

Experiencing the Archive: An Autoethnographic Impression

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Abstract

This essay offers two things: First, an autoethnographic outline and analysis of an experience of the archive and its role in historiography. The framework for this analysis consists of various themes from archival theories, notably the archive as a place of passage and the vulnerability of the archive. Second, it points to possible gaps in its current theorisation. The author shows that the noted two themes were well present in the experience of the archive, as well as in the process of biographical writing. However, experiences of emotion and the recovery of agency do not currently fit into this framework. These phenomena are recommended for further research and theorisation. Moreover, their possible role for (church) historians is considered.

Keywords: autoethnography; archive theory; life writing; agency; historiography

Introduction*

Can anything good come from Nazareth? Like Nathaniel in John 1, I doubted whether anything good would come from something seemingly insignificant in my first encounter with an archive. This involved a micro-biography about Alma Sophie Lange (1875–1956), my great-grandmother.¹ From the depth of its belly, the archive had spit, along with other bigger books, an insignificant-looking envelope onto my shore. After examining the books—and returning empty—I sincerely doubted that this little envelope held anything of significance. Yet it was this envelope that gave me a glimpse

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into the value of archives and the unpredictable pieces of the past they hold. The encounter with the envelope is my most salient experience of the archive and constitutes a focus of this autoethnography.

In what follows I examine my experience of writing this micro-biography. I focus on the role that the archive—and the envelope in particular—played in the process. This experience is then analysed with reference to concepts from archival theory. I first describe the autoethnographic method employed for this study of the archive. Then I outline recent conceptions of the archive in order to place the framework I shall employ in context. Third, I present my experience of biography writing and recount the encounter with the envelope. Fourth, I analyse said experience using the outlined framework. By way of conclusion, I show that many aspects of the experience were well described by the framework, but that it is lacking in others. These are recommended for further theorisation.

Autoethnography

Studies which employ an autoethnographic method vary in their focus on the self (auto), the culture (ethno), and the writing (graphy). It is a method in which the “life of the researcher becomes a conscious part of what is studied” (Ellis 2008, 48). In the case of this study, I focus on the self—my experience in the archive—and on the writing—composing the micro-biography. There is a break away from other conventions of academic writing, in that this method allows for personal narrative writing. A recent example is the article of Landman (2020), in which she employs this method to identify and discuss issues that women face as Reformed ministers.² Therefore, autoethnographies often employ first-person writing, focus (often) on a single case, engage the reader as a participant in the dialogue, and even include private emotional details (Ellis 2008, 50).

I hope to balance my experience of the archive with the intellectual archival discourse, looking at the intersection of my careful reflection and archival theory. This allows me to recognise and place this study within the historical turn in archive theory—which states that archival conceptions are not universal and timeless, but rooted in a time and place and history (Harris 2007, 57)—since autoethnography itself recognises this rooted-ness of theory in that it is subjectively constructed on the grounds of the credibility of the author (Ellis and Bochner 2011, 279). This provides the point of departure for what follows.

2 In the German discourse, Margot Käßmann (2022) similarly reflects on the changes in her church with a biographical engagement.

The Archive: Recent Conceptualisations

Recent thought on the archive—specifically for the South African context—is motivated by the imperative to transform the archives (Hamilton, Harris, and Reid 2002, 7). The logic behind this is that the process of archiving must change as society transforms. Since society is always transforming, any conceptualisation of the archive should be dynamic.³ Undoubtedly, the change of pre- to post-Apartheid South Africa demands a reconceptualisation of the archive. Notable is the work of Verne Harris (2007) and his concern for justice and archival work post 1994. However, to draw out the history of the archive is not the aim of this study.⁴ It does, nevertheless, raise the question of what its role is and how we think of the archive today, specifically for (church) historians who engage with it for historiography.

New perspectives on the archive which push the boundaries of previous conceptions are notably in the 2002 Volume *Refiguring the Archive*. Mbembe (2002, 19), for example, describes the archive as an “entanglement of building and documents.” There is the physical dimension—the site, building, and architecture—and the organisation of files. However, the nature of the file organisation yields a cemetery and temple-like nature. The temple-like nature stems from a religious “set of rituals ... constantly taking place there ... of a quasi-magical nature” Mbembe (2002, 19). The cemetery-like nature on the other hand stems from “the sense that fragments of lives and pieces of time are interred there, ... preserved like so many relics” Mbembe (2002, 19). Archivists and historians therefore fulfil a quasi-religious role in this frame: Their authority rests on the silence of the interred, ie “the domain of things which, because shared, belong exclusively to no one (the public domain)” Mbembe (2002, 25). The ability to lean on this authority—an authority beyond a ‘normal’ text—puts both in an instituting position. This is important since any instituting position is always politically relevant, if not contested. Overall, Mbembe’s description of the archive therefore covers both its material aspect and its role as instituting imaginary.

