

The background features a watercolor wash in shades of blue, purple, and brown, with a torn paper edge effect. In the upper left corner, there are intricate, golden thread-like patterns that resemble traditional embroidery or decorative stitching.

Chapter **06**

After the Fire: Thoughts on Documents and Archives

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A manageable loss

The destruction by fire of a small (reportedly minor) part of the collection of photographs and documents that were once part of Dorothea Bleek's southern African research project prompts a personal reflection on my entanglements with the Bleek collection. The loss of these materials, for the most part, photographs arranged as objects in albums and preserved according to archival conventions, provides an acute reminder of the impermanent condition governing archives and the instability of the objects they contain and preserve.

The documentary residue of Dorothea Bleek's life and work is preserved within the University of Cape Town's larger and internationally acclaimed Bleek and Lloyd collection (Weintroub 2013, see also 2006). The collection is most celebrated for the notebooks of Xham narratives collected by Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek in the early 1870s and 1880s (Bank 2006; Skotnes 2007). Given its status on UNESCO's Memory of the World register (UNESCO n.d.), it is not surprising that this part of the collection was immediately salvaged from the ruins of the Jagger Library (Kirkwood 2021a:1). In the aftermath of the devastating fire in April 2021, some of Dorothea Bleek's materials had been destroyed. In light of the themes of the *Inherited Obsessions* (2022) exhibition and Laura de Harde's artistic practice, I consider the loss of these documents and, at the same time, reflect on my years of research in the now incomplete collection. In the following account, I show how the materials burnt in the fire constitute a sad but manageable loss.

The day Pippa Skotnes's email bounced into my inbox, another burning episode gripped the country (the July 'unrest/ insurrection', see Msimang 2021 for a cogent analysis of the events). 'Dorothea Bleek materials' read the subject line. In the body of the email: Did I have any photographs, 'even bad cell phone pics', notes, or any other materials that I might have gathered through my work on Dorothea Bleek to contribute to her effort to 'secure' the Bleek and Lloyd collection 'after

the shock and panic of the fire'? This was 28 July 2021, not quite three months since raging winds blew fire from the slopes of Table Mountain and Devil's Peak across upper Rondebosch, a not-unusual occurrence in a typical Cape Town summer (Van Wilgen & Van Wilgen-Bredenkamp 2021). This time, however, apart from the usual damage to domestic properties established in areas historically known to be vulnerable to seasonal fires, the fire spread to the University of Cape Town's upper campus, leading to the destruction of the African Studies/Jagger Reading Room along with other historic buildings in the area including Mostert's Mill (BBC 2021; Wroughton 2021). Along with local and international handwringing, diverse environmental and social reasons reportedly caused what started as a seasonal wildfire to incinerate priceless collections (BBC 2021; Seekings & Saunders 2021). In the wake of the narrative that would, in significant ways, be repeated in the aftermath of the fire at the National Parliament of South Africa on 2 January 2022, Cape Town seemed to be suffering under a curse of some kind.

As cataclysmic images of fire destruction morphed into the realisation that significant flooding in basement storage areas had occurred during firefighting, I had heard from colleagues, friends and media reports about the heroic rescue efforts that had animated Cape Town's scholarly circles and members of the public to urgently save the water damaged records from the basement at Jagger (Banda 2021; Kirkwood 2021b; Singer 2021). I saw online images of masked men and women forming a human conveyor belt to move records from the basement into waiting vans sponsored by a supermarket chain and other corporates (Kirkwood 2021b:47-49; 2021c). 'Triage tents' were set up, and refrigerated containers were brought onto campus so that water-damaged documents could be frozen to ameliorate water damage and preserve items for later cleaning and conservation (Jagger Library Recovery n.d.; Kirkwood 2021c; Singer 2021). The relief

efforts began immediately. Many Cape Town residents responded to the call to salvage what they could in light of the traumatic destruction of collections and records of international acclaim. These redemptive acts would irrevocably transfigure the archive at UCT and inscribe the ruination of the fire onto the records, documents, materials and collections for all users in the future. After processing or painstaking repair and conservation, I learned that all records rescued from the flooded basement would be marked with the legend 'Survived the Jagger Library fire, 18 April 2021 (Satgoor 2022; Jagger Library Recovery n.d.).

