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Mixed memories: rethinking the loss and transformation of the colonial heritage archive in the aftermath of the Jagger Library inferno and Rhodes Must Fall Movement

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ABSTRACT

In this article we look at how colonial heritage as an archive is being curated, and in some cases obliterated within selective priorities in South Africa and Zimbabwe that are informed by decolonial thinking and politics. We draw on the idea of archivability by referring to an inferno that destroyed part of the Jagger Library at the University of Cape Town and contestations associated with the presence and management of Cecil John Rhodes grave. We argue that the loss suffered at the Jagger Library highlights the urgent need for heightened public awareness and education concerning the significance of certain colonial heritage archives and the imperative to safeguard them. We believe that the loss and alterations to these archives risk fostering historical amnesia, where crucial aspects of a society's colonial history are either erased or marginalized. Such oversights can distort our understanding of the past, impeding our ability to learn from history and address past injustices. However, we also acknowledge the complexity of the situation, noting that the fire occurred during a critical moment when other colonial edifices at the University of Cape Town were being contested following the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall Movement. Similarly, in Zimbabwe, the colonial heritage archive embodied by Rhodes' burial site faced increasing challenges, with political leaders advocating for his remains to be unearthed and returned to England. Consequently, we contemplate the meanings embedded within the colonial heritage archive, considering the painful memories associated with many of these buildings and memorials dating back to the colonial era.

KEYWORDS

Colonial heritage archive; decolonisation; Jagger Library; Cecil John Rhodes; Rhodes Must Fall

In 2021, the University of Cape Town (UCT) experienced a devastating fire resulting in extensive damage to the Jagger Library, a globally acclaimed repository of significant African Studies archives. This calamity coincided with the destruction of the Restaurant and Tea Room at Rhodes Memorial, symbolising Cecil John Rhodes, and the dark legacy of British colonialism. In the wake of this catastrophe, so much has been contemplated particularly in the aftermath of the "After the Fire: Loss, Archive, and African Studies"

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symposium, which was convened to commemorate the first anniversary of the devastating fire that destroyed the Jagger Reading Room, resulting in significant losses to the African Studies collections. This symposium served as a pivotal moment for us to reconsider the loss of the Jagger Library archives as a tool for comprehending the transformations and losses associated with colonial heritage in the African context.

Colonial heritage embodies a complex legacy that encompasses both the historical consequences of colonisation and its cultural significance. While the destruction of the Jagger Library is directly linked to recurrent fynbos fires on Table Mountain, often stemming from a combination of arson and dry weather (Nordling 2021), this calamity prompts reflection on the vulnerability of colonial heritage spaces. Such spaces are frequently susceptible to decay, neglect or intentional ruination. Consequently, this situation initiates a nuanced discourse on the preservation of colonial heritage, acknowledging its problematic dimensions. Moreover, it encourages an exploration of how the experience of loss and devastation shapes the perception and utilisation of colonial heritage. These circumstances stimulate discussions concerning the historical and cultural value of the colonial heritage archive (Rowlands and De Jong 2007). As explored in this contribution, individuals may question the contemporary societal role of these repositories, debating whether they should be preserved or if alternative approaches should be considered to address their dissonant past.

In this context, reference is drawn to ongoing debates in Zimbabwe, specifically regarding the fate of colonial memorials, exemplified by the discourse surrounding Rhodes's grave in Matopos. Within Zimbabwe's heritage archive, there exists a discernible selectivity in providing conservation and protection to liberation war heritage, while certain aspects of colonial heritage have been marginalised, discarded and allowed to deteriorate. The reinventing of Zimbabwe's colonial heritage archive is frequently aligned with the preferences of the governing administration and the veterans of Zimbabwe's War of Liberation (1964–1979). Within the conventional archival framework, the determination of "archivability" involves judgement and is a product of specific authority and power, influencing the inclusion of certain documents into the archive and the exclusion of others (Mbembe 2002, 2). The discourse surrounding the potential exhumation of Rhodes's remains has extended into contemporary heritage discussions, with proponents advocating for removal and others arguing for preservation. The late Robert Mugabe, founding president of Zimbabwe, initially emphasised the preservation of colonialists' graves as integral to the country's heritage. However, the government's response to such demands has been inconsistent, often influenced by economic considerations. Economic benefits derived from tourism, particularly associated with Rhodes's grave, have played a pivotal role in its preservation.

On a contrasting note, the Jagger Library, constructed in the 1930s and named in honour of John William Jagger, a significant benefactor of the University of Cape Town Libraries (Bissett 1973), served as a world-class repository for knowledge consumption, particularly amongst the Africanist intellectual community, including archaeologists and professionals from related disciplines. Regrettably, the Library succumbed to a devastating fire despite the unwavering dedication and determination of generations of librarians at UCT who worked tirelessly to build and maintain the collection.

While the Jagger Library now stands as a mere remnant of its past, it is fortunate that not all components of the African Studies collection succumbed to the ravages of

the fire and water damage incurred from the firefighting efforts. The dedicated rescue teams successfully preserved over 30,000 African Studies collections, particularly those housed in the basement during the library's conflagration (Noble 2023). Noteworthy among the African Studies collections that "Survived the fire," as documented on Primo, the UCT Libraries database, are books, manuscripts, maps, journals, photographs, dissertations and volumes on African history, linguistics, philosophy, archaeology and anthropology. This includes the scholarly contributions of the late Michael Gelfand, a distinguished UCT alumnus whose work significantly contributed to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Shona anthropology.

