF. From the 2000s onwards, a strong social movement emerged across the country seeking to address the unsettled legacies of Francoism. Initially, this movement had a primarily forensic character and was centred around exhuming, identifying and honouring some of the tens of thousands of victims of Francoist oppression buried in mass graves – a process dubbed by anthropologist Francisco Ferrándiz (2006) as the ‘return of the ghosts of the Civil War’. Attention later turned to ‘the infrastructural afterlives of Francoism’ (Rubin 2018: 217), addressing the persistence of material traces such as statues, monuments, mass graves, and even pieces of public infrastructure that the regime left behind. These material traces, Rubin (2018: 217.) argues, have allowed Francoist ideology to endure despite the demise of the regime after the dictator’s death and the transition to democracy in 1978. Over the past two decades, national and regional ‘memory laws’ have been put forward to address some of these unsettled histories, granting some degree of recognition to the victims and their relatives, prohibiting – at least *de jure* – the use of Francoist symbols and opening the way for the removal of Francoist remnants from public spaces (Hepworth 2023).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the social and political debate around the removal of ‘remnants of political violence’ (Navarro et al. 2021) has neither been smooth nor straight forward. The process of removing Francoist symbology from public space immediately exposed the ‘conflicting political cultures between ideological

groupings [and] generations' (Ferrándiz 2006: 10). At the same time, it gave rise to what Ferrándiz (2019) terms 'phantom militarism', a phenomenon in which the removal of militarist symbology provokes a memorial backlash and a remilitarisation of public discourse by other means. Such reflection of past military power in present-day memorial processes is a testament to the persistence of the regime's foundations and its historical and political depth more than 50 years after its demise. As I will explore below, engaging SEAT's legacies through memory work generates similar phantom contestations. As the prevalence of a unifying and homogenising narrative proves to be impossible, the refracting of national histories through memorial practices allows the melancholy and unruliness of Spain's unsettled relationship with its dictatorial past to surface within the neighbourhood. At the same time, alterations in the material landscape become palpable effects of memory work in LMZF, producing fissures in both present and future.

Raúl, another ex-worker of SEAT who still lives on the estate, agreed to meet me on a hot June afternoon at the premises of the estate's residents' association. Now in his nineties, Raúl spoke of life on the estate during the 1960s and 1970s. 'There were persons permanently hired by the company to work exclusively as plumbers or electricians of the flats', he recalls. He joyfully remembers the cultural and sporting activities organised by the company's social club, particularly the swimming team that he used to coach, and the buses hired by the company to drive the team to competitions, for free. He shows me pictures and posters of the festivals they used to organise at the estate, 'before everybody became too old'. In an attempt to summarise

his feelings, he says: 'SEAT was a Francoist company, yes, a paternalistic company – as if the company was your father. But I always say it out loud: I was very happy working at SEAT'.

Raúl recalls the 1971 strike, during which the police stormed the factory and killed the worker Antonio Ruiz Villalba. His reflections are somehow contradictory, revealing how the exercise of remembering can sometimes be an ambiguous practice:

Truth is, they should have never employed the Police, shot and killed a person. I understand that people want to protest, that they want to strike. But this should always be done with respect towards the rest. There were a lot of strikes at the factory, SEAT was a pioneer in this compared to other companies. SEAT was a pioneer in strikes, protests, in collective agreements, in everything... At SEAT there was no difference between men and women, the pay was equal, the treatment was equal.

Listening to him, I felt that Raúl was trying to put his feet on two boats at the same time. On the one hand, he celebrates the fact that SEAT had become a hub of clandestine worker organisation and labour struggles by the end of the 1960s (Tappi 2010). On the other hand, Raúl distinguishes himself from the strikers and portrays the company itself as a pioneer in labour rights and questions of social justice, going as far as to credit the company itself for the collective agreements and even the strikes.

Other *vecinos* do not share Raúl's nostalgia for SEAT and the estate. 'Most of the SEAT residents were *adictos al régimen* (addicts to the regime)' says Jordi,



Photo 1. An old poster from a 'bull celebration', an important source of Spanish nationalist pride, at the estate. Photo: Author, June 2022.

another resident who participates in the memory work projects with Manuel. He explains that, at least in the company's early years, to get a job at SEAT required the right political credentials. Describing the company's organisation, he tells me:

The management and the high ranks were staffed by ex-military officers or policemen. Every worker had to wear a pin on their chest so that supervisors could verify that they were always in the right place. Workers living at the estate could lose their flat if they committed a disciplinary infraction at the factory. It was basically a system of domination.

Jordi, now in his sixties like Manuel, grew up in a social housing estate nearby. He remembers with a smile how he and other kids would get into fights with the kids from SEAT, as they were considered to belong to a different neighbourhood – 'and class', he adds. Other elders from the neighbourhood, such as Laia whom I met at a photo exhibition on the history of the area, believe that the residents of the estate, despite being working-class, were somehow more privileged because they enjoyed facilities and infrastructures that the rest of the neighbourhood (and most of Barcelona) lacked at the time. She contrasts the experience of growing up in the estate with the experience of living in the slums surrounding it, like her family did. The contrast between Jordi and Laia's words and those of Raúl is

revealing of the tension that arises when remembering SEAT.

SEAT's past sits uncannily between, on the one hand, a legacy of loyalism to the regime, dictatorial industrial relationships, and a model of national-Catholicism, and, on the other, a legacy of glorious democratic resistance and workers' rights. This contradiction extends beyond the factory to the estate and the wider neighbourhood. Linking back to Tinsley's (2021) concept of melancholy, SEAT's memory becomes a *melancholic archive* within the neighbourhood, bringing together within the same urban landscape the contradictions, omissions, and awkwardness of an unsettled past. A past that nonetheless produces fissures and cracks into the present. At the end of our interview at the residents' association, Raúl walked me through a corridor full of photographs, posters, sports trophies, and commemorative plaques hanging on the walls. Raúl's nostalgia for the estate's past glory cannot easily be accommodated in the present, as being nostalgic for the life at the estate is sometimes understood as being nostalgic for the regime itself. At the same time, the accusation that SEAT residents were 'addicts to the regime' does not sit well with some of the people who live there. On a couple of occasions at memory events, I witnessed verbal brawls concerning the political affiliations of the estate's residents during the dictatorship. In this way too, memory becomes a complex site to navigate, as the contradictions of the past seep into the contradictions of remembering (Hermez 2017).

Trabajo de memoria in the neighbourhood, understood not as a homogeneous essence but as a dynamic debate with tangible stakes on the future urban landscape, thus becomes a 'sociocultural process of

producing time in society' (Hristova et al. 2020: 778). Memorial practices challenge linear perspectives on history by highlighting 'the imprint of the past in the present, portraying the coexistence of different time layers in the same moment' (ibid.). Moreover, such practices generate space as 'phantomic' (Navaro 2012: 15) by calling attention to, and evoking emotion around, the materialities of memory in the neighbourhood. Based on her ethnography on Northern Cyprus, Navaro (ibid.) contends that the phantomic lies in the affective power transmitted by things left behind – in her case, objects that their Greek Cypriots owners lost as they were fleeing the war – to the people who uncannily inhabit them in the present. In turn, the phantomic becomes a 'marker of political stances, affiliations, conflicts, and differences' (ibid.) amongst them. Echoing Ferrandiz's concept of 'phantomic militarism', the artefacts left behind by Francoist SEAT continue to engage residents' imaginations and to affectively mark debates about LMZF's character and future.

The memory of SEAT can be viewed as a microcosm of Spain's broader social conflict over the memory of the dictatorship and the transition to democracy, situating these national debates within the everyday politics of a neighbourhood under transformation. The social practice of producing into the present different aspects of the company's past across the landscape of the neighbourhood, reveals the contested politics of memory that characterise Spanish and Catalan society. The memory of events, both through oral narratives and the presence of material artefacts, produces specific understandings of what is, what is not, and what ought to be the democratic State in the present – particularly in relation to how the past should be dealt with.

The memory of SEAT constructs, in the everyday, the past Francoist State at the same time as it enables the enactment of the neighbourhood as a site of politics by enacting locally national debates around the legacies of the dictatorship. Through memorial practices that mark and alter the urban landscape, abstract concepts such as authoritarianism, paternalism, and democracy acquire specific meanings and produce particular contestations as they become tied to specific events, locations, buildings, and even persons within the neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood-as-archive: Murals, plaques, and *faristols*

Memory work in LMZF emerges through a constant conversation between the material traces of the past and their narrativisation in the present, resulting in what can be described as the *neighbourhood-as-archive*. This archive comprises of the buildings of the SEAT estate itself, which are easily distinguishable, and the representation of ‘life back then’; old Francoist plaques at the entrance of the blocks that still resist removal; contested names of streets and locations; and newly established plaques and murals to commemorate the past at SEAT or in its vicinity. The *phantomic space* comes into being both through the remnants of political violence (Navaro et al. 2021) and through the material imprinting of the landscape with memorial markers. In view of the neighbourhood’s newcomers, some people express concern about the ways in which the past may be portrayed. In our conversations, both Manuel and Jordi appeared worried about how SEAT is remembered.

Manuel, in particular, warned that all the talk about how fun the pool and the sports centre had been, could be dangerous, as it risked reproducing, even inadvertently, the familiar refrain *con Franco se vivia bien* (with Franco life was good).

Reflecting such anxieties, the *Memorial Democràtic dels Treballadors de SEAT* (Democratic Memory of the workers of SEAT), an organisation dedicated to conserving and investigating the history of labour struggles at the company, promotes a mode of remembrance that defies loyalist approaches. Whilst not a neighbourhood association per se, the *Memorial* is naturally connected to LMZF through SEAT’s historical presence there. Beyond publishing books and other relevant material, the *Memorial* organises remembrance activities in the neighbourhood, such as painting murals, arranging historical walking tours, installing commemorative plaques, putting forward suggestions for naming the new public spaces in the neighbourhood, and organising talks and exhibitions.

An artefact of memory that became particularly common across Barcelona – as part of the latest progressive city government (*Barcelóna en Comú* 2015-2023) campaign on historical memory – is the *faristol*. It consists of a plaque mounted on a metal lectern commemorating a historical incident, period, or figure linked to the *faristol*’s location. The *faristols* follow the same design across the city, featuring short texts in Spanish, Catalan, and English, accompanied by a couple of images. *Faristols* become sites of contention, as they are occasionally vandalised with fascist symbols. In La Marina – Zona Franca, the *Memorial* successfully campaigned for a *faristol* commemorating the struggles at SEAT, which was eventually installed

Photo 2. A faristol installed in 2021 in commemoration of the SEAT labour struggles of the 1970s. Photo: Author, May 2022.

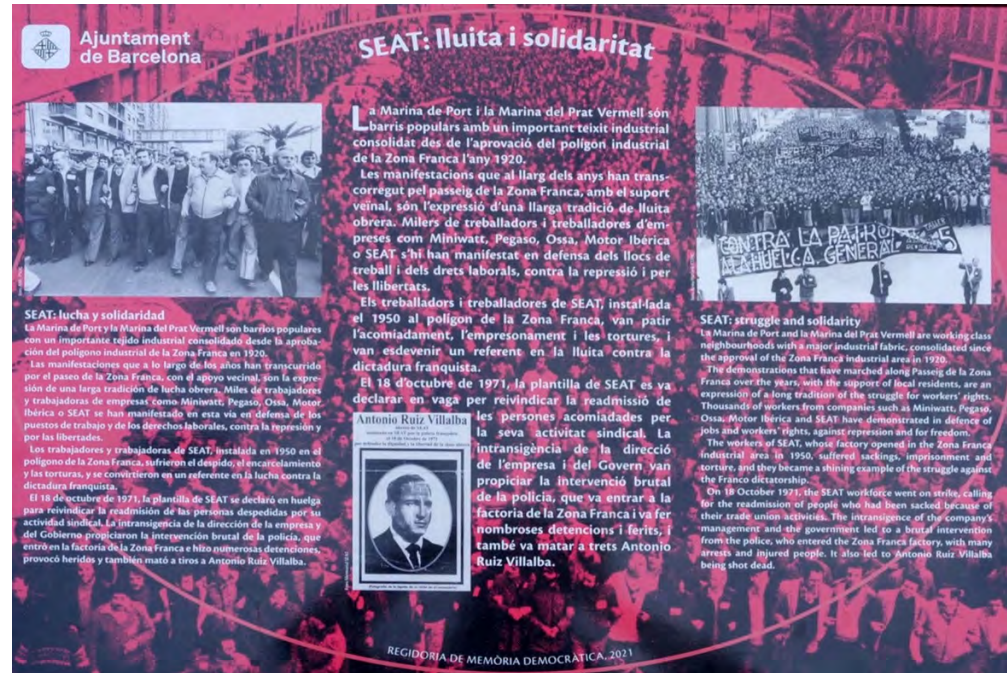


Photo 3. 'Freedom', 'SEAT labour struggles': Mural commissioned by the Memorial Democràtic dels Treballadors de SEAT on a wall in the neighbourhood. Photo: Author, July 2022.



in 2021 at one of the newly reformed squares of the neighbourhood which, after the *Memorial's* proposal, was named *Plaça del Moviment Obrer* (Working-class Movement Square).

Memorial artefacts such as plaques and murals, however, do not merely 'preserve' history. While the notion of 'transmitting' history, whether to younger generations or to the neighbourhood's newcomers, might suggest that history is a static object that can be handed down unchanged, these activities actually resonate more with what Cohen (1994) famously called the 'combing of history' into the present. Recounting stories from the past through on-going and recurrent activities, in this case unfolding across and marking the transforming landscape of the neighbourhood, resembles the act of repeatedly passing a comb through one's hair. The articulation and control of a particular historical narrative, which Manuel referred to in the beginning of this article, is a process of combing memory into the neighbourhood by activating it as a dynamic archive and making it salient for the residents.

