

The 21st Century Scholar and the Calamity of the UCT's African Studies Collection

By

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On 25 May 2021, the continent will be celebrating the 58th anniversary of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU, former African Union). Observing the ethos of African solidarity, the University of the Free State Centre for Gender and Africa Studies (CGAS) annually celebrates Africa Month. This year's event is hosted after the appalling news of a fire outbreak at the University of Cape Town. On 19 April, reports of raging flames sweeping across the Rondebosch campus flooded newsrooms and social media. Within hours, the fire caused immeasurable damage, destroying historical sites, buildings, a library, and parts of an archive – the invaluable African Studies Collection.

Titled 'Solidarity in Knowledge Production and Recording', this year's event is hosted in solidarity with UCT. On May 19, the renowned decolonial scholar, Professor Walter D Mignolo, will deliver the keynote address to honour the memory of transatlantic slavery by reflecting on the work of Prof Jean Casimir: *The Beauty of the Sovereign People: Jean Casimir and the Decolonial History of Haiti*. Prof Sabelo J Ndlovu-Gatseni, one of the leading African scholars in the struggle for epistemic justice, and CGAS Extraordinary Professor and Professor of Epistemologies of the Global South at the University of Bayreuth (Germany), will be the discussant.

The fire outbreak unfolded while the COVID-19 pandemic continues to ravage the world, adding further woes to the calamity. Capturing the severity of the fire, the multimedia

news provider, [Reuters](#), reported that: “South African firefighters contained a wildfire along Cape Town’s Table Mountain on Monday more than 24 hours after it began Winds of up to 45 kilometres per hour put water-bombing helicopters out of action ...” About 250 firefighters were battling with the blazing flames on the ground. Around 400 hectares of vegetation were damaged. Residents and students had to be evacuated. Mostert’s Mill, built towards the end of the eighteenth century, was destroyed together with parts of the African Studies Collection.

Commenting on the damages that the fire inflicted on the African Studies Collection, I join numerous scholars and activists who have already started a conversation on various impacts and implications of this incalculable loss. In its own way, this catastrophe has the potential to spark new aspirations and directions in the historiography of the region and record-keeping in a rapidly digitalising world. Looking on the bright side, for example, the [San and Khoi Inter-University Research Group](#) in UCT’s Department of African Studies is hopeful of “the promise of the fire lilies after the devastation of the fire”. Surely, it will be a mammoth task to chronicle history from ashes and soaking papers. Already, access and availability of historical sources is a challenge faced by scholars. The group highlighted the need to address “the alleged regrettable misconceptions on the value of the institutionalised library and archives as colonial only”.

Adding another important dimension to this conversation, a South African historian and activist, [Prof Nomalanga Mkhize](#) from Nelson Mandela University, argued that there is an ongoing perception that black and indigenous histories were only ‘oral’, dismissing written sources as colonial. On the contrary, she observed that Africans shared their stories with missionaries and other chroniclers. According to Prof Mkhize: “This – while embedded in the violence of colonialism – also means that these stories could survive beyond their lifetime as their response to the ever-increasing encroaching destruction of colonialism.”

Both Prof Mkhize and the above group raise an important point of proximity to time and space in the struggle to rethink the past. As scholars and historians, we use various sources – written, ethnographic, and oral – to reconstruct the past and debunk various imperial and colonial metanarratives. Many of these records were documented by missionaries, travellers, governments, etc., of the time. Unsettling as this may be, it is from these that we triangulate various sources to produce plausible historical accounts. Historical particularities and nuances from historical sources are some of the key tools at the disposal of the 21st century scholar. It is from such sources that we can produce robust and multi-dimensional narratives highlighting various voices, power dynamics, and competing interests.

In our time, ‘rebutting’ is no longer the end, but one of the means to launch more layered stories that use history as a method to understand the present and strive towards a desired future. Monolithic narratives are detrimental, and the process is complexly dialectal. It begins with understanding our own moments in world history, an articulation and expression of an ideal future, and revisitation of the past in its relative entanglements and divergences. This goes beyond using and misusing history to support narrow interests and pursuits. An elitist few typically benefit from such skewed historical explorations.

The majority of us are marginal. It is no wonder that we still see each other from the cracked mirrors of racism and hegemonic supremacy. Our common occupation of the world requires new principles of association and exploration of more inclusive formations. Different historical epochs in world and regional histories are pregnant with various lessons. The archive is indispensable for that, yet it continues to be a site of contestation; however, academia must not succumb to persistent pressure from populist interests. Solidarity as one of the key tenets of building a more plural and inclusive world society is pertinent.