Bhekizizwe Peterson’s (2002, 29) refiguring of the archive begins from a political perspective, namely the denial of the “existence of any legacy among Africans worth preserving, an attitude borne out in the ... insistence that Africans had no history.” He

3 This is especially evident in the recent proliferation of communicative technologies, which beg the question of how they can be – or are being – archived. The same is the case, conversely, for archiving technologies, eg the digitisation of physical resources, or the archival of digital resources.

4 Initial discussions around the archives in a post-Apartheid reality were organised in 1998 by the National Archives, the University of Witwatersrand’s Historical Papers, the Gay and Lesbian Archives, and the South African History Archive at the University’s Graduate School for the Humanities and Social Sciences. As much as it sought to synthesise the concerns and concepts of historical researchers and archival practitioners, it also looked at public and community interests. Moreover, it investigated the archive as the “basis for the identities of the present and for the possible imaginings of community in the future” (Hamilton, Harris, and Reid 2002, 9). In this vein, c.f. Harris (2002) for social memory construction in the transition to Democracy.

draws on Dhlomo's (1931) complaint regarding the "difficulty of ... [n]atives getting access into public and state libraries and into the archive Department." The relevance of the notions of legacy and history are important for Peterson, since he ascribes to the archive the aims of systematising "the chaos of the past, organizing ... [it] in ways that can renew the world we inhabit", of "ordering the past as inheritance" and of "transforming inheritance into deliverance" (Peterson 2002, 29). Consequently, the denial of such an inheritance through an exclusion from the archive equates to a denial of deliverance and a renewed world. The archive is therefore crucial for the political imaginary.⁵ Based on this view of the archive, Peterson advocates for a refiguring of the archive's institutional processes, taking due cognisance of African worldviews and experience (Peterson 2002, 34).⁶

An influential engagement with the archive comes from Derrida's (1996) *Archive Fever*, also present in the South African discourses on the archive (Derrida 2002; Harris 2002; van Zyl 2002; Vosloo 2005). It is an example of a creative synthesis between Freudian psychoanalytical concepts and other subject matter—in this case the archive.⁷ For (church) historians, Vosloo (2005) has drawn out the most salient notions of Derrida's Freud-archive synthesis.⁸ Two of the themes one can draw on from Derrida are (a) the reflection of the word 'archive', and (b) the Freudian death drive. The former describes the archive as a place which marks the "institutional passage from the private to the public sphere" (Vosloo 2005, 383). The principle at work which gatekeeps this passage is the archontic principle, which is linked to the custodians of this place.⁹ That is, the custodians of the archive use a principle of selection with which they determine what should (or should not) pass from private to public.¹⁰ The archive and this principle

5 The notion of political imaginary connects well with Mbeme's notion outlined earlier, but Peterson draws again on Dhlomo and his notion of the political imaginary as "the intellectual and cultural horizons that shape our grasp of personal and social identities and histories: where we come from and where we are destined" (Peterson 2002, 29).

6 According to Peterson (2002, 34) the African experience had to find refuge in "rituals, ceremonies, songs, literature, performances and popular culture" of black people since it was 'officially' denied and excluded. In turn, this presents the challenge of how these can be archived.

7 Marcuse's (1955) synthesis of psychoanalysis and the Marxist class struggle is another such example.

8 Since my archive experience and historiography took place in connection with the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) archive and my own theological studies, Vosloo's exposition presents a useful aid for the purpose of this study.

9 This feature has been well-identified. For example, in Foucault's (1972) terms, this is analogous – though not identical – to 'the law of what can be said'. See especially the third part – 'The statement and the archive' 79–134. Achille Mbembe (2002, 20) writes "The archive, therefore, is fundamentally a matter of discrimination and of selection, which, in the end, results in the granting of a privileged status to certain written documents, and the refusal of that same status others, thereby judged 'unarchivable'. The archive is, therefore, not a piece of data, but a status."

