Spectres of decay: Anarchival approaches to decoding the palimpsest

Nicola Deane

Africa Open Institute for Music Research and Innovation,
Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa.

nicola.deane@gmail.com (ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5524-4403)

ABSTRACT

In my practice-based research for the project, *Decay without mourning: Future-thinking heritage practices*, I employ decentering strategies to uncover aesthetic-conceptual potential within the marginalised material ruins of an archive. This involves scrutinising visual and sonic traces of decay to depict the "anarchival impetus" – that which threatens the archive may paradoxically liberate the captures of the past from the colonial confines of their conservation. In this article, I discuss my artistic exploration of decay across three personal collections of an enthusiast, an archivist, and a photographer. The Hidden Years Music Archive (HYMA) documents an alternative view of the South African music scene from the mid-1960s to the early 2000s, reflecting the countercultural impulse against apartheid. The Decay Anarchive consists of discarded elements of processing artefacts within HYMA while being incorporated into the Documentation Centre for Music (DOMUS) at Stellenbosch University. Finally, a collection of outdated photographic paper provided the basis for producing a range of lumen print experiments in collaboration with Jurie Senekal titled *Spectres of decay I* (2023). This series of chance compositions in a time-based medium captures the spectral qualities of archival detritus as fabricated palimpsests that illuminate the trajectory of decay.

Keywords: decentering, decay, anarchival materials, cultural heritage, palimpsest.

Dates:
Received: 2024-08-26
Accepted: 2025-02-13
Published: 2025-05-02

Published by

SCHOOL OF THE ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

Original research

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2617-3255/2025/n39a2

Introduction

> Like an unfinished symphony, culture is a work of art never meant to be completed. Its expressiveness demands that it be endlessly recreated and that its appreciation derive from this process of creation (Guss 1989:67).

In this article, I will trace my artistic research engagement with decayed elements from the Hidden Years Music Archive at Stellenbosch University, undertaken as part of the larger project, *Decay without mourning: Future-thinking heritage practices.* This broader initiative examines decay across heritage sites and communities in South Africa, Brazil, Japan, and Antarctica. I explore the aesthetic and conceptual potential of visual and sonic decay within the archive, seeking to translate the encoded processes of deterioration inherent in vibrant (archival) matter. Central to this inquiry is the concept of an "anarchival[1] impetus" – the idea that what threatens the archive may paradoxically liberate its contents from the colonial confines of conservation. By "anarchival," I consider the prefix *an-* (from the Greek, indicating "not, without") to imply matter without or beyond the archive. This includes what is often considered superfluous, disruptive, or counter to archival norms. I propose that adopting this anarchival perspective enables fresh contemplation of official records, challenging conventional narratives while revealing new possibilities for engagement with the past.

> The moment we record things they become spectral. Often the spectrality is totally invisible to us – such is the illusion of presence in our creations. As time goes by and the medium breaks down, we notice ghosts emerging, before eventually they too disappear, as the matter that once preserved their trace so well, is exorcised by natural decay (Coldwell 2021).

From my *domestic decentering* of the archive (in my doctoral research) to *decoding decay* in the archive (of my current research) – I re-assess cultural heritage collections in terms of palimpsestic decompositions of time-space. Through their *TimeSpace* collection, Jon May and Nigel Thrift (2003:i) challenge us 'to think in terms of neither only time or space but a multi-dimensional, partial and uneven TimeSpace,' arguing that temporality is neither linear nor singular but relational and dynamic. The palimpsest embodies the concept of layered time, where various traces of the past remain visible and interact with the present, creating a multi-temporal surface with which to engage. It is a dynamic phenomenon since it is continually rewritten by human and nonhuman forces, including decay, material changes and reinterpretation. In her introduction to 'Palimpsests and "Palimpsestuous" Reinscriptions,' Raeleen Chai-Elsholz (2011:1-2) notes that '[e]rasure is a prerequisite of reinscription, and so it may be said that destruction paves the way for re-creation. Thus the palimpsest is an image of the process of adaptation, translation, and rewriting'. Decay

in the archive relates beautifully to this notion of process as a temporal agent inscribing new layers onto the palimpsest.

Archival records carry many traces and layers of time made visible and audible through natural aesthetic phenomena, such as the chemical reactions between substances of poorly preserved film that produce painterly effects upon the surface of the recorded image (as seen in Figure 1 from the archive below), or the crackle, hiss and pop sound effects of surface noise upon vinyl records – that inform our perception of the past in (relation to) the present. These organically grown phenomena accrue upon the surfaces of the materials while at the same time erasing material information, thereby modifying what one may read and understand of the record.

