

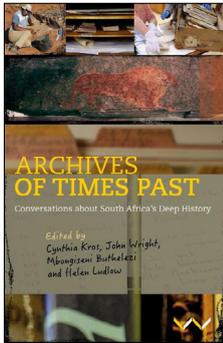


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# Posing biographical questions to deep pasts

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Archives of times past: Conversations about South Africa's deep history



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In a scene from the science fiction novel *The Dispossessed* by Ursula Le Guin (Harper & Row, 1974), the physicist Shevek, who is part of an anarchist-socialist society living in exile on Anraes, tries to explain simultaneity and sequential thinking to those living on the twin planet of Urras. Drawing upon a metaphor of a rock being thrown at a tree, he conveys simultaneity as the rock already having hit the tree, while the sequentist is concerned with the rock always in process, of ultimately never hitting the tree. Asked to distinguish and decide between the two, Shevek asserts: 'I prefer to make things difficult and choose both'. When pressed further about how he reconciles them he says he does not know but what he constantly seeks is a complexity of being and becoming. After all, he says, 'it is not the answer we are after, but only how to ask the question'.

If there is a book that encompasses the philosophy of Shevek, it is *Archives of Times Past*. It is about material beings – shards, traces, archival presences and absences – and their continual processes of becoming through translations, filters, catalogues, transcriptions, and tracings (among many others). These are not components of a science fiction universe, but what the editors situate spatially in a contemporary national state called South Africa (which is always unstable and reimagined), and are located in pasts of human habitation, which they call deep history. Their concern, like that of Shevek, is not to present answers about the characteristics of these pasts, but to search for ways to ask questions that will further open up avenues of exploration. The objective is not to narrate a tale of times past, but of extending archival possibilities and expanding historical futures. The preferred punctuation marks dotted throughout are inverted commas, as the signs of explanatory doubt, in association with question marks as the vectors of continual historical enquiry.

Of course, one of the key questions is about labelling, and no more so than in how to assign a temporal designation. The editors firmly reject the precolonial as a category of the southern African pasts they are thinking and writing about given its persistence in marking a short history of the colonial as significant in a trajectory of teleological progression. There are replacements that are used throughout the book and, although the editors claim never to have settled on one, instead leaving this as an open question, they use deep history in the title. Indeterminacy is combined with a preference, continually inviting the possibility of further interrogation. One of those questions that it leaves open is the duration and timing of the layers, when history and depth is defined in human lives, and even then, largely in the last three thousand years. As with so much in the book, the invitation is to the reader. 'Don't expect us to answer your questions, or even the many we are posing', they appear to reiterate.

This though is a very narrow and conventional reading of the way time is used in the book. More than anything, the layering is associated with contemporary encounters. History making through autobiographical conversations, mediated by the editors, are the explanatory devices. This is achieved in two ways. The first and most evocative are those told through of course what must be a partial life story of the ways the archival presences are encountered, re-encountered, imagined and reimagined. As one may expect in such stories of self, elements of surprise and discovery are used consistently as a narrative trope. But it is the doubts, the inconsistencies, the institutional formations (often as barriers), the deletions, the sidebars, the friendships, the hesitations, the misreadings and misunderstandings that are much more important. It is in these fissures that the questions begin to emerge, rather than in the locating of lacunae as the foundation of historical interpretations. The seemingly easy dichotomous couplet of silence/voicing is completely shattered to make way for the traces of inconsistency and the always ambivalent. Pushed further, the book is a subtle invitation to readers, through these uneasy conversations, to scrutinise how it is that through destruction and concealment, rather than finding and revelation, the narratives, categories, understandings of events, societies and people are constructed and may be undermined. The challenge is not a simple one of replacement or discovery, for that will merely establish and further new foundations, but to further the capacity for restlessness, apprehension and murkiness. If these conversations about the being and becoming of South Africa's deep histories generate such productive uncertainties, it will have achieved much.

Much of that creative opacity comes through the second biographical move when the stories of the respective contributors to this collection of archival encounter are used as a way to tell brief snippets of life stories of individuals who collected, transmitted, authored, transcribed, and translated the material that came to be the substance of the evidence. These are broadly referred to throughout as sources of deep histories. Many of the lives that are told and written about those who collected, collated and categorised seem superficially to conform to the stereotype of the colonial, missionary, apartheid official as the bearer of what is tainted archive. Yet in nearly all the autobiographical/biographical encounters in *Archives of Times Past*, it is the complexity of lives that is highlighted. Individuals who come to be constituted as the bearers of sources of deep history are not presented as static beings by the contributors to this collection. The power of meanings conveyed in their texts, stories and artefacts is constantly mediated through interactions with interlocutors. There is the necessity of official production though that is always not so clear itself, and the claims being made to depicting cultural meanings and histories are continually contested. The lives of the authors of the archival traces, as presented through these autobiographical conversational encounters, are multiple, shifting, and contradictory, and are difficult to fit into a singular prescribed label.

I want to suggest that this presents the editors with a difficulty that I have also encountered in reviewing the book. Through using conversation as method and metaphor, this book so cleverly and beautifully crafts together the contradictions, contests, multiple beginnings, changing trajectories, different and shifting authorial interventions, staging of performances and (mis)understandings in translation that constitute the making of meaning through the production of historical evidence. These are so evidently not prior to history in a hierarchy of knowledge but histories in themselves. But signifying origins and emergence, through being derived from and returning to the evidence as a source of history, runs counters to much of what this book is about. It stands in contrast to the processes of being and becoming that the editors have weaved through the intersections of the autobiographical/biographical tales. All these processes that the book illuminates in such a sterling manner are a clear indication that the term 'source' is inadequate for understanding the ways that material traces shift and alter between becoming marked or not as bearers of histories. Like the editors, let me then end by posing a question as a way to extend the conversations they have so vividly sparked off: Is it time for historians to abandon the concept of source as the sign of evidence?

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