10 Peterson's (2002) outline of the denial of the black experience above presents a critique of the unjust archontic principle of colonial and Apartheid times.

are different sides of the same coin. Any healthy society must be clear about this relationship and its power dimensions (Vosloo 2005, 384).¹¹

The second theme relates to the vulnerability of memory and the archive. There is a death drive, which “incites forgetfulness, amnesia and the annihilation of memory” (Vosloo 2005, 384). In my reading, this relates to the unwillingness to remember pain, and the bliss of ignorance. Opposed to this is the archive drive, the passion to remember and conserve memory, which arises exactly because all traces of history *can* be lost through the death drive. This possibility of loss challenges naïve notions of memory and archive since the radical finitude of the archive precludes any omniscient remembering (Vosloo 2005, 385). One is forced to be selective, i.e. forced to operate on an archontic principle.

The Micro-Biography

The micro-biography¹² of Alma falls within the category of biographies from recent decades which have attended to marginal figures (Caine 2010, 111). As wife to a missionary, little was actively archived about her. While there are two volumes with short biographies of the Hermannsburg missionaries (Pape 1986), there exists no such equivalent for their wives. Alma’s husband features in one of the volumes as “einer der letzten “Patriarchen” der Hermannsburger Transvaalmission” (Pape 1986, 1:108) [*one of the last “patriarchs” of the Hermannsburg Transvaalmission*].¹³ This absence motivated me to write about Alma and title my micro-biography “Meeting my Matriarch”.

One of the concerns of this micro-biography was where and how I could get source material on Alma. As a marginal figure even in the larger scheme of the Hermannsburg mission, I did not have much hope to find anything about the *Transvaalmission* in the *Kaapkerkargief*. Most of the primary sources came from my family collection: Alma’s (1905) diary (which begins in 1902 upon her arrival in Cape Town), and various family photos. More material came from the archive of the Hermannsburg mission in Germany. Most useful was that Alma had written a few contributions to the youth magazine of the mission organisation (Lange 1935). Other sources included mission reports which helped provide background information, although they never mention Alma directly.

I received the initial sources from the mission archive through a family friend in Germany, who scanned and sent them to me. The archivist later found letters from Alma’s father which he emailed to me after I had already completed the biography. Here

11 This is evident in South Africa by the well-recognised colonial and Apartheid bias of public and government archives (Hamilton, Harris, and Reid 2002, 9).

12 The micro-biography is part of the movement toward life writing, which accepts the notion that many if not all lives are “of interest and worth writing and reading about” (Caine 2010, 67).

13 All translations in this document are my own.

I experienced the provisionality of historiography: I had previously concluded that Alma married a missionary mainly out of love for ‘her beloved Heinz’, but also due to a lack of young men in Germany at the time and her being above the average age of marriage (Gavalas and Tscheulin 2017 48, 50). However, the ‘new’ letter revealed that Alma would have gone to the Hermannsburg mission field in India by herself, had she not married Heinz (Dreyer, 1901). It seems that the marriage to a missionary was not out of lack for other suitors, but rather an opportunity to follow her vocation.

When it came to photographic sources, I stumbled over the problem of qualitatively evaluating them. For example, the more I analysed a particularly striking photo of Alma,¹⁴ the more my evaluation changed. At first, I saw a lonely woman enduring the hardship of missional life, but now I see a content woman, bravely choosing the hardships she deems worth suffering. A colleague of mine, on the other hand, saw a ‘scary auntie’ in this photo. Ultimately, it seems to me that an evaluation of this particular photo—and photos in general—says just as much about me as it does about her. Clearly, there is a reflexive component involved when engaging with sources.

Before I turn to the archive and the envelope mentioned earlier, I need to note that when presenting Alma to the rest of my course, I was suddenly overcome with emotion when I displayed the photo of the matching tombstones of her and that of ‘her beloved Heinz’—one in Hermannsburg, RSA and one in Braunschweig, RSA. I consider myself a reserved person and was therefore embarrassed at the public outburst of emotion. Through writing this micro-biography, I got to know my great-grandmother—as well as elements of myself—and even developed an emotional connection to this person I never got to meet. At least that is how I explain the emotional episode to myself.