FIGURE Nº 1

David Marks, decayed photographic negative, 35mm. Undated. From Hidden Years Music Archive, Documentation Centre for Music, Stellenbosch University. Courtesy of David Marks.

The strata of evidence of this constant transformation of the record (from the microscopic to the catastrophic) informs our sense of security in the future reading *our* remains, just as we now read the layered traces of our past. These palimpsestic traces of erasure and return allow us to decode and re-compose the messages for the future.

From decentering to decay in the archive

I begin with a reference to an earlier work of mine, from my doctoral study, *Decentering the Archive: Visual fabrications of sonic memories*, that I will contextualise[2] in this introduction to establish my "decentred" approach to reading the archive through its marginalia and their surfaces. When I was invited in 2016 as a visual artist into an archive of music-related materials to develop a research project, I chose not to engage with the material via the given organising frame of the archive, namely the catalogue and finding aids. This was in part to do with my instinct as an artist to flirt subversively with chance and chaos in the face of order, and in another part to do with the decolonising spirit that emerged from the student protests of 2015 across South Africa, with the #FeesMustFall and Open Stellenbosch movements.

With that context in mind, along with the theoretical debates around decolonising museums and archives that were roiling at the time, I considered the given organising frame to be an inappropriate means to critically and creatively engage with the archive, since the call for *decolonising archives* requires, 'recognising that the seemingly neutral Western criteria and classifications are in fact tools for maintaining the role of an archive as an imperial project of domination' (*L'Internationale Online* 2016:5).[3] Archives in South Africa still bear evidence of the wounds, oppressions, and exclusions bound to its colonial and apartheid history.

The archive of my doctoral study is DOMUS (Documentation Centre for Music), situated in the music library of the University of Stellenbosch – a repository for various collections[4] related to music made/played/recorded in South Africa. In 1976, the same year the Soweto Riots took place, the University purchased the private collection of British emigrant Michael Scott,[5] which sowed the seeds within the Music Department to create a music archive to house such special collections. In 2005, Professor Stephanus Muller founded DOMUS with the intention of collating the various collections under one roof, formally facilitating the specialised handling and preservation of music materials, and actively expanding its collections.[6] This substantially enlarged archive now stores various fragments and fabrics of sound, cyphers, scores – compositions of text/image/sound and captured time that I endeavoured to re-process through my art practice to evoke a subversive and (de)constructive site for reflecting on cultural heritage.

In pursuing a decolonial approach[7] to reading the archive, that is, going *against* rather than along the archival grain while considering the (an)archival (re-)turn, I chose to re-imagine the frame via the process of *decentering*[8] it. Following the denotative path, to "decentre" is, 'to disconnect from practical or theoretical assumptions of origin, priority, or essence' (Merriam-Webster), while the structuring practice of archivisation assumes

priority or focus based on what is present, explicit and deemed essential – thus a *decentering of the archive* allows the option of shifting focus to what is *absent, implicit,* and *inessential*. From a decolonial perspective, the call for decentering the official archive involves questioning traditional value systems based on established power structures, thereby challenging the dominant Western perspective of what counts as important cultural artefacts and narratives. It entails recognising and elevating marginalised voices and alternative perspectives in the archive.[9]

My "delinked" stance on cultural heritage and the archive considered the epistemological position and creative potential of "border thinking"[10] in the drive to reshuffle representations and expectations. I shift focus from the assumed centre (and privileged subject) to the overlooked or undervalued margins via artistic recontextualisations of material, in order to stage a 'deterritorialization' (Deleuze & Guattari 1977) of the archive and re-invest it with an ability to *bleed* – to traverse the rigid taxonomies and segregated categories of the old order's process of storing records of social, cultural, and political practices.

Thinking (and doing) from the borders or margins, as opposed to the centre, expands our discovery of the unknown and initiates alternative ways of knowing, being, expressing, and becoming. The practical purpose of a border is to outline and define any territory, space, or body separating the inside from the outside. But the border zone is potentially a productive one, neither inside nor outside; it facilitates movement in either direction, as the semi-permeable Möbius membrane[11] that channels symbiotic relations[12] between inner and outer elements, facilitating 'contamination as collaboration' (Tsing 2015). I consider such a border-membrane to exist on the surface of the material record, since it carries the traces of touch and interference – it carries the history of its handling as well as the process of its decay as it transforms through time. Erik Ketelaar (2001:138) observes the membranic nature and potential of the archive:

> No longer can we regard the record as an artifact with fixed boundaries of contents and contexts. In a post-traditional view – reinforced by the challenges of the electronic records – the record is a 'mediated and ever-changing construction. It is open yet enclosed, it is "membranic", the membrane allowing the infusing and exhaling of values which are embedded in each and every activation.

