

Decolonising the Archive, Monday 23rd November, 5-6.30pm

Achille Mbembe, 'The Power of the Archive and its Limits' from *Refiguring the Archive*, (2002)

Jennifer Bajorek, 'Decolonising the Archive: The View from West Africa', *Aperture*, (2013)

www.decolonisingthearchive.com

'The relationship between the archive and the state [...] rests on a paradox. On the one hand, there is no state without archives – without its archives. On the other hand, the very existence of the archive constitutes a constant threat to the state. The reason is simple. More than on its ability to recall, the power of the state rests on its ability to consume time, that is, to abolish the archive and anaesthetise the past. The act that creates the state is an act of 'chronophagy'. It is a radical act because consuming the past makes it possible to be free from all debt. The constitutive violence of the state rests, in the end, on the possibility, which can never be dismissed, of refusing to recognise (or to settle) one or another debt. This violence is defined in contrast to the very essence of the archive since the denial of the archive is equivalent to, *stricto sensu*, a denial of debt.

This is why, in certain cases, some states have thought that they could do without archives. They have therefore attempted, either to reduce them to silence, or, in an even more radical manner, to destroy them. By doing this, they thought they could defer the archive's ability to serve as proof of a suspect fragment of life or piece of time. More interested in the present and the future than in the past, they thought that they could shut down the past for once and for all so that they could write as if everything was starting anew. Because, in the end, such methods affect the materiality of the archive more than its dimension as an instituting imaginary, they have, on occasion, run into trouble.' (Mbembe, p.23)

'A museum director and friend in Saint-Louis, Senegal, once said to me when I asked her if it was true that large numbers of negatives had been dumped into the Senegal River: "Si ce n'est pas d'epoissons, c'est des clichés" (There may not be fish, but there are negatives). Her comment refers to the contemporary crisis in the local supply chain caused by overfishing in Atlantic coastal waters. It also refers to the fact that large numbers of negatives have been destroyed, or disposed of in ways that have led to their destruction, in this city, as in several other coastal West African cities, over the years. Owing to the particular geography of Saint-Louis, whose central districts are located on an island in the mouth of the Senegal River, negatives—including whole crates of glass-plate negatives—have become trapped in the mouth of the river, which is separated from the Atlantic by the island and by the long, thin sandbar known as La Langue de Barbarie. This sandbar, which has amassed what I sometimes refer to as the "submarine archive," has played an unexpected role in what we might call the archival situation in Senegal. In Ghana, by contrast, negatives disposed of in a similar fashion have simply washed out to the open sea.

[...]

Not all instances of archival loss are the result of dramatic acts of destruction, but stories such as that of Saint-Louis's "submarine archive" add considerable nuance to our understanding of "loss." As my friend's sly reference to the contemporary geopolitical situation reminds us (the blame for overfishing off the coast of Senegal lies mainly with Europe and particularly Spain), the African studios that were forced to shut their doors in the 1980s were put out of business by foreign competition: new color labs, owned by Lebanese or Koreans. The outlays of cash required to buy color film-processing machines were beyond the reach of ordinary Africans. The submarine archive is, among other things, an allegory of the loss of cultural sovereignty. At the very moment that Africans were supposed to be

seizing control of their destiny in the postcolonial period, photographers who had fought to maintain both creative and economic control of the photographic apparatus during the colonial period found that it could be suddenly taken away. Such stories are also, however, about the survival of photographic memory. They point to forms of resilience—and resources for writing, or transmitting, history—that have allowed these communities to remember their lost photographs, and an earlier period of photography history, even when the images are no longer visible or tangible as photographs. As such, the submarine archive encourages us to rethink the relationships among history, memory, and photography in ways that can seem downright prophetic or at least ahead of their time, given that twentieth-century photographic prints and negatives are disappearing all over the world today.’ (Bajorek, p.66)

Suggested visual and audio sources: www.decolonisingthearchive.com

‘Whilst You Archive Me’ – film, 2mins.

Fresh Off the Boat Episode 1: ‘Big Up Ruel Lactavia Spence’ – 10mins.

Big Up Ruel Lactavia Spence is a short radio play/provocation addressing the (mis)treatment of Africans from the Caribbean, the so-called Windrush Generation, on their arrival to the UK. Touching on the contemporary concerns around the danger Covid-19 poses to people of African heritage, this short piece demonstrates the clear, and sometimes troubling legacies of Windrush in the present day. (CW: mentions death from COVID-19.)