The Envelope in the Archive

I like to think of the archive as the big fish that swallowed Jonah, as alluded to in the introduction. Of course, a fish stomach is probably the worst way to preserve documents. However, moving through the heavy door that closes from the outside into a life-threatening room—all oxygen vanishes within seconds when there is a fire—where it is neither day nor night might give Jonah a *déjà vu* (although Jonah would consider the archive coffee an upgrade from his fish fluids). Moreover, the belly of the archive contains much swallowed material that is bound for wonderfully unpredictable shores—hopefully to witness a comical redemption, as Jonah did.

14 In this photo Alma stands on the dark porch of the mission house in a white dress, which makes for a stark contrast in the black and white photo. To her right are a few pot plants, in the middle the wooden pillar for the roof, and to her left the door to the house. Her facial expression is difficult to read.

One such shore was my micro-biography. True to the initial concern, there was predictably little source material of a woman from the *Hermannsburg Transvaalmission*. A few books had marginal remarks about the Lutheran Church mainly in the Cape region, but these were of no use to my project. Then there was the A5 envelope. My resignation turned into excitement when the gothic script of an 1887 edition of the *Hermannsburger Missionsblatt* peered at me. I was also taken aback: What was this document doing here? Why has it been archived and preserved for the past 135 years?

I could not immediately answer these questions, but I could gain a glimpse into the mission's activities of 1887. There were mission statistics of the various stations, including Alma's station Manoane, but what interested me more were the glimpses into the human interactions that played off on a mission station in those days. These were both heart-warming and shocking—a product of their time. For example, the story of a girl who fled a forced marriage with a much older man and found an asylum in a mission station, despite the repeated threats the chief made to the mission, or the story of a boy threatened with eternal hell if he went to initiation school. One of my favourites was the short note of thanks by King J. M. Mamogale for a net that someone had gifted him, which taught him that 'he and his house are not alone in Christ' (Mamogale 1887). What these stories reveal is a completely different world, which may encourage and/or shock us and the sensibilities of our time.

Judging by the many stories in just this 1887 edition indicates that the mission archives have rich data to offer (Rüther 2012) which are untapped in South African (church) historiography. The difficulty involved in tapping into these sources is that they are written in German and archived in Germany. This is what the late Presiding Bishop M.J.H. Ubane (from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Southern Africa) lamented and why he called for the (re)writing of church history from a local perspective for local edification.

From the whole content of the envelope, what was most perplexing to me was the prayer in the very introduction of the *Missionsblatt*, which mentioned *Missionschuld*—a guilt or debt of mission:

We may jubilate with all the holy angels: *Christ is risen from all torment, for which we should all be joyful, Christ wants to be our consolation.* We too may proclaim this message of joy to the poor Gentiles, and that is a special grace. Look to it, Lord Jesus Christ, that we experience this more and more as grace, that we can really enjoy that we are people of this mission. And then we have another request to You, the Risen One: Take our *Missionsschuld* (mission guilt) from us, so that we can work again with all joyfulness [own italics] (Harms 1887, 4).

The first part in italics is arguably the oldest German church hymn (Marti 2002, 157). In the prayer, it is set as the joyful chorus of heaven into which the mission society may join. The proclamation of this chorus to the 'poor Gentiles' is then taken as its vocation

– a special grace. This vocation is then to be lived out in joy. But what about *Missionsschuld*?

One possible interpretation of this concept could be the lack in missionary activity of the Protestant churches post-Reformation and the consequent ‘debt’ to mission work. The second interpretation is similar but more general, in that *Missionsschuld* refers to the work that is yet to be done by followers of Christ. The third interpretation, however, reads it as the guilt one takes upon oneself as one imperfectly carries out the missional vocation. In our current climate where decolonial and postcolonial perspectives are current, it seems significant to me that a mission society would, for example, knowingly take the guilt of being complicit in the colonial enterprise upon itself in order to carry out its missional vocation. This, of course, rests on the assumption that the third interpretation is plausible, and that there was an awareness of being complicit in the colonial enterprise.

Be that as it may, this prayer urges the listener to get involved in life and attempts to impart agency, whether it is in addressing the inadequacies of the past, as the first interpretation suggests, or doing the work that is currently outstanding, as the second interpretation suggests, or becoming guilty in the process of healing the world—Bonhoeffer send his regards—as the third interpretation suggests. Ultimately, the encounter with the idea of *Missionsschuld* and with Alma taught me that the archive stores more than mere data. I could emotionally connect with my great-grandmother and gain agency from *Missionsschuld*. Profound insights from a little brown envelope.