Ketelaar (2001:138-139) emphasises the power of the archive as a 'repository of meanings,' as he reminds us that 'the archive, by Jacques Derrida's thinking, is not just a sheltering of the past: it is an anticipation of the future'. I used the metaphor of the membrane in my doctoral study to bridge the "membranic archive" with the tympanic membrane of the ear, which facilitates hearing – the opening through which sound and music penetrate the body, as a productive border zone to reflect upon. I produced a series of audio-visual studies playing with the concept of a *decentred membranic archive* continuously

enfolding within and without the official/traditional archive, while reflecting on the words of Edmond Jabès (1984:63), 'through the ear, we shall enter the invisibility of things'. My decentering strategies included de-composing, and reimagining given material, to create different passages of theoretical engagement through *fragments, surfaces, intimacies, noise* and *masks*.

On the Passage of a Few Ants Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time (2018) is a short film study of the *surfaces* of the archive – the outer skins of the contents and containers of archival records: https://vimeo.com/264413165

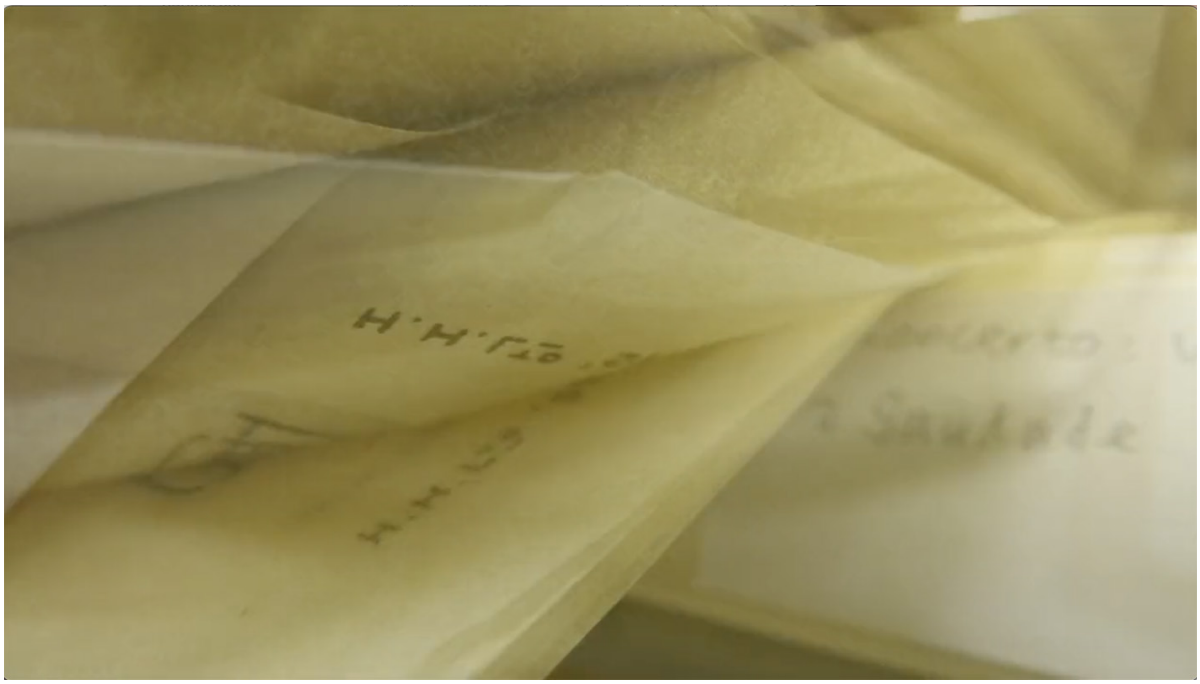

FIGURE **Nº 2**

Nicola Deane, still from *On the Passage of a Few Ants Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time*, 2018, [HDV], (13:33).

As a surface reconnaissance of DOMUS, this passage provides a circuit to read the archive by in its movement through the aisles of the main storeroom. *This extreme close-up readin*g of archival matter in *visual* terms – the edges in ruin; the fading ink of various inscriptions; the folds; cracks; spaces between; the dust and decay – has produced a literal skimming of the surfaces to create an expanded, all-encompassing view of the minute-scale terms of their photographic capture.

