
Are there alternatives to reading archival sources either with or against the grain?

"Erudition becomes a field of play rather than a substantiation of fact"
- Michel De Certeau

Ann Laura Stoler's eloquent evocation of the archival grain persuasively shows the importance of critical reading of both the content of the archive (against the grain) and its form and context – the production, maintenance and physical situation (along the grain). Deep engagement with any archival sources must do both, so potential alternatives should be seen as what can be added to readings with and against the grain, rather than methods that can replace them. Several such additions will be discussed: one is critically reflection on one's personal experience of the archiv; another is to attempt to more deeply understand ones own biases and the political, social, epistemological pressures and constraints present when working with archives. This can be described as reflecting on the influence of the present moment, both personal and societal, on the use of archival sources. A further alternative involves juxtaposing different documents or collections, which can be done through academic triangulation or in more creative, artistic ways. Furthermore, interdisciplinary approaches to the use of archival sources can free one from particular disciplinary confines and pressures, and bring innovative ways of thinking about archival research, though this could be seen as part of reading along the grain. Finally, in all our criticality and careful use of archival sources, we must keep in mind the limitations of archival sources, that some things can never be known through archival research (see Derrida, 1998: 50).

Firstly, it is important to examine what we mean by archives. Most basically, they are collections of stored data in the form of documents - often text, but including photographs, audio recordings and other types of information. Appadurai begins his discussion of the archive by defining it in the 'humanist imagination', in which 'the archive is no more than a social tool for the work of collective memory' (2003: 14-5). I too begin with this definition, not because either I or Appadurai necessarily agree with it, but because this idea of archives as impartial stores of information about the past is still pervasive in the public imagination and must be deconstructed. Appadurai proceeds importantly to note how 'Foucault destroyed the innocence of the archive and forced us to ask about the designs

through which all traces are produced' (*ibid.*: 16). Here, I work within this framework of understanding the archive: partial, and produced by specific institutions with a goal of providing a particular conception of history in which certain things are either remembered or forgotten.

It is also important to see archives both as physical spaces and as the documents they contain (Mbembe, 2002: 19). This becomes particularly important in our personal experiences of archival research which shape the way we interpret archival sources. In order to understand archives we must look at how we use them; as Harris states in his reading of Derrida's *Archive Fever*: 'The object does not speak for itself. In interrogating and interpreting the object, the archive, scholars inscribe their own interpretation into it.' (2002: 65). It is by using the archive that it is brought to life; it is through accepting that archives are not impartial stores of knowledge that we need 'an approach to archives that is wary of the claim that one or another corrective intervention can 'fill the gaps' in an archive. The very idea of a discernible “gap” was problematised, with the archive being stressed as sliver rather than as incomplete whole' (Hamilton, Harris & Reid, 2002: 10; also see Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995: 36). This indicates that we need to go beyond acknowledging the biases and incompleteness of the archive and figure out techniques about exactly how a particular archive is biased, where it is incomplete, and what this tells us about the archive, its producers, and its information. Much work still needs to be done to develop particular strategies for this (Spear, 2006: 312-3).

Stoler's book *Along the Archival Grain* uses various metaphors to articulate some crucial considerations pertinent to the use of archives. She argues that it has been more common for scholars of colonial archives to read against the grain of the archive: examining the contents of these sources critically, 'against the languages of rule and statist perceptions' (Stoler, 2009: 47). This involves recasting the biased manner in which the state apparatus recalled specific events and

emphasising the agency of colonized or silenced peoples. Reading against the grain is therefore about looking at who is in power and recognising their ability to produce their version of history as knowledge, allowing one to 'demonstrate more than the warped reality of official knowledge, to elucidate their textual properties and the violences condoned by such political distortions' (*ibid.)*. This is an important task, and enables the telling of stories of those marginalized in official narratives, though according to Stoler, this 'leaves intact the assumption that colonial statecraft was always intent on accumulating more knowledge rather than on a selective winnowing and reduction of it' (*ibid.*: 50). Therefore Stoler calls for a reading of the archives along their grain, examining the categories employed therein, the context of their production, and the contestation over what was ultimately included: 'to read for its regularities, for its logic of recall, for its densities and distributions, for its consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake' (Stoler, 2002: 100).