The combing of SEAT's history, however, is not only about making visible what Manuel and others fear may be forgotten or misinterpreted, such as the general strikes or the killing of Antonio Ruiz Villalba, but also about reducing the visibility of what is deemed to be an opposing message. This understanding informs the campaign in the neighbourhood, as well as in other parts of the city, to invoke the law on historical memory and remove the traces of Francoist symbology found on stone plaques at the entrance of SEAT buildings and neighbouring blocks constructed during the dictatorship. These plaques, installed at each building's entrance, were designed to forge political identity and



Photo 4. *The memorial plaque to Antonio Ruiz Villalba, a SEAT worker killed by the Francoist police during a strike.*
Photo: Author, May 2022.

establish legitimacy through the material marking of the landscape. They typically feature a symbol of the regime, the year of construction, and the name of the state body that financed it. A series of national and regional laws on 'Historical Memory' enacted from 2007 onwards enabled the removal of many Francoist symbols from public places. In Barcelona, the left-wing progressive government of *Barcelona En Comú* (2015–2023) actively promoted and campaigned for these removals. Plaques on blocks in and around the SEAT estate were gradually removed and, after being catalogued in a database, they were placed in a depository.

Manuel recounted to me about how this process unfolded in the neighbourhood a few years ago. For him, removing the plaques was a way of overcoming



Photo 5. The plaque of the Francoist National Institute of Housing. The arrows are a recurring element in Francoist symbology. Photo: Author, May 2022.

the traumas of the dictatorship. While these plaques remit to a contested past and are relics of national history, they remain, peculiarly enough, the property of each block's community of residents, who retain the final say over their removal. Manuel recalled the exact address where a plaque is still in place. According to him, one of the residents, who is a *facha* (fascist) and acts as the manager of the block, refused to consent to the municipality removing the plaque. David, who, overhearing our conversation, recalled with discontent some of his neighbours' comments when the plaque at his own block was removed: 'They tell me that it is just a plaque which is simply there, it does not mean anything, and that we don't have to remove it'.

The plaque incident vividly illustrated how 'haunting' arises through the interplay of material

artefacts, narratives, and resident's collective practices across space. The 'ghostly', here, does not exist as a matter of fact: rather, it emerges from the interaction and disjuncture between material traces of the past and living actors – whether in removing a plaque or unearthing a skeleton – that makes the ghosts appear. The notion of a plaque being 'just a plaque' paradoxically neutralises its phantomic and militaristic force in the present, while simultaneously enabling its survival against the forces who seek to remove it. For people like Manuel, the persistence of such remnants is uneasy to accept, yet their survival keeps the story of removals alive. It was *precisely* the persistence of these material remnants that afforded me the chance to 'speak with the ghosts' and explore the ways in which they continue to interact with the living.

Another opinion on the matter holds that the complete removal of the plaques risks erasing an important part of Barcelona's housing history. Urbanists Oriol Nel·lo and Carme Trilla believe that these plaques – beyond serving as praise to the Francoist regime – are also evidence of the fact that these buildings used to be public, before the massive privatisations.³ What is notable, however, is that residents inhabiting the *phantomic* do not necessarily assume fixed positions on what constitutes the 'correct' or 'incorrect' memory or representation of it, much as we saw with Raúl's attempt to juggle between seemingly contradictory positions. In the context of Eastern Ukraine, Anna Balázs (2020) observed that residents sought to 'balance' between celebrating a Soviet past and accommodating a process of decommunisation that was ongoing at least until 2022. In this context, too, the past may sometimes be discussed 'as a more abstract conceptual subject'

(Balázs 2020: 110), allowing people to avoid taking definite stances on traces of previous regimes that the current political order deems removable.

Though incomparable in content, the material afterlives of demised Soviet and Francoist political orders, pose similar conundrums to their ‘-post’ eras, which cannot easily be resolved through memory work or legislation alone. The act of engaging with the materiality of memory -by assuming a position, by disciplining others to do the same, or by refusing to do so – enacts the urban landscape as an archival form and testifies to how the ghosts of the past can still be present despite any efforts to ‘tame’ them (Crenzel 2020: 254).

To remember is also to forget

A few days after our last conversation, I walked to the address Manuel had indicated to me to take a picture of the Francoist plaque. As I wandered through the streets of the estate, I came across another plaque that caught my attention and took out my camera. The plaque was an homage to Jordi Pujol, the first president of the Catalan self-government after the dictatorship, who remained in power for more than twenty years before being convicted for money laundering and tax evasion. The plaque celebrated his contribution to the construction of some of the last SEAT estate blocks. I was perplexed as I had been quite certain that the SEAT estate was a Francoist project of the 1960s. As I stood by the plaque, Manuel suddenly appeared beside me. He immediately advised me not to photograph it, insisting that ‘this is not worth remembering because Jordi Pujol

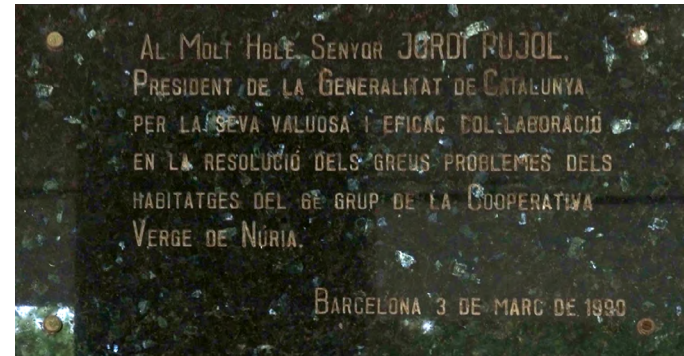


Photo 6. *Plaque honouring the ex-president of Catalunya Jordi Pujol 'for his valuable and efficient collaboration in the resolution of the serious problems' of the block.*

Photo: Author, May 2022.

is a corrupt politician’. When I asked him what all of this was about, Manuel explained that as the SEAT workforce grew in the 1960s, the need for housing also grew. SEAT responded by establishing a workers’ cooperative, which uses member’s monthly contributions to finance the gradual construction of new housing blocks on the estate. However, the constructions were delayed as the project directors, appointed by SEAT itself, usurped the money. In protest, workers still awaiting their apartment allocations, including Manuel’s family, occupied the semi-constructed blocks. The dispute continued for years, even after the dictatorship ended, until Pujol’s government financed the completion of the buildings and the surrounding urbanisation works. Manuel still lives in the same apartment his family occupied when he was a teenager.

This episode is a vivid example of how the politics of remembering goes hand in hand with the politics of forgetting. Uncanny material remnants of personal

and national histories cannot easily be resolved by their monumentalisation, nor by their removal. Manuel's insistence that I should not photograph Puyol's plaque echoes the ambiguity between remembrance and forgetting that Sami Hermez (2007: 150) observes in post-war Lebanon, an ambiguity that renders 'memory a continuously lived moment, one that is not seized by history'. Manuel's personal experience of the housing struggle at SEAT is not represented by the official plaque, creating the need to re-live and renegotiate that history in the present. Reasserting one's own position in relation to the past by selecting what to remember and what to forget, renders memory a lived, ongoing process that is situated within the neighbourhood rather than confined to history textbooks, as Manuel might put it.

I suspect Manuel's statement conceals a kind of historical disillusionment, perhaps linked to the compromise and decline of the labour movement and the co-optation of the neighbourhood movements in the post-dictatorship years (Delgado 2015). The plaque, to Manuel's apparent dismay, commemorates Puyol rather than the struggle waged by his family and others. This disillusionment became evident to me on another occasion, when Manuel and I assisted a book presentation on the 1971 strike at SEAT published by the *Memorial*. Welcoming an audience of around 50-60 people, including former factory workers, the president of the association stressed the need to 'rediscover a utopia that takes us forward' (*re-encontrar la utopia que nos lleva adelante*), implicitly suggesting that today's workers and society experience a sense of disorientation and a disappointment compared to 1971. The infrastructures of memory in LMZF haunt the present

not only in their capacity to keep the dictatorship alive (Rubin 2018), but also in their capacity to evoke what some perceive as lost struggles that failed to live on in the present.

The plaques in the neighbourhood function as a dynamic archive of memories and experiences that enabled me to engage in conversations that connect both uncanny and heroic stories of the past to the present and the future of the neighbourhood. The mobilisation of the memory of SEAT situated the neighbourhood within a broader national history, thereby producing the *neighbourhood-as-archive*. Beyond the contestation over history itself – whether SEAT represents resistance or nostalgia – I contend that memory functions as a generative force, allowing people to link the neighbourhood to the wider histories of Barcelona, Catalunya and Spain. In the context of an influx of newcomers to LMZF, these connections may help to counteract the neighbourhood's historical peripheral status vis à vis the city of Barcelona (Morcuende 2018). Projecting the neighbourhood's history as integral to national history allows LMZF residents to claim belonging to the city of Barcelona, especially in a context of rapid urban transformation. This projection is materially forged into the fabric of the neighbourhood: in the walls that bear the murals, in the commemorative plaques, and in the removal of the old plaques.

Conclusion

In this article, I have explored how the *neighbourhood-as-archive*, produced through memory work in the Barcelona neighbourhood of La Marina – Zona

Franca, assumes particular significance in the context of a large-scale urban transformation project unfolding in the area. While the memories and legacies of political violence in Spain have shaped broader political debates for more than two decades, I have explored how local memory work shapes people's relationship to spatial transformation and to the future. Drawing on the ethnographic concept of *mentrestant* ('the meantime'), I showed how residents employ memory work to navigate the temporal gap between present and future introduced by the transformation of LMZF into Barcelona's newest residential area. I have argued that the haunting of national histories in the neighbourhood, exemplified by the remembrance of SEAT, manifests not only as a battle of unsettled political disputes over the past, but also as a productive occasion through which to participate in the making of the future neighbourhood. Imprinting the landscape with relevant markers of memory becomes a way of conversing with the future: with the newcomers arriving to the area, and with the anticipated conditions of neighbourhood life yet to come. Hence, I have drawn attention to how the temporal category of the *meantime*, and the condition of expectation it entails, can sometimes be experienced as productive, rather than only as stagnating.

Memory work is at once an act of anti-forgetting and a means of living the neighbourhood politically during a period of intense change. Residents involved in memory work seek to enact urban space in political terms, that is, engage their neighbourhood as a site in which contentious politics can be practiced and demands towards the authorities can be formulated. Therefore, the *neighbourhood-as-archive* becomes formative of the neighbourhood itself, activating and

mobilising people in their quality as residents of the neighbourhood. Memory work makes claims upon institutions, manifested in the participatory processes concerning the ongoing transformation of the area. In this way, memory operates not merely as a retrospective lens – what Walter Benjamin, in his reflection of history, termed the 'pile of debris' (Löwy 2016) – but as a tool with which to temporally and spatially navigate urban change.

This is significant not only for the future of LMZF, but also for understanding how memory is entangled with the ways in which politics are imagined and practiced in urban space more generally. In a city that has historically witnessed intense contestation and struggles around urban infrastructure, public space, and housing – struggles that have intensified over the past decade amid exponential tourist extractivism and the expansion of the expatriate economy (Mansilla 2023) – memory work is about creating in the present the conditions that might allow the past to remain relevant for urban life in the future. In this article I have focused primarily on the legacies of Francoism in LMZF. However, as memory work is increasingly expanding to encompass other pasts beyond the legacies of Francoism and the Civil War per se, such as feminist legacies or agricultural histories, it remains to be seen how memory will continue to shape urban futurities and inform people's political engagement with urban space.

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Notes

- 1 All names used are pseudonyms.
- 2 I choose to translate the word *relato* as narrative, as it better carries the political and ideological shade that Manuel talks about. *Relato* also means ‘account’ or ‘story’.
- 3 https://www.eldiario.es/catalunya/edificios-resisten-franquistas-barcelona-concentran_1_1567640.html Accessed on 31 May 2025.

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Listening to Archives

Iatmul Voices and Silences in Gregory Bateson's Ethnographic Archives

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In August 2024, after spending four months in Kanganamun (East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea), a Iatmul village by the Sepik River, I was finally able to meet Caspar Avuran to discuss the archives of Gregory Bateson, the famous British anthropologist who visited the region twice between 1929 and 1933.¹ During these visits, Bateson took about 500 photographs and gathered objects, plants, stories, names, and other forms of local knowledge. One of Bateson's closest informants – and the only one acknowledged with a named photographic portrait (1936: plate XXIII) – was Malikindjin, Caspar's great-grandfather.

Although Caspar lived in Dreikekir, a village further inland North of the Sepik River, he decided to come to Kanganamun in August 2024 to help his relatives with the ongoing renovation work of the Wolimbi ceremonial men's house. Upon arriving in the village, he was informed of my presence and what I had brought

with me: laminated copies of Bateson's photographs made in the region (462 images from the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, United Kingdom) and digital copies of Bateson's fieldnotes (50 notebooks held at the Library of Congress in Washington, United States). The copies had been at the centre of people's interest since my arrival some four months before.

Caspar and I met briefly at the market where we scheduled a rendezvous for the next morning in the Minjimbit men's house, in Kanganamun. There, we sat with photographs laid out on the floor and my laptop and talked about his family. Caspar was particularly interested in hearing what his ancestor had told Bateson. As I was reading the stories and knowledge provided by Malikindjin and written down by Bateson in Iatmul, Caspar told me that it felt like he was hearing the voice of his ancestor. He was not the first man to

tell me this; other collaborators had often expressed how, when hearing me read Bateson's fieldnotes, they felt a direct connection with their ancestors.

Caspar's personal history was not uncommon in the region. He had never met his grandfather and his father died before transmitting any knowledge to him. Hearing me read the stories told by his great-grandfather to Bateson was a way of learning about, and arguably from, his family, their past, and their stories. By listening to what was recorded in the archives, Caspar could attempt overcoming the fatality of his father's disappearance. According to several of my collaborators, the archives and my reading in Iatmul of them were a means to learn from their ancestors in an unprecedented way.