These salvage and recovery actions and efforts have been memorialised in different ways, including personal testimony, display, online photography collation, and an exhibition opening a year after the fire (Michaelis School of Art 2022; Singer 2021).

By July 2021, after months of painstaking processes of salvage and recovery, it had emerged that 'a lot of Dorothea Bleek's photographs and some documents are destroyed' (Skotnes 28 July 2021). The library reported in a list assessing the records of Dorothea Bleek:

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... the following boxes [are] missing: 63, 66, 67, 68. This reflects the following series in the collection: BC151_J2-J7 and F1.16-F2.4. The collection then continues uninterrupted with the rest of the sequence. Sadly, this represents those physical records that were locked in the Archives Office above the Reading Room during the fire (Kirkwood 2021a:2).

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, there had been some confusion about the integrity of the Bleek and Lloyd materials. However, I had heard that the famous notebooks had been saved and remained intact. In her email to me, Skotnes wrote:

The bad news is that an assessment has finally been done, and a lot of Dorothea Bleek's photographs and some documents are destroyed. I am now trying to find out if any of these exist in copies made by those who worked with the material. Even bad cell phone pics would be better than nothing (Skotnes 28 July 2021).

Special Collection's archivist Clive Kirkwood (2021a:2) confirmed in a formal report just a few months later that 'four archival boxes of the

Bleek and Lloyd Collection (out of a total of 88 archival boxes and oversize material) had been destroyed in the fire. These materials were part of the work on a digitisation request and had therefore been locked in an archival working room awaiting processing. These materials were destroyed along with the building. There was a silver lining, though: Much of the 'original material lost in the fire ... which was unique in terms of its origin in the work of the Bleeks and Lloyd themselves, had been scanned [to archival standards] and is available in digital form' (Kirkwood 2021a:2). Kirkwood wrote of the remaining material that had not been scanned, 'much did not originate in the work of the Bleeks and Lloyd themselves nor did it have direct relevance to the focus of their work' (Kirkwood 2021a:3).

Further corroborating the efficiency and professionalism of the salvage operation and its recognition of the collection's global significance, Kirkwood noted that 'the very first collection removed from the damaged Jagger Library and assessed was the Bleek and Lloyd Collection. As stored in the archival basement, the collection was intact and had not suffered any exposure to dampness. To ensure the best possible archival conditions, the Bleek and Lloyd Collection was moved to Special Collections' custom-built archival store in the Oppenheimer Institute on Library Road on the upper campus' (Kirkwood 2021a:1).

To what extent could researchers who had worked with the materials be able to provide images and documents to stand in for items that had been lost in the fire? What could I do to contribute to making Dorothea Bleek's documentary records whole again?

File by file

I had to return to files and notes from an earlier epoch in my scholarly life to decades previous, when I first ventured into what would become years of research on the Bleek and Lloyd material, culminating in my biographical investigation into the scholarly and personal life of Dorothea Bleek. What remnants of these years of research, pre-dating 2010, survived in my records? I returned to a file bearing the label '*Dorothea*'. Metadata told me that the file was created in September 2016, but I knew that my PhD research spanned 2006 to 2011, when my degree was conferred. The 2016 date indicated when the files were transferred onto the laptop I continue to use. From a list of subfiles with titles such as *Final drafts June 2008; Notebooks; On Rock Art; The Dictionary; The Dictionary, DB's Language Research*, I find one labelled *Research BC 151 file by file*. Would this be of assistance, I wondered?



Figure 6.1.

A selection of Dorothea Bleek's field notebooks and other materials, photographed in February 2010 in the University of Cape Town Libraries' Manuscripts and Archives reading room. Courtesy Special Collections, University of Cape Town Libraries.

In my *file by file* directory, I find a subfile labelled *F1.13.1 – F1.18 misc (sic) writings by others*. The library's list itemises *F1.16 – F2.4 – Miscellaneous writings of others (destroyed in fire)*. My notes appear to cover some of the surviving materials up to F1.16, but not all of the materials catalogued from F1.18 to F2.4. (The letters F and J refer to the archival classifications given to materials, with the letter J indicating predominantly photographic material. The numerals represent the subfiles into which the various documents are sorted.) My document is barely two pages long, and the notes are fragmented.