The exercise of reading along the grain also involves 'the cardinal rules of gathering historical evidence, considering who has produced a particular item of information, in what context and for what purpose' (Ellis, 2002: 14). Stoler strongly argues for the importance of reading first with, and then against the grain of the archive, to gain a critical understanding of the idiosyncrasies of colonial rule and archival production, part of which involves historicizing the archive: grasping 'every document as a symptom of whatever produced it' (De Certeau, 1988: 11). In allowing archives their own historicity, they can more clearly be seen 'as technologies of imperial power, conquest and hegemony' (Burton, 2005: 7). Clearly, to fruitfully read along the grain, one requires a degree of knowledge about the context of the archive's production. While engaging with the form and materiality of archives (categories, order of storage, architecture etc.) can enlighten us as to this context, the archive itself can only tell us so much about the context of its production. In cases where triangulation with other types of source is difficult, for example in many parts of pre-colonial Africa, we must accept the limitations of archival research, that some aspects of the past may

remain a mystery; what we *can* apprehend will *always* be partial.

While the internet as a powerful tool for storing and sharing data has begun changing the archival process, allowing marginalised people significant agency in the process (Appadurai, 2003: 18), this does not fundamentally alter the way we should *use* archival sources. The rise of the digital age has changed the nature and our conception of the archive, though the layers of criticality discussed in this essay are still important in using digital archives, even though the particularities involved with doing so may be different for new types of archive.

In my recent work on the construction of Hartebeestpoort Dam in South Africa in the first quarter of the twentieth century, reading along the grain allowed the categorisation of people and the priorities of social engineering in state archival sources to reveal how different actors within the South African state viewed race relations and socio-economic issues in the country (Middelmann, 2015). These views contrasted from pragmatic to dogmatically racist, though even the more pragmatic views – for example expressed through the desire of the Irrigation Department to employ black labour in order to save costs – were predicated on deeply rooted notions of white supremacy. Requests to use black labourers were wholly uncritical of the fact that working conditions, wages, and access to the resources of the state were significantly and purposefully worse for black workers. 'Densities' (see Stoler, 2009: 35) around poor white upliftment in the archives showed how pragmatic concerns never sought to challenge notions of white supremacy. Another example of this was a commitment to racial segregation of the work camps, despite the fact that it was not yet fully entrenched by law in South Africa. Spatial and residential segregation between races in South Africa had been gaining currency as an ideology during this period and by the early twentieth century it was extremely common in practice, ultimately resulting in laws being passed to codify it. Silence around segregation in sources from the National Archives and the Irrigation Department

archives showed the implicit acceptance of segregationist ideals by state institutions.

De Certeau's philosophical musings about the labour of history provide valuable insights into an understanding of how to use archival sources. Conley, translator of *The Writing of History*, interprets De Certeau in a way that can be applied usefully to studying archives: 'Every “fact” that has been recorded and is today assumed to be historically valid is shaped from conflicting imaginaries at once past and present' (Conley, 1988: xv). So-called 'facts' or pieces of information contained in archives were shaped both by the realities of historical processes at the time of an event and again during the process of archiving. 'Every document in a colonial archive ... is layered with the received account of earlier events and the cultural semantics of a political moment' (Cooper & Stoler, 1989: 319-20) This in turn is shaped by the perceptions and motives of the archivist in the production and maintenance of the archive, and later by the interpretation of subsequent researchers. As users of archival sources, we must remain aware of these various layers imposed on the archive. 'Try as we might to describe an event in order to determine “what happened there”, we must realise that events are often our own mental projections bearing strong ideological and even political imprints' (*ibid)*. This is true both of our interpretation of the archive, and, as Stoler shows, true of the archivists interpretation of information in deciding what is archived as an “event” at all.

It is crucial for understanding archival sources to keep in mind the debates that inform production of the archive and power relations that inform the way we read them: 'Archives do not simply arrive or emerge fully formed; nor are they innocent of struggles for power in either their creation or their interpretive application. Though their own origins are often occluded and the exclusions on which they are premised often dimly understood, all archives come into being in and as history as a result of specific political, cultural, and socio-economic pressures – pressures which leave traces and which render archives themselves as artefacts of history' (Burton, 2005: 6). Adding to this the

impact of our gender, age, class, race on our experience of the archive, it becomes difficult – though important – to delineate the different layers of impact on our understanding of archival sources. Inasmuch as there are different layers of meaning embedded in the physical or conceptual archive, there are different layers of pressures that impact both the archivist and the way the researcher experiences the archive (Van Zyl, 2002: 51,53).