My discussions with Caspar and other men brought new perspectives to Bateson's archives. I believe that through the process of reading the fieldnotes out loud, a reactivation of the recorded voices was taking place. In this article, I examine the sonic dimensions of ethnographic archives to discuss the collaborative research praxis of 'listening to' archives, following visual theorist and historian Tina Campt's (2017) model. First, I present the notion of 'listening to archives' and provide a general theoretical background. I then showcase how voices were recorded and later heard again in Bateson's archives through both voicing and entextualisation. Voicing archives brings attention to how I gave a voice, my own, to archives so that my collaborators were able to listen to and engage with the archives. Entextualisation investigates how voices are turned into texts, thereby challenging the sole agency of Bateson in his fieldnotes. Lastly, I show how this collaborative method of listening to archives chal-

lenges archival absences and specifically the hushing of female voices.

Listening to archives: Sensorial and sonic considerations in the archives

Accessing archives is often a lonely and silent experience whereby users are told to stay quiet. When consulting Bateson's fieldnotes at the Library of Congress in October 2023, I experienced a similar quietness; I was alone at a desk going through pages of his notebooks and letters, written and thus silent documents. At the time, this silence was even more deafening as I had flown to Washington D.C. shortly after returning from my first visit to the Iatmul region in the summer of 2023, where the lively sounds of the villages made up of a mix of conversations and ambient noises were still fresh in my memory. In her book, Tina Campt discusses how she became aware of the sonic dimension of photographic portraits through their display in a silent art gallery (2017: 18-23). This description is similar to my experience of the archival room; in both places, the loud silence is what makes the quiet archival voices resonate. As historians have highlighted, archival documents have a voice of their own and can speak for themselves (Evans 1997: 126).

To investigate these processes, I follow Campt's call to 'listen to', rather than to simply look at, archival images (2017: 6). Through this metaphor, Campt brings attention back to the moment when the photograph was made; when its sonic atmosphere, the voices or the music were made quiet through the camera's shutter. The importance of this methodological

approach is to bring focus to the sensorial and sonic dimensions of images. By doing so, listening to images becomes a way to interrupt the nexus between seeing, knowledge and power (see Glissant 1997). Here I offer to take this claim further and listen not only to images but to archives more generally. By listening to archives, my aim is to challenge and problematise the ways in which these documents are speaking, particularly in the case of colonial ethnographic archives. The praxis interrogates the archival processes in which colonial subjects are seen and present but framed by the colonial registers of voice, sounds, and silences. By attending to these sonic relationships, we may understand better the historical and relational contexts in which these encounters – and silencing – took place.

While seeing has been used as the primary mode of perceiving the past, Camppt calls for new research methods that attend to the multiple and imbricated registers of seeing, hearing, tasting and touching through which we apprehend and feel the world (Howes 2019). Attending to the sensorial and sonic registers of the archives means disrupting the assumption of veracity and truth. Camppt (2017: 3) argues that listening to images is about refusing to perceive and reproduce the subjects of the colonial archives as regulated or regulatable subjects, and embracing the multiple tenses, temporalities, and refusals registered through ‘the recalcitrant and the disaffected, the unruly and the dispossessed’.

The desire to grapple with these categories of voices has been a central concern within the social sciences and humanities in the past few decades. Ethnographic colonial archives are often understood in relation to the violence of their context of production (Foucault

1969; Derrida 1995). From this context, the colonality of Bateson’s collection is twofold: on one hand, the colonial context made his ethnographic research possible and framed its methods and results (Asad 1973; Foks 2023); on the other hand, the archiving of his research in museums and libraries was another instrument of colonialism and imperialism (Stoler 2008; Basu and de Jong 2016).

Archival research has been concerned with the processes through which archives are echoing certain voices while silencing others (Trouillot 1995). Giving back a voice to the people rendered voiceless by reading archives ‘against the grain’ – that is to say, against the structures that created and framed them – has become a research leitmotiv (Stoler 2008). Subaltern studies have been central in highlighting the potential of these methods in recovering silenced voices. In her essay, Gayatri Spivak (1988) argues that it is the inability to speak as a political subject that defines the subaltern subject as such.

Researching archives becomes not only a way to shift attention to the silenced voices but also a means to give them the status of actor and subject in modern liberal and democratic politics. Expressions such as giving voice, having a voice, reclaiming voice and listening to the voiceless are common in these discourses on power and self-determination. From this perspective, giving a voice becomes part of an ethical project of giving recognition, rights and respect to the subjugated. However, in the context of colonial archives, researchers from the Global North, such as myself, should be particularly sensitive about avoiding the pitfalls of White saviourism, which centres on White agencies saving and recovering Indigenous voices.

The entangled notions of voice and agency have become part of an ethical and moral imperative that foregrounds voices and agencies 'as an antidote to earlier assumptions' rooted in imperialist modern and colonial discourses (Keane 2007: 3). Critics have highlighted the limits of the notion of agency rooted in Western modern models and its current political, ethical, and legal implications (Chakrabarty 2000; Povinelli 2002; Keane 2007). The project of listening to archives aligns with previous ethnolinguistic scholarship on voices. Steven Feld and Aaron Fox (1994: 26) have argued that the voice is both a physical and bodily experienced activity as well as a 'key representational trope for social position and power'. Listening to archives as a praxis is a way to bring attention to the ways in which Bateson's archives were created, by interrogating the processes in which Iatmul voices are entangled with and manifested, interpreted, and mediated by archives.

Voicing archives: A way to collaboratively listen to Bateson's archives

Originally, I understood my research to be centred around the visual return of Bateson's photographs to the Iatmul villages where they were made (Kanganamun, Palimbei, Malingei, Yentschan, Kaminimbit and Mindimbit). However, my collaborators quickly showed more interest in Bateson's fieldnotes than his pictures. This research became the first extensive project organised around a collaborative analysis of Bateson's archives involving contemporary Iatmul communities. In her seminal contribution, Linda Tuhiwai Smith

(1999) calls for research to be done 'with communities' instead of 'on them' by integrating local agendas, methods and epistemologies within research projects. Tuhiwai Smith encourages researchers to listen to what their collaborators have to say and how they want to say it. In a similar way, 'listening to' my collaborators meant reframing my research on Bateson's archives and establishing a new project according to local relevance and methods.

After Patrick Kamanjane, one of my closest collaborators in Kanganamun, had looked with me through some of the notebooks, he came up with the idea to organise reading sessions of Bateson's archives. He realised how important and relevant the information was for his community and decided to gather other men from the Minjimbit men's house to hear what Bateson had recorded. Following my initial readings with Patrick and other men from the village, they decided that I was the one who had to read these notebooks out loud, because it would be too arduous for them to individually read them and most of them could not understand them. They also insisted that this work had to be done collectively in a semi-public rather than private setting. It had to be done in the 'right way', which meant navigating between a collective desire to know what was recorded and acknowledging that everything should not be known by everyone.

In this undertaking, the men asked me to read Bateson's archives in the men's houses. Men decided to conduct these sessions in these spaces to follow customary laws regarding the secret-sacred content of Bateson's fieldnotes. Traditionally, these ceremonial houses have been the spaces where the past and spirits were discussed. Our sessions were attended by

as few as five to as many as forty men, who were for the most part in their fifties or sixties. The diverse groups were always bringing varying perspectives on the past and especially on their relationship with local spirits. Younger men would sometimes be present, but the content of these notebooks meant that mostly elder men had the authority and knowledge to discuss Bateson's archives. I would read one story at a time and then discuss with the men what they had understood, if they already knew this story and whether it belonged to a specific clan. I listened to any comment they had to make. If the story were to remain secret, I invited men to stop me so I could move on to the following one.

The voicing process gave emphasis to my role and position as an intermediary between my collaborators and Bateson's archives. As such, listening to archives had to be a collaborative project because of our different positionalities and limits. Here, Camp's (2017) model for listening to images is particularly relevant because it highlights how her own positionality as a Black woman allowed her to engage, and disengage, with archival depictions of Black people.

As a non-Iatmul person, I could not undertake my project alone. Indeed, due to most of Bateson's field-notes being handwritten in Iatmul, interpreting and reading them was challenging. When I consulted the notebooks for the first time, I was able to understand very little. At the time that Bateson visited the region, no written versions of this language existed, leading him to develop his own system of encoding phonemes into written syllables. I needed the help of my collaborators to understand these archives linguistically but also culturally. They contained information that could

only be understood within the cultural context in which names and stories originated. Bringing back this knowledge became a way to unlock its power in a place where it was meaningful.

However, my Iatmul collaborators were in a similarly reliant position. While they could understand the content of the notebooks, the archives remained partly illegible to them. Most of them had never read archives before and had little experience with such documents. Additionally, Bateson's handwriting was illegible to them, especially because he often wrote with haste, using different systems of abbreviations. My positionality, as a researcher attuned to the specificities of the archives, became central in my ability to act as an intermediary.²

Voicing Bateson's archives was a learning journey during which I had to understand how the syllables and pictograms written by Bateson relate to Iatmul phonemes. I often repeated the same sentences over and over with different pronunciations. After some weeks, I became able to understand Bateson's way of writing Iatmul sounds and could voice more accurately the stories held in his notebooks. Yet, voicing the archives was not only a linguistic process but also a bodily performance (Zumthor 1984), a process rooted in social and cultural discourses in-between the private and the public, and the personal and the social (Keane 1999; Harkness 2013; Weidman 2014). My inability to read Bateson's archives correctly at first was highlighted by both collaborators' comments and my tendency to hypersalivation. My inability to produce Iatmul sounds was also due to the fact that my body was still marked by Western ways of eating, behaving and socialising. To help with my reading, the men advised me to eat

the local staple, sago. As such, being able to read in Iatmul went beyond mere linguistic skills and was intrinsically linked to ways of eating, living and being.

Voicing knowledge recorded by Bateson was not an innocuous process. During these reading sessions, men quickly realised that the notebooks held particularly sensitive knowledge. For example, in one of the initial reading sessions, I read a list of names recorded by Bateson. On hearing them, Patrick was shocked, then asked me to read it again. He whispered the names as I was saying them before smiling at me and stating that these names were the power of the Minjimbait men's house. They were directly linked to specific spirits and ancestral entities. Knowledge of these names was associated with the existence and thriving of the men's house and community. Yet, these names could be as detrimental as they were beneficial. In the Sepik region, talking about spirits and calling their names is a highly sensitive activity. By doing so, spirits can come to the village and cause potential damages and retaliations towards both the speaker and their audience.

Additionally, these specific names could only be known to men from the Minjimbait community. This was another important point of tension: men wanted to control what would be read in which men's house. Some did not want other men from another men's house to hear about names or stories from their own house. For example, I started reading in Minjimbait but then did sessions in the Wolimbi men's house. Before going there, Patrick told me: 'If you see any information linked to Minjimbait, you just skip it'. His fear was a general one because people were afraid that men from another moiety, another men's house or another clan would hear, memorise and steal their names. As

discussed in previous ethnographies of the region, ownership of names was and still is greatly debated and challenged, and this forms a central part of the local political life and tensions between clans (Bateson 1936; Moutu 2013).

Communities in the Iatmul region did not know that Bateson had gathered knowledge and stories beyond those published in his monograph (1936). It was therefore a shock at first to discover that this material existed. Before being able to discuss it, they had to gain back knowledge of and from these archives. This was made possible through listening to my voicing of Bateson's notebooks. By organising these reading sessions, my Iatmul collaborators chose to assume the position of listeners rather than speakers. Previous researchers have highlighted how different groups in Papua New Guinea give emphasis to this position as being more important in the process of providing meaning to what is being said (Robbins 2012; Slotta 2017). In this perspective, power is held by the listeners because they are the ones who judge the speaker and their abilities to provide knowledge and insights. Anyone can give a speech, but only the listeners can assess it and decide to act upon it or not. It is for this reason that my collaborators were more comfortable being listeners because, in this way, they could critically assess the discourses recorded by Bateson. In this process, they were not passive agents, insofar as they listened cautiously and critically to determine if archival discourses were deceitful, truthful or manipulative.

Listening was a central means for my collaborators to learn from the archives. It was by listening to Bateson's notebooks that people came to understand the content of the notebooks. The return of the archives gave my

collaborators the ability to listen to archival voices, interpret them, challenge how they were recorded or misrecorded and regain sovereignty over them. These reading sessions created a space in which the discourses of their ancestors could be heard, assessed, cared for and valued. My collaborators knew that potential mistakes, inaccuracies or omissions could be found in these accounts. By listening to the archival records, they could 'stretim' these stories (Tok Pisin word for putting in order, correcting, fixing or arranging).³

Listening to Bateson's archives created an epistemological space in which men learned from the past and could directly challenge the ways in which it had been recorded or misrecorded. In this perspective, 'stretim' Bateson's archives was not only about correcting certain linguistic errors or details from specific stories, but also about rearranging and reordering the content of the different notebooks. In taking notes from interviews with Iatmul men, Bateson would mix different stories regardless of their local social distribution. Thus, my collaborators perceived that the main objective of listening to Bateson's archives as a praxis was to reestablish the local and clanic affiliations of the recorded stories.

For instance, men from Minjibit realised that the important names from their house had been provided to Bateson by men from the Wolimbi ceremonial house. It was a shock for Minjibit men because it meant, for one thing, that men from Wolimbi knew about their secrets, and for another, that the latter had transmitted to Bateson knowledge to which they were not entitled. It was by listening to the fieldnotes that men from Minjibit could reclaim the power and knowledge belonging to their community.