As Africanist anthropological archaeologists, our connection with the Jagger Library runs deep. It served as an archival haven, affording us access to ethnographic materials crucial for unravelling the lifeways of ancient Bantu-speaking communities spanning sub-Saharan Africa, whose deep history we strive to reconstruct and preserve (e.g., Nyamushosho et al. 2021). Additionally, one of our team members (RTN) undertook the task of digitising the Duncan Miller and Nikolaas Van der Merwe Archaeometallurgy Collection, housed at the UCT Archaeological Materials Laboratory, slated for deposition at the Jagger Library. Although this collection was fortunate enough to be spared from the flames, it could have been lost given the proximity of the Archaeological Materials Laboratory to the Jagger Library.

Of note, the majority of the Bleek and Lloyd collection emerged unscathed from the inferno that engulfed the Jagger Library. This collection holds paramount significance in the fields of African linguistics, archaeology, and oral history (Deacon 1986). The collaborative efforts of Wilhelm Bleek and his daughter Lucy Lloyd with indigenous peoples in southern Africa, specifically the/Xam and !Kun San communities, yielded a comprehensive database of San folklore, myths, stories, languages and oral traditions dating back to the mid-nineteenth century (Deacon 1986). The survival of this pioneering work amidst the Jagger inferno ensures the sustained accessibility of this invaluable resource, facilitating ongoing research and preservation of endangered languages, and contributing to the broader understanding of the cultural diversity of southern Africa.

Regrettably, among the vast array of special collections lost in the fire were archives essential to Africanists. Among these losses were a photographic series containing Dorothea Bleek's images (Jethro 2021), hard copies of analytical and field reports from the UCT Archaeology Materials Laboratory, a bibliography by T.M.O'C. Maggs on pre-colonial metalworking in Africa and other works by Gelfand. The Jagger fire thus emerged as one of the most devastating tragedies in the realm of intellectual record, and the irreparable loss it inflicted is deeply lamented.

It is noteworthy that, despite its richness as an archival repository, the African Studies Library was not readily accessible to all researchers. Criticism arose, with some questioning why essential knowledge was confined and inaccessible to the broader public. As noted by Jethro and Nair (2022), the Jagger Library, being part of UCT, was often perceived as an ivory tower atop a hill, and access to its resources historically reflected privilege, including considerations of race. Such sentiments found resonance on social media, where the Jagger Library fire was viewed as a consequential event. The loss was particularly poignant within the context of the African Studies collection and occurred in the wake of the 2015 Rhodes Must Fall movement, which sought to bring about

transformative changes at UCT and other institutions of higher learning across South Africa.

Surprisingly, the day the Jagger Library was engulfed in flames coincided with the 41st anniversary of Zimbabwe – formerly Rhodesia and named after Rhodes – gaining independence from British colonialism in 1980. Rhodes, a central figure in the colonial history of Africa, had his memorial at Devil's Peak affected by the fire. It is intriguing to note that there was relatively little public outcry over the losses at the Rhodes Memorial, including the Restaurant and Tea Room managed by South African National Parks. This differential public response prompts inquiries into perceptions surrounding Rhodes's contentious imperial legacy, evident in the recurrent vandalism of his bronze bust at the memorial. The concept of an archive, as elucidated by Achille Mbembe, assumes a pivotal role in understanding these dynamics. Archives embody a selective process of preserving materials deemed worthy, with power relations influencing what is included and excluded. The heritage archive in Zimbabwe exemplifies a specific exercise of power and authority, encompassing the conservation of liberation war heritage and the removal of colonial monuments. These actions are subject to diverse interpretations and classifications, intricately woven into the politics of the time. The disparity in public reactions to the losses at the Rhodes Memorial and the Jagger Library underscores the complex and often contested nature of historical memory and heritage preservation.

In retrospect, the events surrounding the Jagger Library fire constituted the loss of an invaluable colonial heritage archive, with profound implications for invoking mixed memories within the academic community and the broader public. This incident prompted reflections on issues of accessibility, privilege and the legacy of colonial figures, exemplified by Rhodes, whose memorialisation has ignited debates and protests advocating for the decolonisation of higher education. Consequently, the loss experienced at the Jagger Library underscores the pressing need for heightened public awareness and education regarding the significance of some colonial heritage archives and the necessity to preserve them. We contend here that the loss and alterations to this archive risk fostering historical amnesia, wherein critical aspects of a society's colonial history are either erased or marginalised. Such oversights can lead to a distorted understanding of the past, hindering the ability to glean lessons from history and address past injustices. However, as part of the decolonial turn, it is also crucial to acknowledge that the de-proclamation and removal of colonial heritage landmarks, including monuments associated with figures like Rhodes, can also be justified as a means for communities to engage with their dissonant histories associated with conquest, disenfranchisement, dispossession, discrimination and other violent experiences and the suffering that accompanied colonialism. This complex dynamic demands careful consideration and ongoing dialogue to navigate the nuanced intersection of preserving the colonial heritage archive, acknowledging diverse perspectives, and fostering a more inclusive understanding of heritage and history.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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