A fuller exploration the meaning of reading along the archival grain, to engage with the layers of context involved with the production of archives is important; it is indeed a densely layered task. However, we need to add a level of criticality to our own roles as researchers in interpreting archives. Reading Stoler through De Certeau allows us to be critical of ourselves, our positionalities, as well as of the archival source and its context:

> 'the situation of the historiographer makes study of the real appear in two quite different positions within the scientific process: the real insofar as it is the known (what the historian studies, understands or "brings to life" from a past society), and the real insofar as it is entangled within the scientific operations (the present society, to which the historians' problematics, their procedures, modes of comprehension, and finally a practice of meaning are referable) ... Historical science takes hold precisely in their relation to one another, and its proper objective is developing this relation into discourse' (1993: 35)

Added to personal experiences of archives, we must also seek to be aware of the context of the socio-economic, epistemological, and political realities in which we operate. What types of thinking and knowledge production are privileged? How do current ways of thinking relate to those current at the time of archival production? Have others read the same archives, and if they have written about these archives or their experiences of them, how does this impact our reading of the same archives? We must be aware of the continuous imposition of layers of archive, by others and ourselves.

Socio-political pressures on our work are also remind us to be cognizant of how we invariably

respond to these in some way: the historians' 'relation to the social body is specifically the object of history and could not be taken up without also calling into question the status of historiographical discourse' (De Certeau, 1993: 62). This speaks to the disciplinary confines experienced by archive users, which is why interdisciplinarity can bring innovative ways of using archival sources (Spear, 1987: 18-9). While it has become clear that the historian no longer seeks to create objective representations of the past, there is still a pressure to create complete meanings: 'the archival endeavour is obsessively fragmentary. Local totalities are fashioned from research that remains always intensely specific, partial, and of needs in areas situated between the physical aura of objects and the discourses that name them' (Conley, 1988: x).

Positivism has experienced a death in the academy (De Certeau, 1988: 38); it is not yet dead in the public realm or in popular conceptions of science or history. Pressure on historians, even with an acceptance that all sources are partial and incomplete, to create objective truth claims, still exists. There needs to be a more explicit acknowledgement of the limits of knowledge production. Honest, transparent archive stories can be a way of doing so. *Archive Stories,* a volume of essays edited by Burton, shows various ways, through lived experiences of researchers, of bringing different levels of self-criticality into the process of archival research. In light of how socio-economic, cultural and political pressures impact both our experience of archival research and our readings of archival sources, we must question the accessibility of archives – not just in terms of who is technically allowed into a certain archive – but what other mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion are at play, and how do those impact our research? Beyond accessibility, how does our understanding of the world we live in today influence our understanding of sources about the past? Is it possible, as De Certeau calls for (1988: 36-7), to make a neat division between past and present?

A clear example of how political climate affects our research is that of Pohlandt-McCormick's

experience of researching the Soweto Uprising of 1976 in the National Archives of South Africa. She conducted her research around the time of the transition to democracy and end of apartheid, visiting the archives in 1993, just prior to the first democratic election, and in 1994, just after. She notes a very different experience in these two spells of archival research that show how political considerations affect both what is available to a researcher in terms of information, documents and facilitation, as well as how a researcher interprets a given topic or set of documents (Pohlandt-McCormick, 2005: 302). The materiality of the archive is also important in this context, and she demonstrates symbolic differences apparent between her two research visits – which altered her research experience greatly - for example the change from the old to the new South African flag, and the new presence of portraits of president Nelson Mandela and his deputies (*ibid.*: 307-8). Symbolic differences were accompanied by real differences in her access to documents: 'the archivists gradually became less guardians of the archives and more facilitators of research' (*ibid.*).