Under F1.16, which has been destroyed, my notes read:

Hand-written on blue stationery A5, in copperplate script, heading 'A story told to me by an old Bushman who appears to be between 70 to 80 years of age' – two stories about 'watermeide' [sic] or 'waterwomen', told by 'old Afrikaander' who addresses the writer as 'baas'.

For F1.17, also destroyed, I wrote:

Hand-written on A5 notepaper, in German, with archivist note referring to 210 in top LH corner, heading 'Aus Customs and Beliefs of the |Xam Bushmen' – may have something to do with Käthe Woldmann ...

Dorothea Bleek had enjoyed a long friendship and correspondence with Käthe Woldmann, based in Switzerland. Having met in South Africa, their friendship grew out of a shared fascination with the folklore and art of people they called 'Bushman'. As noted in my biography (Weintraub 2016), much of the intimate detail about Dorothea's personal life was drawn from this correspondence, conducted in German and preserved in the Käthe Woldmann collection, presumably still safe and sound in UCT Libraries Special Collections.

Finally, under F.18, I had written, in part:

[Pencilled note on catalogue next to this entry records the name R. Storey 1937]

Typewritten field notes by unknown writer, based on language interviews at the camp associated with the Empire Exhibition in Jhb, with a woman identified as "Kabala" and language called

"Kilhausi", said to be slightly understood by the /auni – although they would only address each other in Nama. She was the only one of her tribe present.

Text contains a ref to Professor Maingard's assertion that 'there is no passive in the Bushman languages'. Some pointers to chaos in the method, eg. Difficulties in finding a common language between researcher and object of research – 'Although the woman was an intelligent and patient subject, she knew only a few words of Afrikaans'... 'It was difficult to get her to speak sufficiently slowly, and almost impossible to get her to speak a sentence in exactly the same words'.

For the rest, my document is silent. I cannot make sense of the fragments contained within what I had hoped would be detailed research notes. How to make sense of the loss of the original materials from which my notes were drawn? Does any of this matter? Is this not to be taken as evidence of the inevitable limits of any research endeavour, where the researcher is always required to make selections, to include or exclude words, phrases, quotations, and descriptions? As Kirkwood's report suggests, F1.16–F2.4 was material that was 'not directly relevant to the work of the Bleeks and Lloyd' (2021a:3). When I close my document, Word warns me that the file format is out of date; the Microsoft Word 97–2003 Document needs to be updated to docx format, which requires me to save it as such.

Moving to the J series, the archivist's 2021 report states:

J2.1 Album containing photographs of Bushmen dancing, as well as their shelters and implements. Taken by DF Bleek at Van Wyksvlei, Prieska, Gordonia, Nossop, Lake Chrissie, Bechuanaland and Angola. n.d. c.1920s–30s. Descriptions on the backs of the photographs. (scanned)

J2.2 Photographs taken by D F Bleek during a research trek in Bechuanaland, Christmas 1919. Includes list of photos. (unscanned – lost in fire)

Again, my supposed file-by-file research does not precisely correspond with the listed materials. My file named *J2.1 Photography*

on *DISC*, including Sandfontein, Kafia is seven pages long. Under the heading VIEWED ON 28.01.09, my notes read:

ACTUAL ALBUM J2.1 is a thick tome, cloth bound grey, now frayed at the corners and edges, with blue and gold embossed title in the middle front in Italic script 'Post-Cards'.

Inside are matt black pages of cartridge paper with cut marks where you can slide in your postcards, or photographs as DB did, to accommodate two sizes of card ... but no writing in the book itself, only the annotations on the photos. Her name does not appear anywhere in the book, and there is no mark or writing therein at all! MUST ESTABLISH PROVENANCE OF THIS ALBUM which has been digitised by M&A, and the original put away, altho (sic) it was no problem for me to get access to the album itself to view alongside the digitised version.

When paging through the album pix fall out of their mountings.