A surface reading of the *sonic* contents of the archive, however, produced a discontent mix of waltz, choral folk, political speech, opera, and over-amplified surface noise in the

first movement of the soundtrack.[13] The superficial clarity of the seen archive stands in stark contrast to the audio haziness of the *heard* archive, especially in terms of my democratic mix of the samples in terms of their sound levels, making distinctions between tracks barely audible so that they play together in muted discord, like a sonic-palimpsest.

In this process of developing my doctoral study as a "stitch-up" of all my "creative disruptions" of the archive I reflected on the idea of *dehiscence*[14] or rupture in the archive, along with the conceptual manipulation of *masking*, taking inspiration from different images of *emergence* such as the painting term *pentimento* whereby previous marks or forms emerge by the effects of time on the materials of painting like ghostly discarded traces of the process of becoming; similar to the *palimpsest* where the traces of *erasure*, known as *scriptio anterior* (former writing), emerge due to the gradual deterioration of the materials of the message; in contrast to the medical/biological term *dehiscence* whereby the emergence occurs through pressure and rupture. I continue these threads of erasure, rupture or emergence in the archive in my current research through the lens of *decay*.

Decay & I ... the domestic archive

What is decay to me? What immediately comes to mind is death-in-progress via the most familiar kitchen sink view of my little bucket of organics destined for the compost heap – prone to thriving in warm conditions to the point of bubbling over. I observe the organic developments with every additional layer by sight and smell, to admire the unstoppable forces of material becoming (acrid, fermenting) *other*, and delight in the awareness that energy is kept in motion and continuously recycled through that rapid and radical transformation of matter, exhibiting *life*-in-progress. On less chipper days, the abject dimension of this bucket of living death overwhelms and nauseates me – focussing my attention on all the visible traces of life leaking or breaking down. If it's this rotten on the microcosmic level, what chance has the macrocosm got? This domesticated existential quiver invariably shifts my thinking to decay in the archive.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966:31) reminds us that the fear of decay is 'often rooted in our desire for purity and order … [that] are themselves products of social and cultural processes that are constantly in flux'. The more negative perception of the deterioration process exists in the ordered world of conservation and preservation of material heritage, which abides by care-taking protocols to salvage original records and maximise their longevity, insisting that decay be suppressed for fear of contamination, damage, and loss within collections. Likewise, in the world of domestication, any agents threatening to contaminate areas of communal consumption must be seized, sanitised, and in some

cases blessed, to stay on the right side of that fragile border between order and chaos, purity and danger, as Douglas (1966:30) clarifies, 'the taboo on decay is not just a reflection of our fear of death, but also a reflection of our fear of change and the unknown'.

In Anne McClintock's (1995:168) chapter, 'Empire of the Home', she outlines the influence that the colonial contest had – through the mapping, administrating and archiving of occupied territories – on structuring the domestic front whereby space 'was mapped as a hierarchy of specialized and distinct boundaries that need constant and scrupulous policing'. McClintock (1995:170) affirms, 'Cleaning is not inherently meaningful; it creates meaning through the demarcation of boundaries. Domestic labour *creates* social value, segregating dirt from hygiene, order from disorder'. However, from the perspective of our present-day socio-economic challenges, including ecological degradation, Anna Tsing (2015:27-28), argues for *contamination as collaboration* in her book *The mushroom at the end of the world* when she reminds us that we are undeniably 'contaminated by our encounters; they change who we are … Everyone carries a history of contamination; purity is not an option,' since it is the inevitable process for 'livable collaborations … working across difference' amongst every species for the purpose of survival. Evolutionary biologist Lynn Margulis (1999:14-15) regards our entire species' synergistic emanation from the microcosm and the microbial world informing our survival, '[a] major theme of the microbial drama is the emergence of individuality from the community interactions of once-independent actors … The tendency of "independent" life is to bind together and reemerge in a new wholeness at a higher, larger level of organization'.

