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Ethnography and the Personal: The Field Practices of Writing and Photography on the Natal Leg of the Ninth Frobenius Expedition.

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Within this research report, I explore how the (re-)integration of writing and photography enhances an understanding of the role of the personal within documentary practices. I focus on a portion of the Frobenius Archive as my case study, specifically the documents produced during the five-week Natal leg of the ninth expedition in early 1929.

The German Leo Frobenius (b.1873–d.1938) was a primarily self-taught Africanist ethnographer, who had an interdisciplinary practice that blurred the boundaries between anthropology, archaeology and history. He conducted a total of twelve expeditions within Africa between 1904 and 1935, and his objective on these expeditions was to record ways of life that he felt were vulnerable to changes due to modernity.

The documents collected during the Natal leg consist of field notes, photographs, hand-drawn pictures and diary entries. The field notes comprise of a set of eleven rock art site descriptions that have been constructed by the three artists: Maria Weyersberg, Elisabeth Mannsfeld and Agnes Schulz. Weyersberg's diary entries provide a more impressionistic set of notes, tracking the day-to-day unfolding of their journey (but with many gaps). The subject matter of the photographs ranges from the rock art sites and the landscapes these sites are a part of, to the people they encountered along the way. I engaging with the concept of writing, particularly through the example of Weyersberg's personal diaries, and the ways in which these entries relate to the photographs, creating a space in between where the personal relationships would have played themselves out. Within this research report I demonstrate that writing and photography can be brought back together in order to restore something of the original encounter and that this (re-)integration offers an opportunity for a new dialogue and a new understanding to be achieved.