It seems superfluous to note that this level of engagement with documents in material rather than digital form has, in the case at hand, been lost. Whatever quirks of arrangement Dorothea might have employed in laying out her photographs in this album can no longer be observed. Similarly, this is a loss that will be replicated in other collections now rendered incomplete due to the fire. Returning to the Dorothea Bleek collection, I remember more clearly the materials catalogued within the J series, which covered photography, including field photographs produced by Dorothea Bleek and miscellaneous photographs presumably included in the collection because they were important to Dorothea Bleek for scholarly or perhaps familial reasons. Back in 2009, I had the advantage of engaging with the materiality of this particular residue of Dorothea Bleek's life and research. That experience will no longer be available to researchers. One surviving view of the images in J2.1 and the ones in J2.2 now lost (Figure 6.2) is available in the critical reading of the collection in Bank (2006).

The term polycrisis flitted into my head as I browsed UCT libraries' online media, where several sites and blogs told stories about the emotional, spatial, classificatory, and logistical responses to the devastation of fire and flood. It struck me how the technocratic

response from librarians, archivists and conservators, with assistance from members of the public, corporates and businesses in Cape Town, gave new meaning to the landmark theoretical ideas about archives and collections that had been advanced by scholars such as Michel Foucault (1989) and Jacques Derrida (1995), in relation to how documents and archival materials related to structures of knowledge, orders of governance and disciplinary power, and how this related to the Foucauldian idea of the episteme.

Once the newly catalogued post-fire lists are returned to use, the record for each item salvaged from the flooded basement will be marked 'Survived the Jagger Library fire, 18 April 2021'. Items not recovered will remain listed, and the record will be marked 'Lost in the Jagger Library fire'. Interventions such as these notwithstanding a 'significant institutional loss' remained in that 'the original card catalogues for the manuscripts and archives repositories, the history of UCT Libraries and the special collections archive office and administrative records', vice-chancellor Mamokgethi Phakeng said in a statement issued shortly after the fire (Banda 2021). Not only were these records destroyed but also the historic building, which had undergone careful renovation in 2012 to restore its interiors to the original style and décor, including furnishings from the 1930s. I was taken back to my years of research in that same space now reduced to ash, before COVID, before the fire, before the #mustfall movements. I remember those card catalogues: wedge-shaped cabinets beautifully fashioned in blonde wood, with drawers exactly designed for the cards, a cabinet of curiosities of sorts.

It is not surprising that in the aftermath of the fire, UCT Libraries plans to enhance and continue with its 'substantial investment in a digital preservation system for university-wide use' (Kirkwood 2021b:54). Special Collections was determined to rise from the ashes, by enhancing the focus on digitisation of archival material, together with an enhanced potential to make digital surrogates accessible online linked to the finding aids. The rebuilding provided an opportunity 'for renewal, to add value and become more relevant to users' needs while upholding the university's mandate and fulfilling Special Collections' mission as a leading repository of African research resources' (Kirkwood 2021b:55).

Thus, despite the profound extent of the loss, librarians and archivists at UCT remain committed to conserving, recreating, and remaking what existed before. As director Satgoor (2022) declared earlier this year in an update on post-fire mitigation efforts:

By being focused and strategic about our needs and requirements, we relocated to new premises; consolidated all our dispersed materials to a single location; continued with remedial conservation by staff, an international visiting conservator, and interns; re-organised the thousands of crates into collections; commenced the transfer of primary materials into new archival stationery; sourced additional funding for critical conservation equipment, shared expertise, digitisation of at-risk collections, and future capacity building; and commenced the rebuilding [of] the African Studies collection by re-shelving some of the salvaged and restored materials with the note 'survived the Jagger fire' on each bibliographic record. In addition to the above, the outsourced restoration projects of our rare and antiquarian books and monographs, and audio-visual collections are well underway. After all this activity, we are now better positioned to present the 12-month Jagger Fire report to the UCT community.

