

Tribing and Untribing the Archive: Identity and the Material Record in Southern KwaZulu-Natal in the Late Independent and Colonial Periods, Vol. 1 & 2 [book review]

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Abstract:

This two-volume set, composed of nineteen substantive chapters, seeks to address the material culture of collections and archives as a topic of interrogation. The volumes open with a thorough framing of the project in the form of a preface and introductory essay. The biographical authors' list, bibliography, illustration lists, and indexing are all worthy of emulation. The double volume then closes with a forward-thinking epilogue by Mbongiseni Buthelezi entitled "We Need New Names Too," (pp. 586–99), which interrogates contemporary dichotomous legacies of colonial thinking and calls for attention to the use of language and deeper historical chronologies so that scholars might consider and enliven terms relevant to contemporary political realities.

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conveyance of witchcraft phenomena and a reported exorcism (p. 226) and her inspired political-philosophical engagements with Hinduism in her Durban research (pp. 220–21); to Wilson’s anthropologically Christian life, “much more than an ideology; one that, in her case, encouraged her to view people from different cultural and racial backgrounds with tolerance and mutual understand. It was a lived inner journey, a path that was constantly reshaped and developed as one moved through different life stages, including life crises” (p. 66); to Hellmann’s writings on South African “Jewish cultural adaptiveness” (p. 138), rituals, and history amid her own activism with the Zionist Socialist Party.

This book should be made part of courses in the history of anthropological and social theory, courses on method and ethnography attuned to gender and representation, and the national libraries and archives and the library collections of museums in Southern African countries represented in the book, especially South Africa, Swaziland, Namibia, Malawi, Tanzania, Lesotho, and Zambia. These women are still remembered fondly, if somewhat ambiguously in these places. In Swaziland, for example, “Mam’Kuper” is a hallowed figure in the institutional memory of the National Museum and more broadly. As one colleague there recounted to me this year, she “wrote down things that we are not even allowed to say out loud” as Swazis about royals, rituals, and other topics. Overall, Bank strongly accounts for these women’s gender, class, race, and ethnic positionalities, an important consideration given the contemporary decolonizing politics of hiring and recruiting faculty going on now in South African higher education, a space historically shaped by the same people featured in this book.

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Tribing and Untribing the Archive: Identity and the Material Record in Southern KwaZulu-Natal in the Late Independent and Colonial Periods, Vol. 1 & 2. Edited by Carolyn Hamilton and Nessa Leibhammer. Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2016. Pp. 639; maps, color illustrations. \$96.50 paper.

This two-volume set, composed of nineteen substantive chapters, seeks to address the material culture of collections and archives as a topic of interrogation. The volumes open with a thorough framing of the project in the form of a preface and introductory essay. The biographical authors’ list, bibliography, illustration lists, and indexing are all worthy of emulation. The double volume then closes with a forward-thinking epilogue by Mbongiseni Buthelezi entitled “We Need New Names Too,” (pp. 586–99), which interrogates contemporary dichotomous legacies of colonial thinking and calls for attention to the use of language and deeper historical chronologies so that scholars might consider and enliven terms relevant to contemporary political realities.

Buthelezi's sentiments are similarly reflected in Nontobeko Ntombela's examination of young black artists' material vocabularies, a topic that has been the subject of global artistic and art historical inquiry for the past decade.¹ These synthetic articles calling for new vocabularies in language and materiality underscore current South African debates surrounding scholarly value, the role of archives, and the importance of museums in the intellectual life of the nation. Student protests, Fees Must Fall and beyond, have had an impact on wide-ranging academic pursuits. And, in this climate, work that decolonizes and pushes back against colonial historical boundaries into deeper pasts and complex identities is both timely and necessary.