An alternative way of using archival sources is juxtaposing different archival collections or documents. Methods of doing so lie on a continuum from relatively straightforward academic triangulation to assess the evidential value of a particular source/collection, to more radical and creative methods of juxtaposition, for example by contemporary artists. In my archival research on Hartebeestpoort Dam, I was able to compare and contrast the contents and sentiments of the archive of annual reports from the Irrigation Department and archival sources in the National Archives pertaining to the project. This allowed me to triangulate evidence as well as get a sense of some of the different perspectives within state bodies, which are at times perceived as monolithic. Such juxtapositions are especially useful in bringing out some of the tensions of governance, highlighting in this case the contentious nature of colonial rule. My own biases and the current political climate in South Africa also affected my research, as I felt white South Africans needed to better acknowledge their long and deep history of privilege at the expense of black South Africans, from

long before apartheid began in 1948. This shaped my choice and framing of the topic.

Juxtapositions of different archive collections are not only useful in revealing more about a particular period, topic or historical process, but also in terms of elaborating the very nature of archives: partial, incomplete, biased, and intended to serve specific and often political ends. Contemporary artist of Greek origin, Alexandros Kyriakatos, in a recent video and installation artwork titled *Archives in Exile*, juxtaposed selections from three photographic archival collections pertaining to the Greek island of Makronissos, which from the start of the Greek Civil War in 1946 was the site of a penitentiary camp aimed at reforming and 'rehabilitating' left-wing sympathisers and communists while the Greek government, backed by the US and Great Britain fought against the communist and left-wing forces under the Democratic Army of Greece (Hamilakis, 2002: 309). Suspected communists of draft age were sent to the island and lived in brutal conditions, facing torture, propaganda and attempts at brainwashing; escape could only come by signing 'repentance statements' and asking for forgiveness, after which repenters would be sent to fight against their former comrades (ibid.: 311; Papaeti, 2013: 38-39). The three archival collections used, all from the years 1947-1950, included state archives, which included propaganda postcards relating to the camp, along with brief descriptions drawn from contemporaneous press reports; photographs from the Red Cross which sent delegates to the camp during this period, also with brief descriptions; and photographs combined with diary entries from the private archives of his grandfather, Nikolas Malamoglou, who was exiled in this camp. The photographs from the Red Cross collection and the Malamoglou collection were reproduced as postcards in the same format as those from the state archives for display in the installation: with images on the front and descriptive text on the back.

Archives in Exile, Alexandros Kyriakatos, 2016, MAXXX Gallery, Sierre. 'Installation view', photograph by author.

The images from all three collections showed various aspects of life in the camps in very different ways. The text on the back of the postcards was drawn from the descriptions of the producers of each archive, though the postcards from the state archive were juxtaposed with selections made by the artist of press reports from the time, which also celebrated the work of the camp. The postcards were displayed adjacent to a video of contemporary footage of the island, shot from the mainland. By juxtaposing this footage with the postcards, Makronissos and its history are remembered, to counter contemporary rhetoric of tourism on Greek islands. This speaks to how the process of archiving can both involve the act of forgetting: through the storage of items/information so as to remove it from memory/consciousness, and of remembering: through the unearthing of old archival material to construct new meaning for the past in the present. The use of contemporary footage, shot by the artist, is also a direct reminder of the influence of the present moment on Kyriakatos' interpretation of the past. Awareness of and humility of this fact is crucial when using archival sources; while historians aim to view the past in its own right and not merely through the prism of the present, the current moment has an inescapable influence on our conception of the past. 'The historian ... if he wished to reexperience an epoch, he should remove everything he knows about the later course of history from his head' (Benjamin, 1940: VII).

While we should try to look at the past in itself without ascribing present concerns to processes that may no longer be current, our research is always somewhat affected by our own ideas, perceptions and even emotions, not to mention the 'political preoccupations' and prominent 'intellectual modes' of the day (Ellis, 2002: 1, 3). Many researchers choose topics based on a personal connection or on something they think is important for people today to better understand. Our perceptions and social pressures thereby affect our research from as early as our choice of topics, and these perceptions, no matter how we try to divest ourselves from them, do impact our experience of the archive. Juxtaposing the state archives and Red Cross archives with those from his own grandfather's collection, Kyriakatos is completely open about his positionality within this research. It not only makes the artwork more powerful, but is a refreshing example of humility in the position of researcher, which is unfortunately rare.

