

23 APRIL 2021

Fire on Table Mountain

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On Sunday, 18 April, a small fire on Table Mountain was whipped by high winds into an enormous blaze. It spread quickly to the nearby campus of the University of Cape Town, where embers set alight the roof of the African Studies Library and burned to ashes a significant amount of the world's rarest and most valuable collections of African media. You could watch it all pretty much live: the family WhatsApp group beaming out the incineration of what you had foolishly believed to be enduring.

While the full extent of the damage is still not known, there has been a grim inventory of losses: the Jagger Reading Room was gutted, along with 70,000 books, a collection of government records from across the continent, and the entire African Studies Film Collection, some 3500 DVDs. There was damage to a building that housed important botany collections and an archive of photographs of plants that generations of students have used for researching historical changes in South Africa's landscapes.

Not everything has been lost. Many of the rarest documents were kept underground, in a vault protected by roller doors that were activated by the fire detection system. The 60,000 pages of the Bleek and Lloyd Collection, the only written records of the intellectual life of the San people, have been confirmed to be unharmed. But the building is structurally unsound, access to the basement is limited, and there is still concern about water damage.

The sense I get talking to friends – writers, academics, former students – is that everyone feels winded by a grief it seems precious to talk about; whacked by the loss of something with intangible value, in a country with plenty of material problems. The Covid-19 pandemic has caused huge loss of life and devastated the economy, not to mention the disruption to teaching and learning. The blaze is currently thought to have been started by a cooking fire in a makeshift homeless encampment on the mountain, itself the symptom of many compounding societal failures. Thousands of students were displaced by the fire. Neighbourhoods in the city are regularly destroyed by shack fires. Everyone I know who mourns the loss of the library holds all of these realities in mind.

Part of the grief is privileged, and personal. If you were a humanities student you probably spent a lot of time in the Jagger Reading Room – among the rare repositories of anti-colonial and liberation movements, some of the earliest and only copies of texts in indigenous South African languages – at a period in your life when your ideas about ideas were changing in ways that probably came to define how you thought afterwards. The space helped shape you.

But there is also the huge loss of a collective resource. The archive – of which a small portion had been painstakingly digitised – includes a lot of colonial-era material, but the collectors have also applied considerable effort to building up rare collections from more recent decades, making trips across Southern Africa and further afield, to buy physical copies of books that were not formally distributed and could not be ordered. The film archive held footage that isn't kept in any other formal archive and isn't online: DVDs have been lost that might have been the only traceable copies of the films on them.

'It makes me want to drop everything,' a friend who studies Indian Ocean literature said, 'and just do archival work, while they are still around.' It's a new anxiety, this, at odds with what an archive is supposed to offer: the possibility of repeated reinterpretation, and the comfort of knowing that it can happen beyond the bounds of a single lifetime.

It's especially cruel that the fire should have affected the African Studies Library, vital to the project of creating an indigenous narrative about the city, the country and the wider region. The library allows history to be revisited and reread; keeping the records in Cape Town – [rather than Oxford, or Austin, or New Haven](#) – makes them accessible to African readers.

In 2015-16, during the [Rhodes Must Fall](#) and Fees Must Fall protests, student demands for the reduction of unaffordable fees grew into broader calls to 'decolonise' the curricula and redress the racially unrepresentative staffing of the academy. There was an acrimonious re-evaluation of the art and artefacts that the university held, displayed and, implicitly, valued; there was also concern for the safety of art and archives on campus, after protesters burned artworks that were housed in a student residence.

Five years ago, people were energetically angry about it all. Now, many people just seem depressed, and even the what-abouters are half-hearted. In the protests there were things to learn: about the country, the university, the suffocating reality for so many students. But fire is brutal and senseless, with its vile smell, and its stupid, irrecoverable losses. It's hard to see what lessons we can take from that.