

Invalidating the Archive: Interpreting Silences and Inconsistencies

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Abstract

This paper questions whether and how the historical narrative that is validated in the institutional archives can be dislocated, while adhering to the scientific requirements of the law faculty in which the authors' doctoral research is situated. Through a joint auto-ethnography, the authors explore their discomfort and anxieties prompted by the need to interpret silences, inconsistencies, and undertones in official state archives during their archival research on racial thinking in the context of the postcolonial regulation of intimacy. Both researchers struggle with the interpretation of archival silences and inconsistencies, as they attempt to work through the question of how their own positionality deeply influences their interpretation. This gives rise to certain questions around how one understands silence and inconsistency within a specific historical time and space, and how this might impact the researcher. In responding to such questions, new ways of reading the archive have been developed within the humanities that aim to uncover the power dynamics inherent in the production of the archive. In this paper, the authors reflect on the usability of these practices in their multidisciplinary research environment.

Introduction

The archive is no longer a privileged space for historians: over a decade ago, scholars from various disciplines have turned to the archive to understand the present. With the growing interest in the archive as an object of knowledge, rather than as a source of knowledge, different modes of reading and interpreting the archive have enabled scholars to shed light on the production of history and power. This underlines the importance of interrogating the telling of history, and the archives that enable us to do so, and has given rise to the productive field of critical historical analysis, which has attempted to invalidate, correct, and complement (national) historical narratives.

In the same line of work, our PhD research explores whether and how 'interracialized intimacies'¹⁸ (Haritaworn, 2012: 90) were regulated in the decolonization and immediate postcolonial period in France and the United Kingdom. The aim of our respective research is to contribute to critical readings of postcolonial histories in order to understand the racialized exclusions encountered in contemporary France and the UK. Our research is part of an interdisciplinary project within the law department. Our work turns to state archives, as one of the locations in which power dynamics are negotiated, to question how racialized, sexualized, and gendered logics have functioned to categorize and regulate society during and in the wake of decolonization.

Turning to the archive to analyse and broaden the validated historical narratives has forced us to reflect on the methodological challenges presented by the need for validity in interpreting archival findings. In the research on France, Rébecca encountered fragmented material and inconsistencies that reflect France's ambivalence in treating 'race' as a category of difference. Nawal, on the other hand, was confronted with one-dimensional representation and painful silences regarding the legacy of Black¹⁹ nurses. In this paper, we will reflect on the workability of critical theoretical interventions across the social sciences and humanities on our own archival practices, as we seek to reconceptualize the meaning of validity.

Situating Our Research

The challenges we have encountered are, to an extent, specific to the national-historical context in which we carried out our research, but they are similar in the sense that they require a methodological approach that overcomes disciplinary boundaries and narrow definitions of validity. The specificity of France's historical national narrative as a 'colour-blind' society causes a particular challenge for research on racialization in France. Research that attempts to understand racialization in France has argued that the French construct themselves as a universal civilization while remaining unconscious of the racialized mechanisms of repression

¹⁸ Building on the work of Jinhana Haritaworn we consider 'Interracialized intimacies' to be romantic relationships between two people that are considered to belong to different 'races'. These types of relationships are 'Interracialized' because an external gaze subjugates and encapsulates them within the artificial binary paradigm of 'race' thinking, therefore, they are considered to disrupt racial hierarchies.

¹⁹ We acknowledge that the term Black is contested. For the purpose of this article, notions of Blackness are not limited to phenotypical features.

that are integral to the French nation (Stovall and Van Abbeele, 2003; Peabody and Stovall, 2003; Saada, 2007). To understand the mechanisms of racialization, then, requires the reinterpretation of fragmented and implicit racial thinking in the French archives, instead of uncovering explicitly racist policies. Rébecca's research looks at archives of the different ministries, local governments, and law enforcement that were involved with the regulation of postcolonial immigration in France. In these archives, she attempts to understand the subtle racialized logics that underpin the policies on postcolonial immigrants.

In the contemporary context of the UK, interracial heritage has been celebrated for signifying the 'multiraciality' of the UK (Ifekwunigwe, 2015). However, the colonial archives tell the story of the unwanted and inferiorized 'halfcast', which has travelled into the metropole. Scholars of colonialism have argued that 'miscegenation' threatens the construction of British identity, which brings the sexual encounters of white women with Black men into the public and regulatory domain (Bush, 1999: 25). Generally, the contributions made by Black women to the British national life have not been substantially researched; this is especially the case in relation to 'interraciality'. This is striking because of the large-scale immigration of Black nurses from the 1950s to the 1970s.

