

**Touch, Affect, and Decay, Monday 9<sup>th</sup> November, 5-6.30pm**

Emily Robinson, 'Touching the void: Affective history and the impossible', *Rethinking History*, 14.4, (2010)

Liam Buckley, 'Objects of Love and Decay: Colonial Photographs in a Postcolonial Archive', *Cultural Anthropology*, 20.2, (2005)

'In Walter Benjamin's words, an original object derives its authority from its material 'presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.' In her collection of *Archive stories* (2005), Antoinette Burton explored the intensely affective relationship of the historian to the archive. While considerations of solitude, surveillance and exhaustion play their part, she also describes the way in which some colleagues "wax rapturous about the capacity of archival discoveries to bring one into contact with the past". One such historian described finding a priest's collar in a Jansenist archive, "folded and secreted inside layers of powder". She drew historical conclusions from this but also found its material presence "a breathtaking and amazing thing" and added that the power of this discovery "had everything to do with finding it there, in the archive". It is this 'presence' which attracts and seduces us – digital facsimiles just do not cut it.' (Robinson, p.509)

'What impact does the process of research have upon our investment in our projects? Is this purely an emotional response or does it have affective qualities? What is the role of touching, of texture? Does *holding* a handwritten letter make us feel differently about its writer? More than that, does it make us *think* and '*know*' differently?' (Robinson, p.511)

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'The photograph collection of the National archives [of The Gambia] consists of some 2,600 images mostly produced by Joseph Bahoum, a Gambian civil servant, between 1947 and 1956. Bahoum recorded the persons and events locally associated with activities organized to modernize Gambian society in preparation for the end of colonial rule, such as Empire Day parades, intercolonial cricket matches, Remembrance Day services, and prize-giving ceremonies. Today, almost 40 years after independence, these photographs are in very poor condition. One afternoon, while doing research in the National Archives, I was told by the Keeper of the Records, "Liam, you have something stuck to your forehead." It was a piece of a page—about the size of a postage stamp—from one of Bahoum's albums. The power had gone down that day, the ceiling fan had stopped, and I was sweating—a piece of the brittle page must have broken off and stuck to my hand and had been transferred to my forehead as I wiped off the sweat. My hands and face were filthy and covered in brown dust. Around me, piles of newspapers stacked haphazardly filled the tables. I would open up manila folders to find small ants crawling within, files would fall apart, rusty paper clips would break, and pages would easily tear.

Dirt, dust, mold, torn paper, water damage, rodent droppings, empty folders, missing items—this is the stuff of the narratives of decay that accompany the presence of colonial artifacts in postcolonial archives. At their inception, the establishment of archives signaled the ability of the new nation state to legislate with authority—to keep itself and its citizens in order, to maintain its heritage and secrets, to foster culture, and to grant public access. Today, instead of symbolizing the advance of independence and its "gifts" of development, progress, and modernization, postcolonial archives are sites of decay and loss, serving as evidence of postcolonial inefficiency and carelessness. I argue, however, that rather than being something aberrant and a stereotypical sign of the neglect and inefficiency of the postcolonial state, decay—as well as right to allow for decay—is central to the cultural practice of archiving.' (Buckley, p.249-250)