The collection is part of two broader research projects, the *Five Hundred Year Archive* and *Ethnologised Pasts and Their Archival Futures*. The authors took part in a two-week retreat where they work-shopped their writing and conceptual frameworks. This intensive process of scholarly engagement clearly ensured that the persons, actions, and systems of knowledge production would be foregrounded for the geographically and disciplinarily wide-ranging contributors. Throughout the set, each essay brings "the archive" and "the collection as archive" to the fore as the topic of, rather than merely a source for interrogation. As Hamilton and Leibhammer point out in their co-authored essay drawn from the long-term Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative, this set of writings exposes "webs of activity that supplied the materials that contributed to the instantiation of ideas of tradition and tribe..." (p. 448). Across all of the volume contributions authors delve into the specific activities and networks that codified Zulu as a cognitive, administrative, and visual entity.

Of course, the ongoing deconstruction of the cognitive homogenization of identities wrought by colonial rule have been the focus of historical, art historical, museum studies, anthropological and other disciplines across the umbrella of African Studies since at least the mid-1980s. Carolyn Hamilton's work from this period is certainly part of this trajectory. Thus, the refrain within the volumes that tribal and ethnic verbiage, as well as tropes of the timeless, are still the norm in many institutions is rather dismaying and at times a bit hyperbolic. Yet, labels do persist. Objects, photographs, recordings, and documents reproduce convenient colonial or collection categories, be they Senufo, Tuareg, Maasai, or Zulu. These categories, which have all been the focus of intense scholarly dissection in the past twenty years, remain in the archives and often in museum labels with and sadly without contextualization.

In their essay, Hamilton and Leibhammer use the methodology of "backstory" to emphasize the point of entry of an object into an archival context. The focus on systems of creating knowledge around and with objects seem at times parallel to methodologically grounded art historical provenance research. Statements that provenance "occludes the backstory of the archived item before it was admitted to a collection" (p. 435) are not standard practice for museum professionals in this reviewer's experience. But, hairsplitting of methodological terminology aside, it is clear that the workshop method used to bring these volumes together created a network of scholars who are shifting the backstory of

¹ Elizabeth Perrill, "South African Rubber and Clay: Material Challenges to the Global Nomad," *Third Text* 26, 5 (Sept. 2012), 585–97.

contextualization and demanding specificity within histories of South Africa and its material record, both object based and textual.

The line between object and text is beautifully blurred through the well-crafted imagery that is present between and spread among the essays. The editors have included no less than 155 illustrations of maps, artworks, photographs, certificates, letters, telegrams, diagrams, time-tables, and a range of collection labels and ephemera. The thoughtful nature of and economic investment in this publication is a credit to the editors, funders, and publishers and should be used as an example that could spark excitement for new generations of students and scholars in the merits of archival inquiry. The Archive and Public Culture Research Initiative's hosting of an online portal for the volumes with both full and partial articles is, again, laudable.²

The chronological and geographic focus south of the Thukela River during what some included authors refer to as the "pre-tribal" rather than "pre-colonial" period brings to bear the specificity required in such a foundational area of historical inquiry. The linguistic shift to the term "pre-tribal" by some contributors highlights the constructed nature of this identity layer while simultaneously removing colonialism from its pedestal as a historical benchmark. Essays by John Wright, Nokuthula P. Cele, Heather Hughes, Mwalela Cele, and two posthumously published contributions by renown scholar Jeff Guy all bring to the fore specific lineages and leaderships structures that will push future scholars to attend to identity layers in a more imbricated manner.

The work at-hand is reminiscent of Susan Gagliardi's and Constantine Petridis's recent challenges to the iconic category of *Senufo*, a physically distant but conceptually similar deconstruction.³ Picking apart an ethnically or linguistically constructed icon of histories is never without difficulties and requires consideration of what Petridis has referred to as "the particular contexts and historical individuals related to an object's creation, use, and circulation." Both objects and documents require less sweeping gestures of labeling and language. This volume, the set of long-term projects that sparked its creation, as well as intensive work-shopping that brought together scholars across disciplines should act as a model for regional scholars throughout our field(s) to continue this critical work.

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² <http://www.apc.uct.ac.za/node/1207682>.

³ Susan Gagliardi and Constantine Petridis, *Senufo Unbound: Dynamics of Art and Identity in West Africa* (Cleveland, OH: Cleveland Museum of Art, Feb.–May 2015). See also accompanying catalogue.