In sum, voicing the archives was a necessary part of a process through which these archives were translocated from their institutional walls to a new space with its own dialogical system, ontologies and epistemologies. Listening to archives as a collaborative praxis was a way to bring Bateson's archives back to local understandings of conversations, storytelling and knowledge sharing. Above, I mentioned that liberal and democratic discourses have proposed that a central aim of (archival) research should be giving voice to silenced communities. Here, however, I have shown that the power of 'reclaiming, reconnecting and reordering ... ways of knowing which were submerged, hidden' (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 69) is held not only in the act of speaking but also that of listening. Minjibit power and agency emerged not so much from voicing Bateson's fieldnotes as from listening to them.

Listening to voices in the creation of ethnographic archives: The plurivocality of Bateson's archives

Listening to archives as a collaborative praxis became a way to bring new attention to the sonic and sensorial dimensions of Gregory Bateson's notes. Through my reading of them, I became particularly aware of the ways in which Bateson translated voices and sounds into written documents. I now analyse how fieldnotes can be comprehended as part of a process of entextualisation of local oral forms of knowledge. The notion of entextualisation can be defined as the 'process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a text – that can

be lifted out of its interactional setting' (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73). From this perspective, entextualisation brings attention to the techniques, mechanisms, and processes through which Iatmul voices were turned into written texts as a specific form of inscription (Latour 1986). Fieldnotes were a specific technological translational process through which Iatmul voices were turned and processed into ethnographic data. Bringing sonic sensitivity to these archives means focusing on not only the data recorded but also its related metadata – how, when, by whom, to whom, and in whose presence the information was shared.

Listening to Bateson's fieldnotes gives new insights into his ethnographic practices. After arriving in Mindimbit in the summer of 1929, Bateson conducted interviews with several informants to make sense of the performance of *mwai* masks. These masks were manifestations of local spirits linked to specific landscape features and specific clan affiliations. Performed in pairs, each had a different name. To develop his explanation of names and their relationship to clan affiliation, Antimali, one of Bateson's informants, gave him several names that his clan, the Mailambu, owned in relation to *mwai* masks. Following from these interviews, Bateson (1932: 401) came to understand that names were something of importance and that they needed to be collected to make sense of the culture. From this point onwards, his way of doing research changed and had to be adapted to this specific knowledge system.

In this system, knowledge is necessarily positioned. A man has access to the specific portion of cultural knowledge linked to his own clan affiliation but culture as the sum of all this knowledge is an abstraction and

never accessible to a single man. This local knowledge system appeared in conflict with the Western modern and positivist model, in which knowledge is assumed to be unique and exists disconnected from its holders. Conversely, for Bateson's interlocutors, knowledge of specific names was linked to power and control over certain social, political, and religious domains, which therefore had to remain secret. Bateson's informants were not ready to publicly share their knowledge, but some were willing to discuss it during private sessions. For Bateson, it came down to a selection of men whom he considered valuable for his research and who were willing to discuss this secret form of knowledge.

This shift in ethnographic methods coincided with a change in his notetaking practice. Data was now clearly attached to a specific informant. In late August 1929, Bateson developed a system of having personal notebooks for each main informant. He explained this system to Nora Barlow, his godmother:

I have discovered a new way of buying conversation – I pay by the notebook. Each informant has his own book & we fill in gaps in conversation by counting the pages. At first I reckoned 18" knife per notebook – but they rushed me. (Letter from Bateson to Nora Barlow, 7 September 1929, Nora Barlow Papers).

While certain men were judged as important informants, others were considered less relevant. Indeed, some men were never called again for further interviews, and their personal notebooks in which Bateson recorded the stories dictated during these private meetings were never finished. For example, Mainsinkwondo gave

one story, but Bateson noted that his work of dictation was not good and that he was 'young & shy' (p. 1, MI notebook, Folder 5, Box N 106, MMPSPEA). Another man called Mwaimdomi started a notebook but after a few transcriptions, Bateson noted:

He is entirely & solely interested in the payment for his talk & will stop in the middle of a story to count the pages. He tried to get extra payment for the kop [story]. I doubt whether he will start another book after he has finished this one. (p.1, Sepik E, Folder 1, Box N 105, MMPSPEA).

Mwaimdomi never finished the notebook, and Bateson used the rest to record knowledge from another informant. Bateson judged that Mwaimdomi was only interested in the length of the story and its payment. He did not value his stories as authentic or genuine and therefore ended their private sessions.

Discussing notebooks as entextualisation of Iatmul knowledge highlights the processes through which Bateson turned oral discourses into ethnographic data. By using the notion of entextualisation, I showcase Bateson's overarching control over what he recorded. He could confront different men's discourses. For example, after recording a story told by Nameatgowi, he noted that Kambuankelabi 'never told [me] that [and he is] therefore unreliable' (p. 24, Sepik C, Folder 7, Box N 104, MMPSPEA). Kambuankelabi refused to divulge these missing elements because they could be used in sorcery. By exposing the gaps in Kambuankelabi's recording, Nameatgowi was trying to position himself as a better informant. In this process, Bateson would compare knowledge held by different men,

selecting them according to their 'relevance' for the gathered data. From Bateson's perspective, a 'valuable' informant was able to first clearly dictate names, stories or other information, but also repeat it clearly several times in a similar way. This required great memory from informants and often men would not provide a story in its entirety but would pause and return to it to add details or further information.

During the interviews, knowledge was therefore shared in a format removed from any local practices. Indeed, an entire story was usually never given in one go but in sections punctuated by debates and discussions around specific details. Because of this, most of the stories were given in what Bateson considered a muddled and valueless state (1936: 128). Notebooks became a new space in which traditional knowledge was recorded but it needed to follow new methods and selection criteria linked to Western epistemologies in which ethnographic research was rooted. Bateson's informants had to adapt to these methods and criteria. Through these examples, listeners are reminded that Bateson remains the framing voice in the recounting of these encounters. He had the final say in recording and transcribing voices, judging their alleged value and authenticity.

Nevertheless, listening to archives offers the means to highlight local voices in the transmission of this knowledge. Because of Bateson's way of recording data, local men were part and parcel of this process. A notebook filled with stories and knowledge provided by a single man challenges the position of Bateson as the creator of knowledge. He appears more like a recorder of statements. By listening to the archives and understanding them as entextualisation, it becomes

apparent how beyond Bateson's overarching control, fieldnotes still retain the voice and agency of their original Iatmul locutors. Another important argument is that Bateson as a recorder was sometimes writing down knowledge that was, at the time, beyond his own understanding. Bateson's informants used him and his notebooks as a means to record knowledge following their own strategy. These new perspectives on Bateson's archives were only possible for me to understand because archives were interpreted by my collaborators during their return in 2024.

For example, during the reading of Savando's notebook in Mindimbit, I started going through the recorded stories. Men started laughing. Most of the previous fieldnotes had been treated as a very serious and tense topic. I asked what they were laughing about. They replied that Savando was just telling funny stories about the misfortunes of some women. They had nothing to say about these stories as they were mostly about local affairs but of no importance. The entire notebook felt to them quite irrelevant. They quickly asked me to start another notebook. These comments sparked my interest and became particularly insightful as a way to address local strategies and responses to this system of personal notebooks. Savando managed to fool Bateson by getting paid for an entire book of trivial stories. While Bateson was aware that some men like Mwaimdomi were clearly playing with him, Savando had clearly managed to give an entire book of stories and get paid for it without Bateson realising that none of them were relevant to his research. At this time, Bateson's proficiency in Iatmul was limited and he therefore recorded stories that he did not fully understand. By the time they began this notebook,

Bateson initiated this system of personal notebooks and was anxious to record different stories owned by different men from different clans. Savando lived in Mindimbit but was from Kaminimbit; so, it is possible that Bateson thought he had access to a different section of knowledge compared to his other informants.

Through the notion of entextualisation, I have highlighted how Iatmul voices have been recorded in fieldnotes and transformed from discourses into texts following specific methods. I have shown how Bateson was the main agent in framing and recording local voices. Nevertheless, I have explored how the process of entextualisation reveals a more complex process through which Iatmul men had agency in the way that their own voice was recorded and transcribed. Fieldnotes became a transcultural space in which different authors were negotiating their contribution and through which they hoped to best serve their personal and collective interests. By doing so, the analysis of Bateson's archives disrupts the canonical organisation of archives as linked to the authorship of a single person. Traditionally, this organisation is based on the definition of the personality who gathered the material regardless of the dialogic and plurality of voices involved in their creation. In this current framing of archives, Indigenous voices remain unacknowledged as authors. By maintaining them as informants, they are not perceived as authors producing knowledge; Bateson was the only researcher. Recognising these archives as plurivocal documents, they are as much Bateson's archives as they are Iatmul ones.

Navigating the quietness: The hushing of women

In my collaborative fieldwork, the voices of Bateson and his main informants could be heard loudly in the men's houses. But these clear and loud voices were accompanied by the silences of those who did not get to be acknowledged in Bateson's fieldnotes. Rather than thinking about them as silences, I follow Campt's approach and discuss them as voices made quiet. Campt's (2017: 51-52) praxis of listening to images provides ways to explore the processes and tensions active in maintaining these voices quiet.

An important hushing framed Bateson's ethnographic practices, as well as my own in voicing his archives: women were refused the status of informants and, during my fieldwork, of listeners. Men kept women away from ceremonial life and esoteric knowledge. In the region, anthropological analysis has revolved around male ritual life and male knowledge segregated from women that is used to promote the domination of men over women (Herdt and Poole 1982). Women were, and still are, excluded because they are not allowed to be initiated, a major *rite de passage* in the region that provides the right to access the men's house and the ability to have a role in its related ceremonial life.

I argue that this exclusion of women needs to be historically situated. Drawing from the example of the *kurgwaragwa* (female sorcerers), I explore the processes through which Bateson's archives silenced women and their participation in ceremonial life. In doing so, I acknowledge that women were not passive agents in these hushing processes. They sometimes deliberately

refused to talk to Bateson, and at other times refused to be silenced.

During his two field trips to the region, Bateson never had a female informant and therefore never recorded female perspectives on *kurgwaragwa*. During a discussion with Nameatgowi, Bateson recorded his informant's discourse on these sorcerers. He explained how the 'kurkwa are a definite organisation with secret ceremonies' (p. 30, Notebook Tultul, Folder 5, Box N 106, MMPSPEA). He mentioned that 'a kurkwa celebration' was organised after the initiation of some women (p. 30, Notebook Tultul, Folder 5, Box N 106, MMPSPEA). While the details of this celebration were unknown to men, he argued that the gist of it was analogous to men's rituals. Through this discussion of the *kurgwaragwa*, the commonly accepted definition of Iatmul culture is challenged. For starters, women could be initiated. Moreover, *kurgwaragwa* contradict the model of womanhood described by Bateson (1936: 144), who emphasized the privacy and quietness of women. However, the *kurgwaragwa* show that women knew about esoteric knowledge, secret and powerful names, and *tsivukundi* (sorcery). They were greatly feared because they could use the powers and magic that were supposedly restricted to men.

Bateson defined Iatmul culture as masculine in that men had their own ceremonial house where they performed rituals from which women were completely excluded. In this way, Bateson maintained, men defined their masculine identity and dominance over the world of womanhood. But this testimony shows that women did have a ceremonial life of their own. Women appeared as a direct counterpower to the supposed dominance of men. They were able to

organise collective ceremonies from which men were excluded and about which they knew little.

Nameatgowi finished his point by saying: 'In Mindimbit women are nowadays crossed & insulted – no one would dare to do it if there were *kurkwa*' (p. 32, Notebook Tultul, Folder 5, Box N 106, MMPSPEA). The disappearance of *kurghwaragwa* in Mindimbit in 1929 raises the question of the reasons for this absence. How and why did they disappear? Was it a violent process? Responses to these questions remain unknown, but Nameatgowi noted that their disappearance meant that violence towards women could now be practised. This disappearance of *kurghwaragwa* therefore meant the enforcement of new modes of gender relationality and a new gendered segregation. Listening to the hushed female voices in Bateson's archives reminds us that gender is not only culturally specific but also historically situated. Iatmul women had different roles and importance at different moments and cannot be so easily categorised as done by Bateson.

The colonial context seemed to have played an important role in this new mode of gender relationality as men were using colonial powers and resources against women in order to silence and subjugate them. For example, I was told by men in Kanganamun that in the 1950s, men had reported on and sent a *kurghwaragwa* to the representative of the colonial administrative post in Ambunti. My collaborators did not mention what happened to her, but she was most probably sentenced to jail and killed. In this context, it seems that the erasure of female voices can be conceived of as a project in which Iatmul men tried as much as possible to maintain women as epiphenomenal.

As mentioned, in my present collaboration I chal-

lenge the exclusion of women from the archives. As I highlighted earlier, women were not allowed to listen to the archives because most of the knowledge entextualised by Bateson included esoteric and ceremonial discourses. The setting of these sessions in the men's house further ensured that these archives remained out of reach for non-initiated inhabitants, women and children. Overall, women's silence in Bateson's ethnography made sense to my male interlocutors. What they valued most was the esoteric and clanic knowledge and names related to local spirits and ceremonial life, from which women were and are excluded. It therefore made sense to them that no women were present in Bateson's archives. However, they agreed that it was unfortunate that women had not been involved in Bateson's research, for it omitted their specific practices, perspectives, and discourses.

As a male anthropologist, I was aware of the double gender bias of working with these archives – Bateson's bias in recording, as well as my own in analysing – so I tried to involve women in this collaborative process. Following local protocols and restrictions around certain knowledge, I directly asked them questions about elements mentioned in the archives and about their family histories, and I showed them photographs. The participation of women during my research largely derived from their own desires to be involved. As such, not only did they actively challenge the historical exclusion of women in Bateson's archives, they also refused to have themselves excluded as listeners of these archives.