Nawal is particularly interested in archival materials such as official documents from the labour and health ministries, church archives that focus on issues relating to immorality or indecency, private archives of the nurses and their family members, and hospital archives.²⁰ By collecting materials from numerous archives, Nawal hopes to comprehend the impact of the imbrications of gender, 'race', and sexuality in British history and nation-making.

The Archives' Juridical Command

As our research is carried out under the auspices of the law faculty and pertains to laws and regulation, the issue of what is considered 'usable data' – that is, which archival documents are valid to respond to the questions posed in our research – is a contentious one. Generally speaking, the field of law has been late to the archive party. While some legal historians have challenged what should be considered as a legal source, there has been no significant questioning of what counts as law (Mawani, 2012). Hence, within the European legal context, the administrative and bureaucratic archive has only sporadically been explored in relation to 'race' and intimacy.

The law and the state archives are closely connected. Derrida has argued that the beginning of the law, that which underpins it, resides in the archive (Vismann, 2008). According to Derrida, the archive itself has juridical command as it 'speaks the law', and as such, the files that constitute the archive should be considered and analysed as objects of knowledge within the field of law. The law differentiates between allowable and unallowable action. The state archive, however, marks the difference between authorized and disqualified knowledge that underpins law (Stoler, 2012: 20).

Thus, the ways in which the archive qualifies specific knowledge claims as true and false, or, perhaps even more revealing, as irrelevant, reflects the structures of power that regulate society. Whereas the British colonial archives show that the regulation of relationships between white women and Black men were a topic of interest to authorities, sexual encounters between Black women and white men remain unmentioned²¹. This indicates that Black male sexuality was seen as dangerous to white women, while white men's sexuality was not seen as dangerous to Black women (McClintock, 2013). An analytical focus that takes into account how the archive itself categorizes and thereby regulates relationships helps us to understand how meanings of 'race', gender, and intimacy were constructed.

Similarly, in the French archives, sex, 'race', and gender played a role in the regulation of immigration. Rébecca found that in the French state archives, 'interracialized intimacies' were casually invoked as self-evident objects of concern. She did not encounter any explicit regulations or laws on 'interracialized intimacies'. Instead, 'interracialized intimacies' were problematized in a more subtle way. For example, at times 'mixed couples' were promoted while other types of 'interracialized' sexual relationship were problematized in an anecdotal manner in numerous official and unofficial letters, governmental research, and various documents of different ministries and (sub-)committees. This shows that the meaning of 'race' and intimacy cannot be pinned down to something static. Rather, their meaning can only be understood as a circulation of signifiers that are co-constituted through the acts of categorization, archiving, and regulation.

²⁰ I have looked a variety of documents at the National Archives in Kew in London; for example, minutes of the National Committee for Commonwealth immigrants HO 231/1, Racial discrimination CO 1032/478, Recruitment and the employment of immigrants MH 165/375

²¹ Typescript guide to the Race Relations Bill 1968 and pamphlet 'Colour and Immigration in the United Kingdom 1968' by the Institute of Race Relations/Facts paper and flyer 'Proof in black & white' by the Lincoln and County Committee for Human Rights Year 3AMS/B/16/11, the status of half-casts CO 822/36/16, minute by Mr MacLennan, 'Passports: Mr Oladele Adebayo Ajose and his White Wife Beatrice' CO 554/103/3. In order to be jointly repatriated with their black wives, this group of men had to wait until ships with special accommodation for women became available. The CO 554/103/3, Repatriation of Natives with White Wives Minutes as to policy to be adopted in regard to' CO 137/735, no. 48782.

By searching only for regulations and laws, the creation of sexualized, racialized, and gendered meaning would have been lost. In this regard, our research requires that we depart from our institutional context concerning the internal validity of our research methods: it should favour the analysis of the state archive as a regulatory practice, instead of reinforcing the differentiation made by legal scholars between law and governmental policy. Consequently, we aim to uncover specific regulations on ‘interracialized intimacies’, analysing the absence of regulation and investigating the archival practice as a site on which history is created.