My experience of the archive and historiography did change my frame of mind. I looked at my own life and realised how impossible it is to capture my—or anyone else’s—life in its totality. Most traces of my daily life just vanish, and so for a while I was keenly aware of the ‘death fever’, realising how irresponsible I archive my life. This sparked a drive in me to archive absolutely everything. Nevertheless, the drive to archive everything did not endure, since such is not possible. Attempting to do so would probably create the impression of being a hoarder. However, it did leave the question regarding the selectivity of archiving in my mind.

Discussion

With the archival concepts in mind outlined earlier, how does my experience of the archive shape up? Or maybe, how do these concepts shape up in lieu of my experience? The archive as a place, as alluded to earlier, was certainly impressive. This is also seen in the metaphoric parallels I drew of it to Jonah’s big fish. Drawing on Mbembe’s thought, the material aspect of the archive certainly was striking. I would go so far as to suggest that the metaphor of Jonah—a figure of authority—evidences something of the instituting imaginary of the archive.

As an outsider to the DRC tradition, however, I also experienced the exclusion inherent in the archontic principle, since my Lutheran tradition was only present on the margins (this is not a value judgement, but a consequence of the finitude of the archive). Nevertheless, this made the presence of the *Hermannsburger Missionsblatt* such a pleasant surprise. It had been archived despite its marginal relevance to the archontic principle at work. Moreover, in the process of writing the micro-biography (and the outburst of emotion) I experienced the discomfort of blurring the lines of private and public as I was participating in the institutional passage of the micro-biography from the former to the latter.

I certainly experienced the vulnerability of memory when I realised how the traces of my life were vanishing, and how this sparked a drive to archive. However, immediately the archontic principle kicked in due to the finitude of my own capacity to archive, as well as not wanting to be remembered as a hoarder. Clearly, I was involved in the manipulation of the memory of myself and therefore beyond the innocence of naïve remembrance. Dealing with the sources of Alma was a similar experience: I realised the value of her diary (of which the last few pages are ripped out and I am endlessly curious as to why) and the privilege of having other sources preserved by the Hermannsburg mission archive. This archive itself—as pointed out by Bishop Ubane—is not a naïve memory of a mission history, but rather a selective rendering of a past. This is in line with Peterson’s outline of the denial and exclusion of the African worldview and experience in the archive.¹⁵

There is a part of my experience which does not exactly fit the concepts I drew on. In my understanding, the archive—with its mechanisms and orientations—is cast as a place which stores memory—past events marked by documents or items. However, where does the emotion and agency that I recovered from the archive fit into that theorisation? It seems to me that an archive is not only a storehouse for memory but also for said emotion and agency.¹⁶ This perspective on agency is interesting if one considers the historiography around Andrew Murray, for example. Much of this work is about his memory, for sure, but also for the recovery of his agency and passion for missional work. Now, things can get a bit weird if we say that we consult the archive for the agency of our ancestors, but to some extent the archive then does contain the traces of the memory, emotion, and agency of the past church, on whose witness we rely on and depend. The purpose of (church) historiography in this sense can be not to recover memory only, but also recover agency and emotion for the task at hand for the current generation.

15 However, I would still caution to distinguish the exclusion practised by government archives with that of mission archives (c.f. Rüter 2012).

16 One can rightly question whether such emotion/agency is not also brought to the encounter by the historiographer. Here it may suffice to consider that both the archive and the historiographer contribute to unearthing said emotion/agency.

Conclusion

I have presented my experience of historiography and the archive and analysed it in terms of archival notions, notably the archontic principle and the vulnerability of memory. The result of this autoethnographic analysis indicates that my experience resonates with this theorisation—and other—in terms of memory, but not in terms of emotion and agency. The latter emerge as possible gaps in archival theory. The archive cast in terms of emotion and agency also demands a sensitising of archontic principles toward those ends.

Perhaps the archive—in its blurring of the line between private and public—can present a creative-liminal space as an institutive imaginary which has a broader horizon to shape our collective identities. For doing (church) history in an African context this perspective may nudge historians to appreciate that their mining of archival resources can surface emotion and agency. For their communities, (church) historians can thus recover agency where there is complacency, and emotion where there is apathy.

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