One of my most important female collaborators was Kambo, the eldest woman in Kanganamun. At first, people told me to meet her because she would have the

answers to some of my questions about past practices. When I arrived at her house, she immediately asked precise questions about the contents of the notebooks, and later, I would read some excerpts to her and other women who assisted me, especially in translating Kambo's answers from Iatmul to Tok Pisin. Refusing their exclusion as listeners, the women asked me to read parts of the notebooks, such as sections on local genealogies, that were not compromising the protocols on sensitive knowledge.

Additionally, Kambo and other women refused to let men alone comment on the archives and past Iatmul practices. They insisted that women, too, had stories about the past that were worth sharing. In doing so, they were challenging their position in which they had been placed by men. As the eldest person in the village, Kambo had an important position in my research, which was partly acknowledged by my male collaborators. While Kambo and other women were listening to parts of Bateson's archives, they were also challenging current masculine discourses and practices. For example, while listening to some general comments about past ceremonies, Kambo was quick to criticise the ones organised by the men nowadays. She complained about how ceremonial life had changed and highlighted how the masks used in contemporary performances for tourists are not as good as they were before; the masks, she said, used to sing during the whole performance, but now they mostly remain silent.

Drawing from this discussion on *kurgwaragwa*, I argue that the position of women at the margin of ceremonial and social life is a historical construction made by Iatmul men and reinforced by Bateson through his exclusive selection of male informants. Women were

hushed by men, and this hushing was then entextualised in Bateson's fieldnotes. The exclusion of women perspectives and voices persists today and is reinforced by the assumption that only men possess legitimate knowledge of the past. Despite this, the voices of women were and still are challenging the actions and doings of men, which testifies to their refusal to remain at the margins. Both before and today, women have refused to stay in the position in which men, local men and anthropologists, try to assign them. I have shown how the absence of women in the archives does not mean that they were silent. Listening to archives offers a means to attend to the hushing of female voices and brings new insights into the historical and cultural contexts of this hushing.

Conclusive remarks: Towards the collaborative curation of voices and silences

Inspired by the work of Tina Campt, I have explored the promise of listening to archives to apprehend the sensitive nature of colonial ethnographic archives. Listening to archives as a collaborative praxis brings to the fore the sonic and sensorial registers captured during ethnographic encounters narrated in Bateson's archives. I have highlighted how this praxis showcases the limitations of theoretical arguments about the right of the silenced, the subaltern and the marginalised to have a voice in the archives. Claiming back authority and agency, I propose, can also be a question of being able to *listen* to colonial archives. Such listening is particularly important in situations in which political, social, economic and linguistic barriers still prevent

Indigenous communities to access and listen to their related archives. Through a presentation of this collaborative archival analysis, I have showcased how voicing the archives was a necessary process through which my collaborators could listen to the archives. Letting my collaborators assume this position of listeners was integral to acknowledging and integrating their perspectives, methods and epistemologies into my research. Such collaborative praxis brought new ethical considerations to the voicing of sensitive archives, as constant negotiations have to take place to ensure that Bateson's archives were listened to in a context where they could be cared for.

Following Camp's concern with quiet voices, I have explored how the hushing of female voices was registered in the archives. Listening to the hushing of women in Bateson's archives brought an improved understanding of the contexts in which this hushing took place. Enforced by Iatmul men and reinforced by Bateson in selecting only male informants, the hushing of women always appears incomplete insofar as the latter refuse to be contained within the margins of their assigned subjugation. In working with these sonic modes of rupture and refusal, researchers are reminded of how being visible and heard can be part of the colonial trap of the notion of the modern liberal subject.

My method has been an attempt to create a post-colonial collaborative curation of archives, which attends to Iatmul voices *and* quietness. Respecting local protocols around sensitive knowledge, my research collaborators and I developed ways of caring for past and present voices, respecting how they wanted to be heard, acknowledging those who refused to be confined

either as silence or voice, existing in the limbo of time, forcing us to reflect on Western biases and categories. Through this experience, archives turned into dynamic spaces where knowledge was not so much accessed, but constantly reassessed, renegotiated and reproduced.

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Notes

- 1 Gregory Bateson visited the region twice; first, between 1929 and 1930, when he mainly resided in Mindimbit, and then between 1932 and 1933 when he was based in Kanganamun.

- 2 This doctoral project builds upon previous experiences in researching colonial ethnographic archives from Papua New Guinea in both French and British contexts. I was therefore attuned to the colonial history of the region, its entanglements with archival documentation, its archival logics and politics, and the potential of archives in recentring Indigenous actors, perspectives and histories.
- 3 I spoke Tok Pisin with my collaborators, an English creole language and the national *lingua franca*.

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The Ethnographer's Archive of Encounters

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'...the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories'
[Benjamin 1955]

In his famous essay about book collecting, Walter Benjamin (2015 [1955]) describes the careful process of unpacking his library. He meditates on the nature of a collection and the different memories each book elicits – where he bought it, the effort that went into tracking it down. Books serve a mnemonic function. Anthropologists might experience similar recollections when they return from their field sites and unpack notes, documents, and other materials that they have collected or been given along the way. Or, in this digital age, when they organise photos, recordings, and screen-shots into files.

But what – exactly – is the nature of the ethnographer's archive? Whose finger marks, political visions, and scribbles does it contain? When and why did

particular items fall into the hands of a fieldworker in the way that they did? In which encounters did they appear? What was not included or evaded capture by the fieldworker?

In his 2025 Malinowski lecture, Chihab El Khahab (2025) raised stimulating questions about anthropological archives and ethnographic data in the face of time. What happens when ethnography – inevitably, sometimes rapidly – becomes history? He reflected on how anthropologists of the future might return to the data of their predecessors. And he contemplated the peculiar temporality of ethnographic data, how societal context constantly shifts around it. El Khahab notes that he is:

making a *prospective* point about the multiple possibilities inherent in one's file. Whether one wants it or not, by being exposed to the vicissitudes of

time, the ethnographer's file retains an irreducible analytical value as potential history. Ethnographers are always salvaging something, even when they do not yet know what it is.

In this essay, I take inspiration from El Khahab's programme for thinking about the ethnographer's archives and the sort of 'possibilities' inherent within them.

There is, of course, a vast body of scholarship which considers state and colonial archives as ethnographic objects (Stoler 2008; Hull 2012), the use of archives in the production of the security state (Verdery 2014), the affective qualities of documents (Navaro-Yashin 2012), digital archiving as a form of subaltern resistance (Paul and Dowling 2018), and the archiving logic of social media (Geismar 2017). Like other anthropologists writing in this vein, I understand archival documents not as 'static' (Hetherington 2013), but as 'generative substances with histories' (Stoler 2008: 1). What interests me here is the ethnographer's archive, and – in particular – my own archive which I have produced over the course of ongoing fieldwork. I examine some of the documents which I have collected over the past decade through doing research with people in Serbia. Many of these people retain strong emotional attachments to the Serbian Orthodox Church and its liturgical life. They are animated by issues surrounding Serbian national identity and history (see, for instance, Lackenby 2024a, Lackenby 2024b). It might be a peculiar capacity of these friends and acquaintances, but to me their world has always felt very papery, material and, by extension, quite heavy. Elsewhere, I have described how Orthodox spiritual literature

circulates amongst churchgoers and how – as a fieldworker studying Orthodoxy – many of these tracts and pamphlets ended up with me (Lackenby 2023). This reliance on paper is striking, given the rampant digitisation of social life. But my fieldwork (in Serbia, and more recently in Bosnia) has always involved texts and notes, with people often giving – or at least showing me – documents to prove their point. The women and men I interviewed would often write things down, or draw things, or sketch things out. This was in no small part their response to my role as an academic observer and they felt – I think – that it would be good for me to have some 'proper data' to take away. The archive I continue to build is composed of tangible documents (magazines, sketches, newspapers, leaflets, exhibition flyers, photocopies, contact details of people with whom it was suggested that I get in touch). But what I store are not simply papers. The archive is also a set of memories about how people *relate to* these papers and, by extension, their ideas, visions, values, and relations to me and to each other.

Ann Cvetkovich (2003) conceived of the 'archives of feelings' not as static repositories of official records, but as the dynamic, affective spaces where personal, collective, and cultural memory are stored, especially around experiences often left out of traditional histories. What I have beneath my desk is, at one level, a pile of papers, kept in boxes and folders – a traditional archive of sorts. But more than a lifeless repository of historic data, my archive indexes moments of social life. As such, I think of it as an 'archive of encounters'. We sometimes hear about 'encounters in the archive', a formulation which indicates critical relationships towards an archival collection and the silences and

hegemonies embedded within it.¹ In this essay, I think of the encounters the documents in my archive gesture towards and to the cultural and social context in which these encounters took place.

Since I commenced fieldwork in 2015, much of this context has changed. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić cemented his grip on power, transforming public space in striking ways, with the erection of glistening shopping centres and monuments to medieval heroes. A pandemic swept the world, decimating the hierarchy of the Serbian Orthodox Church. One Patriarch died and a new one was elected. In May 2023, a thirteen-year-old boy, Kosta Kecmanović, gunned down ten people at a Belgrade high school, the worst act of violence in the country for decades, raising urgent questions about the state of Serbian society. And in November 2024 anti-government protests exploded onto the streets of Belgrade and swept across the country. They are unprecedented in scale and continue at the time of writing. These radical social changes do not diminish the value of the contents of my archives, but recontextualise them.

In what follows, I present seven items from the mountain of papers I have collected. I describe the origins of each piece and the context in which it was procured (and sometimes produced). Looking back, I can see connections that I was not able to see at the time I collected the item. The ‘historicity’ of these documents, to follow El Khahab, is interesting; they gesture towards different pasts and political and eschatological futures, whilst the wider societal context around them continues – inexorably – to shift.

1. Political pamphlet, slightly ripped A5 paper.

This is a political pamphlet for the presidential bid of Vuk Jeremić in the 2017 Serbian presidential election.

Trained at the Universities of Cambridge and Harvard, Vuk Jeremić was the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Serbia from 2007 to 2012 and then president of the United Nations General Assembly from 2012 to 2013. He describes himself as being situated on the progressive side of Serbian politics, pro-European and oriented towards the West. In 2017, he put himself forward as an independent presidential candidate. At this election, then incumbent President Tomislav Nikolić decided not to run for a second term and Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić ran for the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS). There was purportedly concern about Jeremić’s candidacy in opposition circles, where the feeling was that a united opposition behind the figure of Saša Janković might stand more chance against Vučić. Jeremić nevertheless entered the ring.

On the front of the flyer is a portrait of a bespectacled Jeremić, his signature, and the text:

I am convinced that together we have the strength to change this backward system and build a sovereign, dignified and developed state.

On the next page, the beginning of the text reads:

SERBIA CAN BE BETTER

We live in a system characterised by arbitrariness, ignorance, corruption and aggression. Such a system not only

doesn't serve the public interest, but also directly impedes progress and hinders the potential of our people.

*We need **changes** – real and not fake **changes**!*

I found this flyer on the dining table of Slobodan, a man who was deeply involved in liturgical church circles in the town of Kruševac. The flyer had been posted through his door. I know that Slobodan was, broadly speaking, a supporter of the opposition – or at least vocally critical of the SNS and then Prime Minister Vučić. But the Jeremić flyer annoyed him. The reason for his irritation was that the pamphlet was printed in Latin script, not Cyrillic. Since 2006, Cyrillic has been the official script of the Serbian state. All official documents appear in Cyrillic. Serbian pupils learn Cyrillic first, then Latin. But in daily life people switch freely between the two and, outside the realm of the state, texts can just as easily appear in Latin as they do Cyrillic. We might infer that the Jeremić campaign conscientiously chose Latin – a gesture towards (Latin-reading) Europe, not (Cyrillic-reading) Russia.

Slobodan cares a great deal about Serbian collective identity and was performatively incensed by the Latin script. Certainly, in the buildings and surrounds of the Serbian Church, Cyrillic is invariably used – a sign of Serbian distinctiveness and national identity, distinguishing it from Bosnian and Croatian which are always written in Latin. Unlike with other friends, communication with Slobodan on social media has always been in Cyrillic. Slobodan was annoyed that somebody running for high office had opted against the national script, declaring that even though Bulgaria is a member of the European Union (Serbia is not) they stay true to their roots by using Cyrillic. He began to

rip the pamphlet in two, ready to discard it. At this point, I asked if I might keep it.

A few weeks after this episode, Jeremić was trounced in the presidential election. He received a mere 6 per cent of the vote. Janković came second with 16.63 per cent. Vučić got 56.01 per cent. Jeremić did not get a chance to improve Serbia in the way that he promised. The pamphlet now gestures towards a political future that was envisioned, but never realised. It sits as a reminder of an unfulfilled vision, a failure. At the same time, the pamphlet afforded Slobodan the chance to expound on his own set of values. Not, as it happened, directly connected to the pledges detailed in the pamphlet, but about the script in which the pledges were printed. In 2022, Aleksandar Vučić was elected to a second term with 60 per cent of the vote.

2. Genealogy chart, biro on white A4 paper.

This is a genealogy chart of Serbian medieval rulers. It begins with Zavida, a twelfth-century Serbian nobleman and shows his four children: Tihomir, Stracimir, Miroslav, and Nemanja. The chart traces the line of descent from Nemanja, the illustrious primogenitor of the Nemanjić dynasty, which was pivotal in the forging of the early Serbian state. The Nemanjić monarchs loom large in the popular historical consciousness. The chart traces the royal lineage up to Stefan Uroš V (1336 – 1371), known to posterity as Uroš the Weak.