In/valid Archives

Our work is informed by critical interventions in archival research that have sought to remedy the erasure of versions of the past, to uncover those voices that cannot be heard in the letters typed by officials, carefully preserved in the boxes that determine the telling of the past. Subaltern Studies have been influential in postcolonial theory as they intervened in Indian history-making around the 1980s to argue not only that subalterns make histories, but also that the relationship between power and knowledge needs to be interrogated, as the archive is a technology of power that serves to create specific forms of knowledge (see e.g. Guha, 1983; Guha and Spivak, 1988; Chakrabarty, 2000). However, Subaltern Studies have been problematized (at times from within their own ranks) in response to certain issues that arise as a result of seeking to represent the subaltern voice (see the acclaimed text by Spivak, 1994). Namely, the ‘authentic’ voice cannot be retrieved because this effort is always embedded in systemic structures of power. Other, later interventions call for reading ‘along the grain’, to uncover the rationales that weave the archive together, enabling an analysis of the mechanisms that validate historical narrative creation, rather than uncovering an impossible truth (see e.g. Stoler, 2012; Levine, 2004).

Archival labour with the aim of uncovering that which has not been validated throughout history is, according to Arondekar, an ‘unrepresentable search for an impossible object’ (2009: 10), precisely because the archive has made it un-enunciabile. In discussing sexuality in the colonial archives, Arondekar shows the difficulties in tracing homosexuality in the colonial archives, even though its regulation was an integral part of colonial politics. Homosexuality was always mentioned anecdotally as an undeniable problem, but it was never actually substantiated in official archival form (Arondekar, 2009: 19). Accordingly, Foucault has argued that the archive is the law of what can be said: it is an unruly system of enunciability of the past, present, and future (1972). What is included and preserved in the archive determines what narratives can be articulated, and what must be excluded. In our research, we attempt to understand why and how certain narratives on ‘interracialized intimacies’ are made enunciabile while others are excluded.

Silences, Hypervisibilities, and Inconsistencies

While these critical interventions are helpful to understand how to approach the archive, they present some challenges in the interpretation of the archive. The pertinent silencing of Black women’s private lives in the history of the United Kingdom and in Black history of the UK reveals how the archive works to exclude Black women from the British national narrative. During the official tribute paid to Black nurses by the National Health Service in 2018, their trails, tribulations, and triumphs were shared on diverse platforms. Yet, the reconstruction of this story disregarded the impact of the conditions of the nurses’ professional lives on their private lives. The silencing of the nurses’ complexity occurs on multiple levels. The private lives of the nurses were invisible in the historical documents and the relevance of their lives is academically under-researched. At the same time, these women are hypervisible. In the public imagination they are often represented as hardworking professionals who seem to be the embodiment of the ‘good’ immigrant (Shukla, 2016: 93). Their image is used to suppress public anxiety that is replete with colonial, stereotypical ideas about the other. This juxtaposition of simultaneous hypervisibility and hyperinvisibility (Alcoff, 2005: 8; Al-Saji, 2010: 891) raises the question of how to ‘validly’ interpret and understand archival silences.

Like silences, inconsistencies also necessitate interpretation. Rébecca only found ‘interracialized intimacies’ to emerge in the archive at unexpected moments, without substantial explanation or explicit regulation. In the French archive, inconsistencies around the categorizations of immigrants and mixed couples abound. For example, the activity reports of the so-called ‘Muslim Service’ discuss the problem of ‘Algerian families’ as a problem of immigrants, while another section of the reports show that actually in a third of these families, the wife was French. The same type of report invokes mixed couples as evidence of French tolerance, while the very same report mentions the sexual threat posed by too many Algerians in a single neighbourhood.²²

²² These reports can be found at the archives of the Ministry of Social Affairs, at the National Archives in Paris: 19760133/14, ‘Synthèse des rapports trimestriels établis par les Conseillers techniques aux affaires musulmanes (1958–1963)’.

As Rébecca attempted to recover and decode these references and inconsistencies, she struggled with the question of how the researcher can undertake a complete analysis out of an incoherent archival narrative, without interpreting the narrative from her own standpoint, and thereby giving a 'biased' perspective.