By displaying source material from these three archival collections in the same format, and in dialogue with one another, Kyriakatos is able to convincingly demonstrate both similarities but also the radically different respective portrayals of *a particular past*. The photographs, combined with their captions, reveal tellingly how the producers of each archive viewed the camp as well as how they wanted it to be remembered, and what they wanted to be forgotten. This dialogue also allows the viewer to make a comparison between the institutions represented. Photographs of Kyriakatos' grandfather, Malamoglou, alongside his peers, are taken in an isolation camp on the island - to which the Red Cross had no access - and portrayed smiling, determined men, refusing to be broken by the brutalities of the camp life. The text on one image shows his defiance in the face of cruel treatment:

> They grabbed me and until we reached the gorge they were swearing at me, they stripped my epaulets, threw down my peaked cap and beat me with fists, kicks and a bamboo stick. Pushing and hitting me all the way to the gorge. There, was another crew of torturers. One of them says: 'He plays hard, we are going to treat him

> properly. He will sign. He will do the statement of repentance or die.' They threw me down and started whacking me with clubs, everywhere. Trying to protect my head, I was screaming loud: 'I am not going to sign, you are wasting your time!' They were whacking my legs and nails, they were stepping on me. I lost consciousness. (15/5/1948, Nikolas Malamoglou, personal archive)

The brutal intensity of the camps is clearly portrayed by this passage, though a radically different perspective is shown by the images and captions of the state archives. The postcards displayed by Kyriakatos were produced as part of a large-scale propaganda project aimed at sharing with Greece and the world the successes of the camp at Makronissos (Hamilakis, 2002: 312). One such postcard shows an image of a group of men doing morning gymnastics, with the description reading: 'At Makronissos, care for their physical needs reminds them of their mother, good advice reminds them of their father' (L197.008, ELIA-MIET Photographic archive, photographer: A. Ververis: 1949). This, and other images from the national archive, show how the Greek government archived into being a positive image of the 'good' work that was being done at the camp. That at the time the public had no access to other sources of information about the island is crucial; the Greek government of the time had the power to decide what was portrayed, and through archiving, what was remembered and forgotten. This is represented in the installation by Kyriakatos by displaying a larger number of postcards from the national archives than from the other collections.

The images from the Red Cross were a limited selection made by Kyriakatos, thereby placing himself in the position of archivist in selecting what information was available to the viewer. They showed the camp in a more neutral light, and seemed to have the intention not of criticising nor celebrating the camp, but rather to show the good work being done by the Red Cross, for example with images showing distribution of clothes in their response to what they deemed a humanitarian crisis in spite of the state propaganda (V-P-HIST-00924-01, Phototheque CICR, Photographer unknown, 18/12/1948). While this gives limited clues with regard to the nature of the camp, it is telling of how archives are created to serve institutions; in this case the Red Cross creating

knowledge of a history of humanitarian effort: what they wanted to be remembered for.

Juxtaposition of archives in a contemporary setting, as done by Kyriakatos in *Archives in Exile*, allows us to complicate these official narratives in a way that is not only revealing of some of the particularities of life in the camp on Makronissos as well as the different perspectives of respective groups on the nature of the camp (which is shown by how it was archived), but also of how archives are read and produced with different influences and intentions. It is a good example of how 'previously excluded histories [such as Makronissos] do not only present new data to be integrated into the larger narrative [as constructed by the Greek state]; they raise questions about the validity of that narrative itself' (Feierman, 1993: 169). The artwork also portrays the concept of layers in archives; Kyriakatos has imposed his interpretation of the archive, and subsequent viewers then re-interpret the results.

While different levels of criticality *must* be applied to the archive's content, form, context and materiality – with and against the grain – it is crucial to add a measure of self-criticality to the process of archival research. Alternatively, juxtaposition of archival sources in creative ways can evoke new meanings and new ways of understanding the archive itself. Just as archives are not impartial stores of complete knowledge, historians are not impartial observers or interpreters that extract objective knowledge through their critical reading of the archive. History must be acknowledged as a form of fiction, where partiality becomes acknowledged and mystery is allowed to play its own role: 'mysticism is hardly an abstraction. It is very material, if not graphic, evidence of a continued historiographical or “scriptural” process engaged in a dialectic of belief, writing and absence' (Conley, 1988: xix). Ultimately, what makes a reading of archival sources strong, is a combination of the aforementioned levels of criticality, along with interdisciplinarity and archival juxtaposition, as well as an acceptance of mystery and limitation.