This chart was drawn for me by a retired schoolteacher called Veselin. Veselin used to teach Serbian language and literature at a high school in Kosovo. In 1999, when the war broke out, he fled – along with many

thousands of ethnic Serbs – to Kraljevo. In 2008, Kosovo unilaterally declared independence from Serbia. To date, Serbia has yet to recognise the Kosovar state. In the Serbian historical consciousness, Kosovo holds a central place. For the Church, Kosovo was (and remains) the ‘cradle’ of the Serbian people, the site of its most ancient monastic heritage, and an integral part of Serbian territory. In the words of political scientist Filip Ejdus (2020), Kosovo constitutes Serbia’s ‘national ontic space’, a piece of territory taken to anchor Serbia’s past, present, and future.

On the day that Veselin drew this diagram, we had been discussing an exhibition about the Serbian experience of the Second World War. This led – not unlike the discussion I described above with Slobodan – to more general reflections about Serbian peoplehood. Veselin recalled that when he was teaching in Kosovo, he always impressed on his students that they needed to remember their roots, ‘who they are from’ (*od koga su*). He taught them about the Nemanjić dynasty. The Nemanjić era churches and monasteries in Kosovo are frequently used as proof to support Serbia’s territorial claim to the region. Of course, Veselin’s plea to his students to remember ‘who they are from’ takes on acute, politically-charged meaning in the Kosovo context, where ethnic Serbs have long been the minority.

Would I – he enquired – like it if he were to draw such a lineage chart for me, for my interest? He reached into his desk drawer, produced an A4 sheet of white paper and a biro, and began to sketch from memory. He quickly scribbled names and lines. At some moments he paused, trying to recollect the names of various monarchs who had momentarily evaded him,

before leaning in to make sweeping lines of descent in blue biro.

In drawing such lineage charts, people arguably seek to root themselves in time and space. Veselin is a refugee; he no longer lives in Kosovo. And whilst Veselin told me that he used to draw this for his students to remind them of ‘who they are from’ he was also – obviously – telling me that this is where *he* was from, too. With his biro, he sketched out an origin story reaching back to a medieval past and asserted, if only on paper, a sort of historical pedigree.

3. Prayer poem, biro on lined notepad.

This is a children’s prayer poem, purportedly first written down by a Serbian priest called Father Aleksej. His mother used to sing it for him before he slept:

*Lord, bless my place,
Where I sleep, where I dream.
The cross guards me until midnight,
And angels from midnight on;
The Mother of God as long as the world exists,
And the Lord Himself unto the ages of ages.*

Online, one can find variations of the text, but this is the one that was given to me and which I have saved in my archive.

One morning, I was in town to pay a phone bill, and I happened to meet two women who regularly participated in church services and pilgrimages. After agreeing to drink coffee with them, our animated conversation skipped through a range of topics. At one point, Mira reached into her handbag and produced

a small notebook. In it was this poem, written in scrawling Cyrillic. Bogdan, a man who was an active believer in the same parish, had written it down for her a few days previously and she was very taken with it. I struggled to decipher the text, so Mira read it aloud. Mira and Dragana were extremely moved by the poem, effusive. They were delighted by what they perceived to be the sheer beauty of the prayer, but also by what it could *do*, that it could be used to invoke the Lord, wherever one happened to be: Lord, bless my place.

Mira suggested that I photograph the prayer, so I would have it handy on my phone. But then, looking at the scrawl, she thought it would be better to copy it out again for me neatly. Once she had transcribed the poem on a fresh page, she handed it over and I read the text aloud. Again, Mira displayed a strong reaction to the text, viscerally moved. ‘*Naježio sam se*’, she said. The phrase translates into English as ‘I got goosebumps’ or ‘I got the chills’. The root of the verb is *jež*, hedgehog. The etymology is relevant because the hairs on Mira’s arms had – quite literally – stood on end upon hearing the words. She leant across the table and showed me; the fine, silvery hairs on her forearm were bristling. On another day, on a coach trip pilgrimage to visit another monastery, another woman showed me a photograph of the poem on her phone.

The poem, which is now in my archive, indexes several important aspects of contemporary Orthodox liturgical life in Serbia. It reveals the sheer delight which believers take in hearing and reciting prayerful words. On a previous occasion, I had joined a group of women in their sixties (Mira was one of them) as they visited different monasteries near Kraljevo. At one point, a monk led us in singing some songs by the

prolific Serbian theologian, Nikolaj Velimirović. As Mira sang, a tear rolled down her cheek, so moved was she by the words. At another level, the poem reminds us how ideas *circulate* in Orthodox networks. The poem had delighted Bogdan, so he gave it to Mira who – in turn – wrote it out and gave it to me. She wanted me to have these words, too.

4. Handwritten note in notebook, fountain pen ink on paper.

This is a philosophical idea, written down on a piece of paper in blue fountain pen ink.

The length of time that retrograde processes lasted is the time needed for things to return to their previous state. Communism lasted for 50 years and that much time is needed for the Serbian people to return to the basics of the faith, to the faith in which it was before the arrival of communism as a cultural form.

This note was written by Bogdan – the same man who wrote down the poem for Mira which I described above. In his working life, Miroljub had been an aviation engineer in Belgrade. After retirement he returned to Kraljevo, his hometown. Over the course of the summer, I had got to know Miroljub quite well. He was very interested in the Serbian experience of the twentieth century and had a lot to say about the relationship between the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (of which he was extremely critical) and the value of Serbian peoplehood (of which he was a proponent). Serbian Orthodox are generally highly critical of the Yugoslav socialist project. They unsurprisingly reject the ideological atheism at its core. (Communists,

people suggest, tried to play God and impossibly create Heaven on earth.) And they also note, not entirely without reason, that religious expression was restricted under socialism, and Serbian Orthodoxy especially. This historical context is important to understand the critical tone of the comment which Bogdan wrote down.

In a trend which is familiar across Serbia – and the ‘postsocialist world’ more widely, Bogdan became interested in Orthodoxy during the societal turmoil of the 1990s, as Yugoslavia was descending into ethnic violence. Now being deeply involved in church life, he was frequently in the habit of looking back retrospectively at his earlier ‘atheist’ life during socialism and reading it in critical terms. It was clear from the copious references he was able to provide he had read a fair bit about Serbian history and had developed strong ideas about socialism oppressing the Serbian people’s expression of their true faith.

Bogdan had heard this idea about ‘retrograde processes’ ‘somewhere’; he could not remember exactly where. As a committed believer, Bogdan claimed to look towards a future where more people would engage with Orthodoxy, where there would be a more complete re-engagement with the faith that had existed prior to communism. The sort of societal shift that the philosophical claim anticipates would be happening around 2041 or 2042.

Bogdan produced this note during a conversation in a high street café. He wrote it with a fountain pen which, he told me, had been given to him by his mother and was therefore very precious indeed. The note reveals something, then, about penmanship. Bogdan clearly liked writing things down and sharing them (the poem

described above being another example) and the fact that he used a pen given to him by his mother perhaps made this feel more meaningful to him. There is also a point about the intellectual life of my interlocutors. The idea about ‘retrograde processes’ might not be to the taste of readers of this essay – and nor, in fact, to many of Bogdan’s more secular compatriots in Serbia. But my Orthodox interlocutors often enjoyed tangling with such ideas, finding grand intellectual framings for their predicament. This note is one example of that.

5. Diagram of the theology of truth, confession, and communion, biro on notepaper.

This is a diagram of the dynamics of truth, confession, and communion in Orthodox Christianity.

This diagram was drawn by a man called Darko who worked periodically in a church shop. Darko was a willing conversationalist, and I spent a lot of time chatting with him. He also read widely, meaning that his explanations and understandings were often inflected by theological ideas.

On the occasion that Darko produced this small diagram, our conversation had been focusing on ultimate ‘truth’ (to be found – Darko was in no doubt – in Christianity). Darko said that it was important to have a ‘feeling for truth’. It was a ‘feeling’ which should be fostered by ‘tradition’ or family upbringing. It was also a feeling which, Darko felt strongly, ‘modern European man’ (read: Western, secular, consumerist, individualistic) had lost. It is crucial to ‘stand for truth and, if necessary, suffer for truth’, he said.

Darko found a small square of branded notepaper (promotional material for a metal processing company

from the nearby town of Čačak). He drew a yin yang symbol on it. This Daoist symbol did not work in an Orthodox context, he explained. In the Daoist view, there is a little bit of ‘white’ and a little bit of ‘black’ in everyone. But in Christianity there is no such mixing. ‘No mixing’ (*Nema mešanja*), he repeated, several times. ‘If you chose the white [i.e. Christ] then you chose the white and you suffer for the white’. He indicated the white side of his Biro sketch with the pen. He added, ‘Christians can know about the white (Christ) but they make mistakes’. Humans are fallen, they sin. He drew straight biro lines leading out of the white teardrop shape cutting through the edge. These lines, he said, represented the mysteries of confession (*Ispovest*) and Holy Communion (*Pričest*). Through these mysteries people could recognise their sins (very important) and then confess their sins and redeem themselves. As far as I understood him, confession and communion allowed Christians to stay in the white space. He summed this up by saying: ‘He who goes for Christ, goes for truth, and he who goes for truth will suffer’.

When Darko drew this diagram, I felt very keenly that I had understood something profound about the conceptual world my interlocutors strived to inhabit, though this feeling of great insight dissipated after a few days. Professional academic theologians might take issue with Darko’s explanations and reasoning and be uneasy with skipping to Christian truth via Daoism and symbolising confession and communion as small black lines. The paper has a place in my archive because it reveals – not unlike Bogdan – the sort of lay intellectualising that animates some of my interlocutors. And also, that this was how they were willing to converse with a curious outsider. Just as theology can be under-

stood as an ‘ethnographic object’ (Carroll 2017), so too we can attend to how these lay theologies are produced and circulated.

6. Pile of assorted icons and the text of an Akathist.

This is a selection of nine small icons of different Russian and Serbian saints (some laminated) as well as a printed copy of the Akathist hymn to the mother of God.

This set of materials were given to me by Vukašin. Vukašin is a man in his fifties who works as a freelance translator, translating religious texts from Greek to Serbian. We passed some afternoons in his living room, drinking coffee and chatting, surrounded by the notes of various translation projects. On one such afternoon Vukašin commented that he had a lot of icons. On the dresser there was a small mound of paper icons of various shapes and sizes. In the networks of people who frequently attend the liturgy, this is quite a common sight.

Icons – painted depictions of saints – constitute a central aspect of Orthodox Christian devotional practice. Venerating the icon, the believer asks for intercession from the Divine. Normally, when Orthodox enter a temple, they spend some time ‘greeting’ the icons, moving slowly around the nave crossing themselves and gently kissing the saints. Whilst original icons may be seen as retaining greater spiritual power (Hanganu 2010), paper copies of icons also function as icons in a theological sense. Church shops are stocked with copies of icons and, in Serbia, free icons are sometimes distributed with the national press. When people travel to a monastery elsewhere in Serbia – or

in Russia, Romania, or Greece, say – they might bring back with them small icons and pass them on to friends and family.

Theological knowledge (Forbess 2015: 115), icons, relics, monastics, and pilgrims circulate freely. The pile of items Vukašin gave me are a good reminder of the ‘translocal connections’ (Pop 2011: 220) which pattern Orthodox worlds. This is an itemised list of what Vukašin gave me:

- a. Icon of Saint Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović. Printed in Serbia. Laminated.
- b. Icon of Saint Sergius of Radonezh. Printed at the Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius in Sergiyev Posad, Russia. Laminated.
- c. Icon of Saint Kseniya of Saint Petersburg. Paper.
- d. Icon of the Holy Trinity by Andrey Rublev with the Trisagion² printed on the reverse side. Glossy paper.
- e. Icon of Saint Simon the Monk. Printed in Kraljevo in 2015. Glossy cardboard.
- f. Icon of Saint Simeon the Myrrh-Flowing with his troparion³ printed on the back.
- g. Icon of the saints of the Optina Pustyn monastery in Russia. Laminated.
- h. Icon of the ‘Hilandar Hodegetria’. Glossy paper.
- i. Icon of the Hilandar Christ Pantocrator. Glossy paper.

Vukašin spent some time going through the icons and these were the ones he selected to pass on to me. In this very eclectic pile, we get a glimpse of the Orthodox Christian world. There are Serbian saints such as Nikolaj Velimirović, Saint Simon, and Saint Simeon. There are also Russian icons – possibly from Vuka-

sin’s own trips to Russia (he has been several times) or which were possibly given to him. There are icons, too, from Hilandar, the Serbian monastery on Mount Athos in Greece. They had all gathered on Vukašin’s dresser, before he handed them over. For now, they sit under my desk in London – along with over 100 other paper icons that my interlocutors have passed onto to me over the years.

The other document that goes with these icons is a text to the Akathist (or devotional hymn) to the Mother of God. Vukašin added this to the pile of icons, and this is why I have kept them together in the archive. He understood them as all being part of the same offering. The Akathist was printed in 1998, and the paper is slightly browned and fragile. In 1998, Slobodan Milošević was still in power. The following year, NATO bombs would reign down on Serbia in response to the ethnic cleansing of Albanians in Kosovo. Around this time, Orthodox Christianity was percolating ever increasingly into the Serbian public sphere. Nowadays, the texts of prayers circulate freely; there has been a boom in the printing of spiritual material. Many prayers are also freely available online. But back in 1998 this pamphlet would have been something of a rarity. Vukašin apparently had no need for it, so passed it on to me. Thus, things circulate through Orthodox networks.

7. Incitement to engage in resistance, A5 white paper, folded and trampled.

This is a leaflet which was distributed at an anti-government protest in Belgrade on 28 June 2025. It features a list of the offices of the Serbian Progressive Party offices as well as a map showing their

locations. The heading reads ‘painting is not illegal’ – apparently encouraging people to graffiti on those offices.

On 28 June 2025 a massive protest took place in Belgrade. People from across Serbia descended on the city, with a strong feeling that the political situation could not continue. The wave of protest began in November 2024 when a station canopy collapsed in city of Novi Sad. Sixteen people were killed. The disaster raised urgent questions about government incompetence and corruption. Who would take responsibility? Students and lecturers went on strike and the general public dissatisfaction with the President and his ruling party escalated. The protesters demanded free and fair elections.