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Indeed, the entire university appears to be determined to remake this disaster as an opportunity for transformation and redress. As vice chancellor Mamokgethi Phakeng wrote in a letter published by UCT just as the final draft of this paper was being revised, the library rising from the ashes would be reimagined collaboratively and inclusively. As Phakeng put it: 'We want the new Jagger Library to be a space for rethinking, reimagining, re-energising and repurposing higher education; for creating a strong, purposeful community of knowledge builders and knowledge users who will help lead the many changes we foresee in the future'.

In closing

The Jagger fire of 2021 brings home what critical studies on the nature of the archive have been arguing for the longest time regarding the ineffability of archives and their contents. In the formulation of Hamilton, Harris and Read (2002:10), the archive is as much about hopes and longings for the future as it is about the past. One way to provide space for this fluid nature of the archive is to think about the idea of an archival gap—to see the archive as a sliver rather than as an incomplete whole. In the same volume, Harris (2002b:135–42) argues

for the notion of 'the archival sliver' to remind us of the selections, exclusions, and even destruction of records, which are inevitably part of the processes of archive formation and dissolution. Harris (2002b:135–36) is acutely aware of the limits imposed by archival practice, arguing that what archivists like to call 'the record' is in practice 'just a sliver of a window into an event', that the record itself is 'substantially reduced through deliberate and inadvertent destruction by records creators and managers, leaving a sliver of a sliver from which archivists select what they will preserve'. After Derrida, Harris (2002a:63) argues for the 'contradictory' and 'always dislocating' nature of the archive and calls for a recognition of the relation between the known, the classified, and the accounted for, against what is beyond or outside of the archive, the unknowable, unarchivable, the other. The archive is being turned inside out by postmodernist epistemologies and the technological revolution. And yet, many archivists have still to acknowledge 'the devastating rebuttal of the notion long cherished ... that in contextualising text they are revealing meaning, resolving mystery, and closing the archive' (Harris 2002a:71). What needs to be acknowledged instead argues Harris (2002a:71), is the Derridean framing of archival endeavour as being about 'the releasing of meanings, the tending of mystery and the disclosing of the archive's openness'. What is needed is a recognition of the 'blindness or limits residing at the heart of archival practice, the need to move away from binary oppositions such as knowledge or ignorance, self and other, reason against passion' (Harris 2002a:71-75).

In my book (Weintroub 2016), I argued for greater recognition for Dorothea Bleek's role in preserving the documents and papers created and produced by her father and aunt. In the preface, I described how my engagement with the Bleek and Lloyd materials had pre-dated my particular interest in Dorothea as the only daughter who had prolonged and extended the scholarly work of her father and aunt. She, out of five Bleek daughters, was the one who had taken what had been home-based domestic interactions out of the living room and into the field, taking regular trips across southern African landscapes to continue the language and folklore work begun by Wilhelm Bleek and Lucy Lloyd. However, my concern with Dorothea had grown out of a broader interest in the making of the archive and indeed in critically assessing what the Bleek and Lloyd collection could say about the place of the archive in contemporary worlds:



Figure 6.2. Album J2.1 in its archival storage box February 2010. Courtesy Special Collections, University of Cape Town Libraries.

... my interest in the collection and the drama of its making would keep me busy for many years. While working on my MPhil at UCT in the early 2000s, I researched the story of Otto Hartung Spohr and discovered how his dedicated detective work and roots in pre-World War II Germany and Eastern Europe had played out in his study of German librarians at the Cape and of German Africana, and in his writings on the life of Wilhelm Bleek. ... As I read his correspondence [written while working as a librarian at UCT], it became clear to me that Spohr's interest in Wilhelm Bleek was as much emotional as it was professional. The empathy he felt towards Wilhelm Bleek, combined with a profound nostalgia for the Eastern Europe he had been forced to flee in the 1930s, leapt out at me as I read his letters. I began to realise how much Spohr's personal quest and his passion were embedded in a collection of documents that are now often mined for other reasons. This realisation led me to the person of Dorothea Bleek (Weintroub 2016:vii-viii).

Looking back on years of work among archived documents, in the wake of the fire and loss of so much, one is reminded of the contingency of knowledge and the need always to negotiate gaps and omissions. It becomes clear that the work of the archive can be imagined as a relentless, never-ending quest for wholeness and a search for a totality that can never be realised or attained.

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