

BOOK REVIEW

Cynthia Kros, John Wright, Mbongiseni Buthelezi, and Helen Ludlow, eds.
Archives of Times Past: Conversations about South Africa's Deep History.
Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022. xvii + 341 pp. Map. Illustrations.
Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$35.00. Paper. ISBN: 9781776147274.

Archives of Times Past: Conversations about South Africa's Deep History, edited by Cynthia Kros, John Wright, Mbongiseni Buthelezi, and Helen Ludlow, is an interesting and accessible book that provides a tangible lesson: that archives come into being through dynamic engagement. From the starting point that South Africa's deep past is politically and methodologically fraught, it invites readers to connect with traces of that past through the individuals who created, collected, and interpreted those traces.

To establish the need for a better method, Cynthia Kros and John Wright cite a 2016 *Business Day* op-ed by Nomalanga Mkhize. Mkhize wrote the piece as a tribute to her father's expert knowledge of local history. By comparison, the historical instruction she received at her elite school made her bitter: It was "intellectually thin and devoid of social intelligence." Offering no lessons on the deep past her father knew so well, it taught her "nothing at all of what was going on" around her (25–26). Mkhize, who later became a lecturer in history at Rhodes University, tried to educate herself about her ancestors, but she "did not know where to find this in the books."

One could respond to Mkhize's admission by offering a primer on research methods and tips on how to access the fixed phenomenon of "the archive." The approach of this book is more holistic and humane. It offers conversations and reminiscences about how to develop the "knowledge and skills to make meaningful connections with the world" (36).

The opening set of short chapters by Kros and Wright reviews a range of certainties that have hindered the quest for better histories. These include trust in master narratives and a reliance on stereotypes and prejudice against both African and academic ways of knowing. But this book is about connecting, not critiquing. To counter the counterproductive certainties, it encourages seekers to "ask the old people, ask the professors," look back to previous historians (especially Black historians who have often been neglected by academic researchers), pay attention to language, consider objects, and if one finds an old trunk full of documents, unpack it.

The second section of the book puts an impressive set of contemporary historians in conversation with past interlocutors of South African history: Hlonipha Mokoena on Magma Fuze, Rachel King on David Frédéric Ellenberger, Fred Morton and Jan Boeyens on Paul-Lenert Breutz, Sekibakiba Lekgoathi on


Nicholas van Warmelo, and John Wright on A.T Bryant. The interlocutors are a diverse set—a kholwa intellectual, missionary antiquarians, and apartheid officials. Each essay conveys something about the life of the men, what they researched, and how they wrote. Each author navigates around blind spots and bias to suggest the value in an incomplete and imperfect archive.

The third section of the book depicts contemporary scholars as historical explorers: Muchaparara Musemwa in environmental history, Ndokuyakhe Ndlovu in archaeology, and John Wright in the James Stuart Archive. Lize Kriel's account of her journey into "the world of Carl Hoffman and his interlocutors" is transparent about her learning curve and her dependence on others, revealing a dogged determination to follow every lead. The fourth section tracks Amanda Esterhuysen, Geoffrey Blundell, and Justine Wintjes in their explorations of rock art and archeology, which are important records of the South African past.

In case this sounds overly rainbow nation-ish, be assured that the authors address the racialization of historical authority. The book's white and Black historians tell very different stories of their paths toward the past. Like Noma-langa Mkhize, some Black contributors write of their alienation from the histories that were taught them in school. In the last section of the book, "Conflicting Opinions," Sifiso Mxolisi Ndlovu records his disappointment with rote learning that provides no critical insights. He turned to an isiZulu "African archive" to write better history. Himal Ramij expressed similar regret about the dumbing down of the subject of Mapungubwe, and by extension, deep African history, in school curricula. The essay by Grant McNulty provides another layer of complication by returning us to the history told by Noma-langa Mkhize's father. It turns out that even among the Mkhize, historians argue about the truth.

A concluding photo essay by Wintjes emphasizes the variety that is to be found among different types of archives. It valorizes the wide range of sources of South Africa's deep past and concludes, "The work of engaging with the archive is never finished." The book makes this point well, but I appreciate more the lesson that in engaging with the past and what we can know about it, we engage with each other. It reminded me of a landmark vision of history produced in a community: *Telling the Truth about History* by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob (Norton 1994).

The practice of history in Africa is full of examples of shutting others down. This still happens today. This book provides examples of human connections, sometimes deep, sometimes glancing, that allow us to improve our understanding of the past. It issues an invitation to bring ourselves with our own identities, curiosities, affordances, and burdens into conversations and to recognize the vulnerable, interested, prejudiced, hurting, and insightful other as an interlocutor. It is a call for social intelligence as a historical method.

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