The protest attracted around 140,000 people. Throughout the day, protesters gravitated towards the square, blowing whistles and horns. Vendors selling badges with witty political slogans set up stalls along the route. As people passed the pro-government protest camp in front of the parliament building – provocatively blasting out jocular Serbian taverna music – they blew on their whistles and horns to drown out the sound. Thousands thronged onto Slavija square, a mass of people drinking, smoking, and singing. To great applause, a variety of speakers addressed the crowd.

At some point, these flyers were thrown out into the crowd. Some people clutched them and picked them up. After the speeches were over, thousands of people began to move very slowly home. I found this leaflet trampled on the ground, not far from the large circular water fountain which sits in the centre of Slavija square. The plumes of water had been shut off.

I left Belgrade shortly afterwards, so did not have the chance to see whether people enthusiastically took to spray painting SNS offices. As I write, new protests are planned for November 2025 to mark the anniversary of the canopy collapse. The trampled A5 paper indexes just one moment, now past, in this ongoing struggle.

An archive of encounters

Looking through the pieces I have presented here, I see aspects of my interlocutors’ lifeworld which I did not immediately appreciate at the time: Bogdan’s love of penmanship, the value placed on actually *having* a prayer written down or saved on a phone, the simple fact that some acquaintances could simply produce diagrams from memory on the spot. I notice, with the advantage of hindsight, their various elicitations of socialist and medieval pasts, as well as worldly political and eschatological futures.

Anthropologist Vyjayanthi Rao has written that archives ‘can be treated as anchors in the reconstitution of social relations’ (2009: 380). Her comment is especially apposite in relation to the anthropologist’s own archive. Papers, tracts, notes, and sketches help to reconstitute the set of social relations in which they were produced. My archive offers archaeological traces of now historic social interactions, revealing something about the sort of interactions I was having in the field and relationships to people I knew more or less well. It reveals information about how my interlocutors communicated with me, but also with each other, amongst themselves. Through these papers I see the histories

towards which my interlocutors gestured, the flow of objects and ideas between them, and their attempts to explicate the world in conceptual terms. It reveals, then, the conceptual, cosmological, and political worlds they were grappling with – and the ways in which they set about conveying that to me and to other people.⁴

All ‘data’ is, of course, socially constituted (Douglas-Jones, Walford and Seaver 2021) and what becomes part of an archive depends on who is collecting it and for what purpose. The ethnographer’s archive is, in other words, never ‘neutral’. Ethnographic data is inextricably entwined with the ethnographer themselves – their gender, political leanings, ethnicity, personality, capacity for downing strong liquor and heavy food, their sense of humour. The archive of the ethnographer indexes a set of memories produced through interactions.

The archive is a constructed material trace of a field site which I have, in turn, constructed. The materials in it are stuff which I found noteworthy or meaningful – not necessarily what my friends or another ethnographer would find noteworthy. I have not presented here historic documents, holy books or original illuminated manuscripts, say. As I have shown, some of the things I included were actually destined for destruction, regarded as superfluous. Some items I salvaged, others were entrusted to me. And yet, some items remained beyond my reach. They resisted collection. Let me demonstrate this with one final item:

8. Depiction of the Devil [destroyed].

This was a drawing of the Devil. It was burnt and destroyed, so I could not include a physical copy in the archive.

I almost obtained a physical copy of this item, just after midnight early in December 2017. I was in the apartment of Jovana and Aleksandar, both of whom are extremely committed churchgoers in their early seventies. Aleksandar had, I knew, experienced something akin to a spiritual transformation a few years prior to our first meeting. He never fully elaborated on what had happened, nor what had changed and when. But that night – having finished numerous beers and a bottle of wine – Aleksandar was in the mood to share some of his encounters with the supernatural. He wanted to describe the time he encountered the Devil (*Đavo*).

Aleksandar generally instigated recording our conversations. On that evening, however, he told me that I needed to turn off the Dictaphone. He was suddenly extremely serious. He smoked cigarettes and recounted how he had met the devil on the street one night, a few years before. Jovana nodded and mumbled in agreement. I asked Aleksandar how he had recognised the Devil, how he knew what he was experiencing. He reached for a scrap of paper and a biro and began to sketch very carefully. On the page appeared an angular snout with pointy ears and a long flowing body with four legs, running. On a different occasion, I might have described it as looking like a fox or a sleek dog. Aleksandar was sombre, eyes wide. We all looked at the picture of the devil in a sort of drunken, smoke-filled silence. I said that I would quite like to keep the sketch and reached out to take it. Aleksandar whisked it out of my reach, shaking his head gravely. He took his cigarette lighter, lit the paper, and held it as it was instantly consumed by an orange flame. He pushed the blackened remains into the ash tray alongside his cigarette butts. Jovana agreed that there was no way I

could have kept it. The sketch could have been used to invoke or summon (*prizivati*) the devil, she said. And so, a material trace of this particular ethnographic encounter – which was, in turn, a telling of Aleksandar’s own encounter with the Devil – does not exist anymore. Not all knowledge – Aleksandar seemed to be saying – can, or should, be captured. Not all materials encountered can be stored in the ethnographer’s physical archive. And yet, the destroyed drawing of the Devil nevertheless feels proximate to the collection, present through its absence.

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Notes

- 1 For instance, this symposium <https://parsejournal.com/open-call/encounters-in-the-archive/> (accessed 3 October 2025). Various other publications use this formulation, such as Wooley (2017) and Bryant Davies and Johnson-Williams (2002).
- 2 The Trisagion is a liturgical hymn sung to honour the Holy Trinity.
- 3 A short devotional hymn dedicated to a particular saint.

- 4 Obviously, such traces are not unique to my archive. Kristen Ghodsee (2017: 12–23) describes finding a set of papers in a Bulgarian bin and bringing them back to her us academic office. They were papers of a man’s life and, through them, she offers a broader meditation on the passing of socialism. Especially interesting is her description of *how* she acquired them. There was a tense encounter with a hungover young man who tried to stop her from taking the documents. Ghodsee insinuated that she was working for the CIA, at which the man made a swift retreat. The papers in her archive matter not just for their content, but the collecting itself, give her and us insight into her position and interactions in the field.

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Against the Carceral Archive

The Art of Black Liberatory Practice

Damien Sojoyner

Fordham University Press, 2023

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Addressing how archives are used and subverted, *Against the Carceral Archive* explores the myriad ways in which the 'carceral archival project' of the state is built on pejorative blackness as one of its key foundational bases. The book defines this project as both analytical and ideological, where expressions of statecraft are intimately bound to the manufacture of the terms of existence for civil subjects. It is within this normative process that Sojoyner locates the harsh realities faced by Black communities in America.

Adopting the framework of liberation workers and activists, specifically the Los Angeles chapter of the Black Panther Party and the Coalition Against Police Abuse, he draws extensively from the teachings of these groups, which have been collected, recorded, archived, and taught through the Southern California Library (SCL), a space he described as 'a critical node of liberation and communal praxis' (p. 3).

Building on core principles of these activist

communal practices, as well as the life-affirming ontologies of Black communities, Sojoyner emphasises the importance of studying and planning as key elements of organising. He borrows this notion from Michael Zinzun, a former member of the Black Panther Party, who worked tirelessly on the praxis of education and planning for radical organising. This emphasis on learning the multifarious ways in which the racial capitalist state enterprise operates, drives the book's trajectory throughout. The book is evidently an attempt to articulate the nuances of the carceral archival project as part of a broader effort to contribute to the study of the state's biopolitical structures as they pertain to the establishment and maintenance of pejorative blackness.

Knowledge production, both through state and counter state practices, is the author's central concern as he examines the carceral project of the state. Drawing on and adopting insights from decolonial scholars, such as Cedric Robinson and Sylvia Wynter, Sojoyner links

the state's *myth-making* processes to its discriminatory and violent practices against those it deems inhumane. The author's use of the term *myth*, rather than 'knowledge', is a valuable analytical category as it pertains to the epistemologies of the imperial state. Once he establishes the mythical ontology of racial capitalism, he also uses the category of *myth* to address the false dichotomy drawn between the rational and the divine. This rupture, he argues, is crucial to the state's 'very particular claims' about the human.

This project, based on pejorative blackness, rests on technologies that disseminate knowledge about ideal civil subjects, specifically by categorising bodies into those that 'deserve' to live and those who are meant to die. The façade erected by the state, in both its material and ideological forms, serves to conceal the violent underpinnings of the carceral project. The erasure of violence from the project allows stakeholders to legitimise specific individuals while simultaneously deeming others illegitimate. This undertaking by the state depends on the consistent functions of its various apparatuses – the legal system, education, healthcare, and the media.

The discursive project of making a civil subject (and therefore defining the limits of inclusion) is a reactionary task assumed by these state structures. Sojoyner clarifies the inherent life-destroying capacities of these projects by outlining the internodal functions of different state structures. For the author, these structures are fundamentally based on a notion of pejorative blackness that serves as a system of definitions and enables the state to control the materiality of these bodies. The book specifically addresses the ways in which this control is manifested through various state structures operating

based on pejorative blackness. These structures also provide the organisational framework of Sojoyner's book – each chapter addresses a different manifestation of the state apparatus as it responds to Black liberatory practices: police, technology, environmental degradation, and health and safety. These manifestations are later synthesised in relation to liberation and liberatory practices. The strength of the book lies in its anchoring of analysis within specific records accessed through the SCL. Each chapter anchors its analysis in particular archives from the SCL to deepen the analysis of the state's carceral project in its multiple formations.

Notable in the section on Ideology in chapter one, is Sojoyner's distinction between theory and ideology. He states: 'while theory as a tool of ontological manipulation is vital to western intellectual traditions, ideology animates theory as a governing logic of sociality' (p. 22). This distinction serves a specifically important role within the larger aims of the book; it elucidates that the state and its apparatuses are omnipresent (albeit largely made invisible) and therefore any liberatory practices that resist the violence of the state also operate across theoretical and ideological concerns.

If these ideologies, and therefore their material manifestations, rely on the notion that Black bodies reside outside the realm of the 'civic subject' governed and protected by the state, it is clear why Sojoyner explores the archival aspect of these structures. The carceral state not only incarcerates Black bodies in prisons and through the hyper ghettoisation of Black communities and spaces but operates through databases and 'empirical' evidence that consistently respond to and counter life-affirming ideologies and practices of Black communal epistemes. 'As the dominant

model of state governance', he writes 'carcerality is the connective logic that bleeds through structures that are foundational to the civic project (such as housing, education, health care, science, and the law)' (p. 7).

These technologies rested on binary framings of legitimate lifeforms and ideologies – it was imperative to what the author calls the 'Western academic enterprise' that any body of knowledge containing the possibility of a grey-area was consistently categorised as illogical and irrational through the discourse of pejorative blackness and its consistently established inhumanity (p. 55). Black knowledge forms, therefore, threatened this seemingly stable Western ontology since it contained the possibility of multiple and legitimate forms of life that are equally valid. This notion threatened the façade of scientific categorisation under the Western academic enterprise, which sustained itself by erasing *other* forms of existence: both ideological and material.

In addition to the myriad ways in which Sojoyner expands on statecraft and its manifestation/s, the book also brings into conversation climate change and environmental instability as they relate to the violence and suppression of Black communities in the us and beyond; we see this specifically in chapter four 'Environmental Instability'. I situate this discussion within the recent academic turn among historians and political science scholars who are engaging with to geologists or historians of 'earth' to understand the multi-faceted and wide-ranging nature of the fascist-imperial-racial-capitalist state structure (Haraway 2016; Mbembe 2019; Chakrabarty 2023).

This aspect of the book also highlights the lack of 'humanity' within Western ontological practices and their disregard for the larger ecology of the planet.

Scholarship on ecology as well as the condition of the Anthropocene brought about by the imperial enterprise of racial capitalism, emphasises the multiplicity of nature in its functions, both human and non-human (Muñoz 2009; Haraway 2016; Chakrabarty 2021). Since this discipline of study emphasises on the nuances of intersections between human and non-human entities, it is pertinent to the conversation regarding Western myth-making; an episteme that actively rejects knowledge containing multiplicity and negates the possibility of ecological harmony through its insistence on binary categorisations. This book therefore feeds into the larger conversation around the insistence of Western ontologies to suppress nuance and dissent, particularly as it pertains to exposing the violent industry of racial capitalist nation-states and in scholarship that tries to understand the structures and functions of the 'state'; an entity that is often tactically left undefined.

In addition to its contribution to the study of life-affirming and liberatory practices that strive to undo state violence, this book also contributes to the scholarship on the difficulty of defining the state. Anchoring his analysis within specific events and archival material, Sojoyner addresses the proverbial institution of the state within the distinctive capacities of its operations.

The final chapter, 'Liberation' synthesises the analyses presented throughout the book. This chapter bears the footing for the subtitle of the book: *The Art of Black Liberatory Practice*. Drawing on specific materials from the scl, he discusses to the ontological practices that 'give life to Black intellectual thought and study' (p. 81). Sojoyner draws upon two collections to illustrate the essence of liberatory organising: the Clyde Adrian Woods' collection and the Mothers

Reclaiming Our Children collection. The first centres on the material and traditions of the Black working class in the US whereas the Mothers Reclaiming our Children, formed in the 1990s, articulates the carceral state as ‘an apparatus that tethered seemingly incongruent regions together across time and space’ p. 82). Building his analysis on these collections, Sojoyner highlights the importance of records collectively built to challenge and dismantle the violent state apparatus. In the same chapter, he reconstructs an event that took place in 1996 in Los Angeles – a meeting held at the campus of Alain Locke High School. Using newspaper accounts, personal memos, and video footage, Sojoyner brings to light a significant concern that runs through Black liberatory organising. He narrates the audience’s reaction to the testimony of a former LAPD officer, who describes how the LAPD disseminated drugs under the farce of the War on Drugs. The officer’s testimony draws applause from the audience in the auditorium, and Sojoyner tactically reminds readers that this applause should not be misread as merely a validation of the officer’s words, but as a larger affirmation of all the testimonies of Black people who spoke before him.