Validity as Positionality

Mawani has argued that the interpretation of the archive involves processes of translation, as the reader interprets the documents outside of the political and spatiotemporal context, through present-day concerns (2012: 352). Similarly, Stuart Hall has shown how the archive stands in 'an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past' (2001: 92). The researcher enters the archive not as a blank interpreter, but as an individual with an epistemic and political positionality. Hence, methodologies that are presented as objective and outside of the researcher's interaction with the archive cannot grasp the dynamics of the creation of meaning that is always ongoing. Doing archival work that aims at critique involves necessarily conceptual and methodological risks (Macharia, 2015). In the archive, we do not follow its grain nor do we go against it; rather, we communicate with the grain of the archive.

In that sense, critical archival work requires expanding the meaning that is validated in the archive, rather than providing a 'complete' and 'unbiased' analysis. The researcher inserts herself in the circulation that creates meaning by the act of reading and interpreting the archival documents. Accounting for the specific spatiotemporal context and our political and epistemic standpoint is not sufficient, due to the fact that the act of archival research involves a process of interpretation and translation of the knowledge produced through the archives. We need to be aware that the meaning of the archive itself changes as the circulation of the implications of signifiers in the archive are 'tampered with' by the reader-scholar.

The call to attend to positionality has had an important impact across the social sciences and many disciplines within the humanities, yet it has not been given as much attention in the fields of history or law. However, as both of us enter the archives from a particular standpoint, we are confronted with understanding our positionality in relation to the archive. In order to do critical archival work, therefore, we believe that attention to positionality is crucial.

Rébecca embarked on her archival visits in an attempt to 'uncover' the logics that underpin the archived documents, as she felt the will to know better than the archive. However, she was not prepared for the emotional vicissitudes she felt while rummaging through thousands of papers. The many inconsistencies in the archives made her anxious. She felt conscious of the projections she made, which made her feel too 'biased' to interpret the logics that underpinned the inconsistencies. However, her specific agenda of understanding the covert racial signifiers helps her to reveal the workings of racial enunciability.

Nawal's experiences of entering the archives as a Black woman interested in the lives of other Black women were also emotionally conflicting, albeit for different reasons. The lack of explicit evidence of the existence of these women beyond their recruitment and migration undeniably prompted her to reflect on her own trajectory. She wondered whether she will also be forgotten or erased. The connections she felt through denominators such as 'race' and gender force her to question the silences in the archives. Nawal's reading of the archive becomes inextricably connected to her own history, location, and understanding of the politics of the contemporary moment. She felt pain upon seeing the erasure and denial of the complexity of these lives. As Saidiya Hartman writes, 'a history of the present strives to illuminate the intimacy of our experience with the lives of the dead' (2008: 4). Therefore, researching the history of the nurses is personal, since this history 'engenders' her, because 'the knowledge of the other marks her', as the frustrations experienced in the encounter with the archive push her to continuous self-questioning and self-critique (Hartman, 2008: 4; Aguinaldo, 2004). Yet, this causes Nawal to become aware of the silences, rather than perpetuating them.

Conclusion

Valid research is that which questions power and narratives. Our research expands the boundaries of what is considered to be 'laws and regulations', by re-conceptualizing the meaning of 'valid data'. We argue for the validity of our research because it identifies the gaps, the forgotten and disregarded variables (Burton, 2005: 12). Encounters with the archive thus cannot be neutral, given that researchers endlessly 'tamper' with the materials they find. We consider the archive to be a 'contact zone' between past and present, between the researcher and the local, national construction of the past, a past that has come into being through power struggles (Sahadeo,

2005: 54). In reconstructing the past, the archive should not serve as a place where evidence is found, but rather as a site of ongoing negotiation. Interpreting information found (or indeed the lack thereof) on specific demographics in the archive then becomes a practice of negotiation between the archive and the researcher. Positionality forces the researcher to see the archive in a distorted way, which has the ability to complement and/or question the existing historical narratives. For researchers who identify with their research demographics due to political and/or personal markers of identification, conducting archival research can be an emotional endeavour since it can force them to reflect on and interpret the archive in relation to their own biographical trajectories. In this way, valid knowledge can then only be knowledge that is situated and that which emphasizes the particular in relation to the universal (Haraway, 1988). Thus, archival research sets in motion a set of processes that select, interpret, negate, produce, and reproduce (Aguinaldo, 2004). These processes are intimately connected to the researchers' positionality, the history of the archive itself, and the contemporary moment that influences the interpretation of the (lack of) information found in the archive.

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