Bibliography

Appadurai, A. (2003). 'Archive and Aspiration' in *Information is Alive*, J. Brouwer and A. Mulder (eds.), Rotterdam: V2_Publishing/NAI Publishers, pp. 14-25.

Benjamin, W. (1940). *On the Concept of History.* Translated 2005 by D. Redmond. Accessible online at: http://www.efn.org/~dredmond/Theses_on_History.html [Accessed 12/01/2016].

Burton, A.M. (2005). *Archive stories: facts, fictions, and the writing of history,* Duke University Press.

Cooper, F. & Stoler A.L. (1989). 'Introduction Tensions of Empire: colonial control and visions of rule', *American Ethnologist,* Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 609-21.

De Certeau, M. (1988). *The writing of history*, New York.

Derrida, J. (1998). 'Archive Fever: A seminar presented at the University of the Witwatersrand', transcribed by V. Harris, in C. Hamilton (et al) (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive,* pp. 38-80.

Derrida, J. & E. Prenowitz (1995) 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', *Diacritics,* Vol. 25, No.2, pp. 9-63.

Ellis, S. (2002). 'Writing histories of contemporary Africa', *Journal of African History,* Vol. 43, pp. 1-26.

Feierman, S. (1993). 'African histories and the dissolution of world history', in *Africa and the disciplines: the contributions of research in Africa to the social sciences and humanities*, R.H. Bates, V.Y. Mudimbe & J.F. O'Barr (eds.), Chicago, pp. 167-212.

Hamilakis, Y. (2002). 'The Other "Parthenon", Antiquity and National Memory at Makronisos', *Journal of Modern Greek Studies,* Vol. 20, No. 2, pp. 307-338.

Hamilton, C. et al eds. (2002). *Refiguring the archive,* New Africa Books (Pty) Ltd.

Harris, V. (2002). 'A Shaft of Darkness: Derrida in the Archive', in C. Hamilton (et al) (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive,* pp. 61-81.

Kyriakatos, A. (2016). *Archives in Exile.* Video and installation, presented at MAXXX Gallery, MAPS exhibition, Sierre, Switzerland.

Mbembe, A. (2002). 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits', in C. Hamilton (et al) (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive,* pp. 19-26.

Middelmann, T. (2015). 'The Hartebeestpoort Irrigation Scheme: A Project of Modernisation, Segregation and White Poverty Alleviation, 1912–1926', *South African Historical Journal,* Vol. 67, No. 2, pp. 158-179.

Papaeti, A. (2013). 'Music and 'Re-education' in Greek Prison Camps: From Makronisos (1947–

1955) to Giaros (1967–1968)', *Torture,* Vol. 23, No. 2, pp. 34-43.

Pohlandt-McCormick, H. (2005). 'In Good Hands: Researching the 1976 Soweto Uprising in the State Archives of South Africa', in A. Burton (ed.), *Archive stories: facts, fictions, and the writing of history,* Duke University Press, pp. 299-324.

Spear, T. (1987). 'The Interpretation of Evidence in African History', *African Studies Review,* Vol. 30, No. 2, pp. 17-24.

Spear, T. (2006). 'Methods and sources for African history revisited', *The Journal of African History,* Vol. 47, No. 2, pp. 305-19.

Stoler, A.L. (2002). 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance', *Archival Science,* Vol. 2, No. 1-2, pp. 87-109.

Stoler, A.L. (2008). *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense,* Princeton University Press.

Van Zyl, S. (2002). 'Psychoanalysis and the Archive: Derrida's Archive Fever', in C. Hamilton (et al) (eds.), *Refiguring the Archive,* pp. 39-59.

Archival Sources:

L197.008, ELIA-MIET Photographic archive, photographer: A. Ververis: 1949

Nikolas Malamoglou, personal archive

V-P-HIST-00924-01, Phototheque CICR, Photographer unknown, 18/12/1948.