Using this example, Sojoyner elucidates the dynamics of Black liberatory practices and organising. His message is clear: for Black communities haunted by the state’s violent carceral project, the words of a white ex-policeman do not serve as evidence for the testimonies of Black people. In the rhetoric of liberation and radical organising, there is no space for manufactured, rational, evidence-based testimonies to ‘validate’ Black experiences; the communal logic is that within Black life-affirming epistemes, the experiences and first-hand accounts of the marginalised are sufficient and

do not need Western imperialist notions of evidence. He furthers this point by discussing the ways in which the carceral state uses spectacle to mask the operations of the carceral regime.

Despite being a key characteristic of radical organising, where the formation of the spectacular is based on nuanced and quotidian knowledge traditions, the spectacular is often co-opted by the state to suppress the same. It is this nuance that the last chapter brings to light, while the book comes to a conclusion: redirecting the reader to the importance of study and planning in radical organising.

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In Conversation about Chains

Breaking with Chains

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Perhaps the analytical problem with chains – from a material perspective – is that, no matter how you position them, their links always retain their form. Every link *is* the same, and the chain's direction is unilinear. The links are not malleable, stretchable or flexible. It is their rigidity and strength that we assign to their use. But, as Jonkman and Prins (2025: 8) note in the previous issue of *Etnofoor*, chains index certain kinds of relations. It is the social relations to which their use is ascribed – their materiality (Miller 2005) – which lend themselves to an expression of inequality and injustice.

While in Ecuador in 2020, I was travelling with a group of rural Indigenous and peasant women to their traditional pastoral and foraging territories in a highland páramo moorland near Cuenca. After driving and then walking for some time, we arrived at a crossing, which, despite the presence of a Canadian

mining company, was usually transitable on foot. This was, however, not the case on the day we wandered up to forage for medicinal herbs and visit the women's sacred lakes. To the women's surprise, the crossing had been fenced off, and the newly erected 15-foot-high iron gate was secured with a long, thick metal chain and padlock. 'They've locked us out of our lands, just like they did with our ancestors', one of the women fumed as she grabbed onto the chain-link fence and pulled with all her might. When the gate wouldn't give, women started grabbing rocks and using them to attempt to break the lock or rupture the links. When the police arrived to disperse them, the women loudly chastised their presence, criticising them for facilitating their dispossession from their ancestral lands. The police argued they didn't have the key and that the women no longer had title to these lands. Nothing,

they claimed, could be done; the lock was locked, the gate was chained.

To me, an economic anthropologist and Marxist critical development scholar whose work focuses on the labour ecologies of natural resource extraction, chains evoke images of enslaved labour, incarcerated work gangs and cordoned-off private lands (Robinson 1983); of primitive accumulation and economic imperialism (Luxemburg 2003[1913]); and of capital accumulation and its guarantors (Harvey 2007; Lenin 1914[1917]). Chains index unequal power relations that are openly displayed and that are unapologetic about their dialectical assertion of both dominance and subordination. In these manifestations, they are simply one of many tools at the Master's disposal – the infrastructures of carceral logics (Borrelli & Lindberg 2025) – set to work in plain sight. At the same time, chains also represent a mundane, everyday, nearly invisible relation that, until property relations are challenged, seldom requires the outright use of force. It is the latter representation of chains, not the former, which is brought to the fore in the *Etnofoor* issue on *Chains*. Despite my initial assumption that the issue would focus on explicitly violent manifestations of power, aside from Borrelli and Lindberg's (2025) *The Chains of Everyday Statecraft*, which draws influence from a Foucauldian analysis of biopolitics and state-making, the majority of articles focus on the more mundane or implicit manifestations of inequality and power.

Dependency is a key theme that emerged from these readings, which speaks to the physical nature of chains. Here chains represent metaphors of enchainment or entrapment between powerful and less-powerful actors. Brian et. al's (2025) article on hustle economies and aid

dependency in Nairobi honed in on the relationships of dependency by which aid shapes male sex-workers' desires to 'get ahead'. Although the unequal dependency link is rendered explicit in the authors' analysis, the dependency relationship also seems reminiscent of what anthropologist James Ferguson (1990), in his book *The Anti-Politics Machine*, describes as the depoliticisation of poverty. Much of the conversation within the community-based organisations revolves around individual aid recipients not 'saving', or being 'irrational' with their money – thus individualising the problematic and placing it outside of the structural constraints of capital. Borrelli and Lindberg's (2025) effort to map the bureaucratic administrative infrastructures, which contribute to the expanding enchainment of soon-to-be-deported peoples as part of the expansion of capital accumulation (and perhaps even Harvey's expanded notion of primitive accumulation applies here), can serve as a foundation to expand dependency to accumulation. Similarly, Rozenbaum's (2025) analysis of a Brazilian private museum endeavour atop the ruins of an abandoned sugar mill attempts to map out the links between accumulation and dependency. And although the author clearly identifies the ways that 'gifting' creates an obligation on receptors that they are unable to reciprocate, hence contributing to their overall dependency, it would be interesting to know whether some of the recipients considered the museum owner's 'gift' a debt to be repaid due to the past labour – or 'dead labour' (Marx 1990[1867]) – of their ancestors in the mill operations. To ask that question would require a shift in focus to labour and its relationship to accumulation and dependency.

But chains as metaphors become complicated when

the analysis shifts to commodities. At times, it appears throughout the articles that the chain as metaphor restricted more than it permitted. As Koopman and Huang (2025) and Toji (2025) observe, in their research with coffee producers in Indonesia and textile fabricators in Brazil, respectively, mainstream supply chain analyses assert a seamless connection between production and consumption, which obfuscates varying degrees of exploitation and flattens fundamentally hierarchical relationships. Efforts by the authors to break with the restrictive analytical framework by which development theory reads commodity production and circulation go in two different ways.

Simone Toji's (2025: 68) analytical decision to move from chains to an 'ecology of practices' in describing the Brazilian garment industry reflects a search for new vocabularies in order to overcome the limits of predominant frameworks of chains to describe economic activities. This attentiveness to the diverse practices, businesses, and logics that hold together certain ecosystems, however, also risks flattening unequal relationships. I differ from the author's viewpoint that Global Value Chain analysis simply reproduces the flat relationships that are produced in Supply Chain analysis. Historically, within development studies, the move from commodity to value was an attempt to make visible the hidden aspects of *value capture* and economic inequality between Global South and Global North countries. A stronger focus on the producer perspective, might have revealed more of the inherent inequalities built into capitalist circuits of textile production and productive consumption. Yet to move *beyond* production chains, as Toji proposes, is also to move beyond labour – the source of the generation

of value, and thus the source of economic exploitation. What does such an analytical move mean for how we approach the exploitation of Bolivian and Paraguayan sewists? Is this rendered a *fait accompli*? In my reading, the ecology of practices risks reifying unequal relationships, especially if we consider labour.

Instead of coining new vocabularies, Koopman and Huang (2025) outline the limits of supply chain analysis and focus on the structural constraints that international capitalist coffee markets impose on producer emancipation. Their argument that shortening the supply chain does not eliminate the existence of a chain, and thus does not challenge the fundamental inequality between producers and consumers, is a clear and communicable example of the limits of entrepreneurial efforts within capitalism. In this case, the shortening of the chain of dependence, as the authors note, implies the increased intensification of exploitation: coffee producers are required to labour in new ways and under new conditions, relations that are otherwise potentially obfuscated due to the fetishisation present with new social media presence and technologies, if not for their focus on labour.

Chains then, and the metaphors they evoke, might limit more than they reveal. It is no coincidence that Marx himself uses the metaphor of chains in the *Communist Manifesto* when he proclaimed that 'the proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win!' (Marx and Engels 2002[1848]: 34). Chains for Marx and Engels were not literal in the sense of those worn by the enslaved Romans and Africans whom Marx references in *Capital* (1990[1867]). Still, workers under capitalism, according to Marx (1990[1867]), were rendered *unfree* by the naturalised

relations of exploitation embedded within circuits of capitalist accumulation, which commodifies and hides labour behind fetishised relations. In Brazil, when the smaller productive operators within the textile industry make references to the “chaotic” state of the industry as offered by Toji, we have to take their position as necessarily impartial, they cannot *really* know the reality of those sewing. As Jonkman and Prins remind us in the introduction to *Chains*, ‘for in many ways, the creation of commodity value is premised on staying purposely ignorant of the daily goings-on in production sites, and with that, on the devaluation and exploitation of the (non)humans living there’ (2025: 9). Perhaps the limitation of chains in driving an analysis, especially one that focuses on commodities or processes (be they objects or labouring bodies), as I have noted elsewhere (Francescone 2019), is the tendency to move away from labour as a relevant site of analysis. Nowhere is this perhaps more true than within anthropology.

As an extension, I was surprised to note that, despite their diversity in focus and approach, all of the authors in this series anchor their analyses of (supply) chains and economic frictions in anthropologist Anna Tsing’s work. Having migrated more recently to critical development studies due to my current teaching obligations, I was surprised to see that Tsing continues to be the main anthropological reference point for analysing capitalist accumulation. And, especially for a special issue on *Chains*, Tsing is a remarkable reference point given that her own approach tends to do away with chains altogether in favour of assessing particular frictions at any given point in the life of a commodity (see for instance, Tsing 2009, 2013). Supply Chain analysis and Value Chain analysis, although both incomplete

and fraught with all of the issues that the authors underscore in their critiques of them, were attempts to see beyond commodity fetishism and the notion that you could understand a commodity’s social relations at the point of consumption. It seems that capitalism and its cultural, economic and social manifestations continue present challenging ethnographic material for anthropological analysis, despite its acceleration as the dominant global economic system of our time (Haraway 2016).

And it is in this spirit that I return to the vignette at the beginning of this piece.

As the women continued to hassle the police and insist on their ancestral claim to the land, one of them was gathering large rocks. She piled her *awayu* (a textile used to carry things on the back) on top of some large boulders, and then, with the help of two other women, hoisted herself onto the chains, and over the top she went. Energised by her example, the group repeated this process, lifting and supporting each other until only two women remained, their uncommodified labour and their refusal of primitive accumulation the driving forces of their defiance. They resumed their foraging for the day, gathering herbs and greens and wild fowl eggs, which would feed their families that evening.

Does grappling with chains also entail breaking with them in our analyses? Rozenbaum (2025) is the only author who contemplates this possibility – the villagers of her study who refuse to engage in an unequal gift economy do so based on historical, embodied memories of exploitation. Refusing to be tethered or enchained at the expense of ‘stability’ (read: exploitation) is perhaps also an avenue for further exploration in research on

entrepreneurs and sewists in Brazil, small-scale coffee producers in Indonesia, and hustlers in Nairobi.

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Forthcoming Issue

Justice

While notions of justice are as old as human civilisation, recent decades have seen a proliferation of terms like climate justice, social justice, mobility justice, epistemic justice, and planetary justice. Liberal theories of fairness and social contract shaped many late twentieth-century debates (Rawls 1971; Nozick 1974; Fraser 1997; Sen 2009), whereas popular mobilisations for racial, gender, climate, and decolonial justice have drawn on feminist, anti-racist, and decolonial thought (Fanon 1963; Okin 1989). 'Justice' here encompasses both institutional frameworks, such as legal systems and legislation, and broader moral and affective claims about fairness, harm, and redress.

In anthropology, early ethnographic works documented customary law, dispute resolution, and moral codes across cultures, but often without explicitly theorising 'justice' as such (Nader and Sursock 1986).

Since the 1980s, however, particularly in the field of legal and political anthropology, documenting and analysing diverse forms of (transitional) justice has been a cornerstone of research in conflict and post-conflict contexts (Wilson 2001). Anthropologists have emphasised that justice is not a universal principle but a culturally embedded, historically situated process (Robbins 2010). They have demonstrated how formal judicial systems often fail on the ground, and how structural inequalities and colonial legacies constrain both access to legal justice and the achievement of substantive justice (Merry 2006).

Ethnographic accounts have also shed light on the making of justice in practice, interrogating how courtrooms operate, how lawyers and litigants negotiate outcomes, and how disputes over what justice should mean unfold in specific settings (Andreetta 2022).

At the same time, anthropologists have increasingly examined justice claims made outside institutionalised frameworks – by social movements, protestors, and everyday actors – showing how these moral claims can contest, reinterpret, or supplement formal legal understandings of justice (Englund 2006). Even when justice is recognised or mandated by formal institutions, these rulings do not necessarily alter practice, and debates persist over who counts as a legitimate recipient of justice. Increasingly, and inspired by their (Indigenous) research collaborators, anthropologists have also expanded the boundaries of justice by engaging with multispecies and environmental justice to explore how environmental harm, extinction, and interspecies relations challenge anthropocentric legal and moral frameworks of justice (Rose 2011; van Dooren 2014; Tsing 2015).

Taken together, these insights underscore the need to examine how global human rights and justice discourses – shaped by anthropocentric and liberal frameworks – can inadvertently (re)produce injustices, even as they seek to promote fairness, equity, or redress. At the same time, anthropologists are particularly well equipped to trace and analyse emergent forms of (in)justice produced by rapid societal transformations, precisely because they ground concepts in lived experience, attend to local and historical contexts, and critically interrogate abstract frameworks that tend to universalise hegemonic perspectives. This allows them to study struggles over AI and digital rights, movements for reparations of colonisation and slavery, reproductive or metabolic justice, and challenges to established normative understandings of justice.

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