Here it is useful to think of the body as an archive (and as metaphor for the archive), since microbes reside within and on the human body – just as the body stores various active cultures to maintain a healthy operating system during a lifetime, it also stores latent microbes that drive the decay process of the body upon death, to complete the cycle of return.[15] While an archive stores cultures to maintain a society's enduring relationship to its heritage, it also houses various microbic activities upon the organic materials of the records, registered in samples of the air and surfaces of various artefacts within the storage spaces of the archive. The passage of time is made visible by and through decay in the archive. Decay is subtly active and never-ending. Nothing ever disappears completely. Decay blooms and dissipates *steadily*. There are only more layers and sub-atomic levels of processes that break down matter. The archive is never static, whole or complete. An archive cannot contain an entire life, or an entire history, there will always be missing, dispersed, or forever lost parts – the lacunae of the archive – whether those holes are due to an oversight (in terms of leaving out the perspectives of those on the margins of the "main event" history: the possessed and dispossessed; the colonised and domesticated; the silenced and culturally-appropriated), or due to the activities of those other agents of erasure, the out-of-site-bodies and their processes of

digesting matter, leaving holes and ruins in their wake, that is, the insect and mould communities quietly thriving in the deep recesses of any collection within any archive.

Fragments of the anarchival impetus

In a manner analogous to the way our brain fills in the gaps between still frames to perceive subject and time in motion of a film at the cinema, the reader of records of the archive fills the gaps between the individual fragments of stored matter to complete a chronological perspective of the past – fragments add up to a history. It is a projection in the present of the interrupted signals and incomplete captures of the past strung together for a continuous sense of time, but it is a *fabricated continuity*, a backwards projection, since we can never completely recapture the original context of the relic. As Louis Armand (2023:74) beautifully puts it, 'the past is *always-already* a work – a texture or fabric or web – of hallucinations'.

The first issue of *Mnemoscape Magazine: The Anarchival Impulse* (2014), invites 'readings and interpretations of archives that challenge the pitfalls and dangers of methodological fetishisms, linear narratives and prescriptive chronological orders' and includes an article by Lucy Bayley, Ben Cranfield, and Anne Massey, in which the writers argue for disrupting the archive by extending the possible connections between fragments across time and space to allow obscured narratives to emerge. Cranfield (2014) asks, 'Who has the right to tell, re-tell, not-to-tell, forget, remember or re-claim?' He considers Derrida's analysis of the duality of the archive (destructive *and* generative), then proffers that (Cranfield 2014):

> It is the archival fragment – recalcitrant, but mute, monumental in its partiality. The document retrieved after twenty years, after forty years, recovered from oblivion, is not fungible, in that its status is one of specific materiality. The archival fragment asks us to forget its origins and to revel in its partiality, in a state, perhaps, as Sven Spieker notes, of play. The fugitive fragment, so freed, runs ludically through the archive, opening up potential futures and possible pasts.

Decay's progress through decline eats away at surfaces; it fragments, merges, separates, modifies, or obscures layers of information. Decay disrupts the archive and disturbs the status quo, but does it yield a field of play? I believe the border zone/membrane potentiates a playful state-of-decay, which I actuate through artistic experimentation with anarchival materials from a particular collection within DOMUS, the Hidden Years Music Archive – an immense archive that captures an alternative view of the South African live music scene from the mid-1960s up to the early 2000s reflecting the countercultural impulse against apartheid. From its domesticated inception, this collection has endured the

detrimental factors of its informal storage conditions and amateur handling practices, including high humidity, temperature fluctuations, and the infiltration of creatures, fungi and mould, before it was donated by David Marks to Stellenbosch University in 2013.[16] These destructive forces have caused significant decay and transformation of the collected objects.

I entered the DECAY project as an artistic researcher to find ways to work creatively with the discarded elements of the archival processing of an immense collection[17] – the case of a personal archive being incorporated into a public institutional archive. The container of superfluous matter that I was invited to survey and re-imagine a purpose for included the following:

- two glass bottles of densely packed dust
- a ¼" open reel audiotape
- an open box crammed full of rusted hand-pressed button badges
- a slide box labelled: DRAKENSBERG
- a box labelled: RARE SLIDES 16mm FILM MAKHOS 1, that housed another ¼" open reel audiotape and box of empty slides upon a bed of silica-gel beads
- a small tin containing a tightly bound cluster of rusted staples and paperclips
- a plastic bag of a much larger knotted mass of equally rusty fasteners
- another bag including wooden pegs
- a relic boxed film reel suffering from vinegar-syndrome
- a plastic bag containing a paper parcel of cannabis
- ten plastic folders of mould-stained papers of various documents, lyrics, and letters
- an archival box containing a postcard collection
- an archival box of negatives and slides

This assemblage of decaying detritus problematised the evaluation and preservation interests of the archive, and yet the archivist could not bring herself to get rid of it. Perhaps she sensed some yet unknown value or purpose within the debris, of an *other* importance,

or perhaps she was holding on to the minor ruin-remains of a massive archival process – a project held close to the heart for a decade of her life, after all, deeply *significant*.

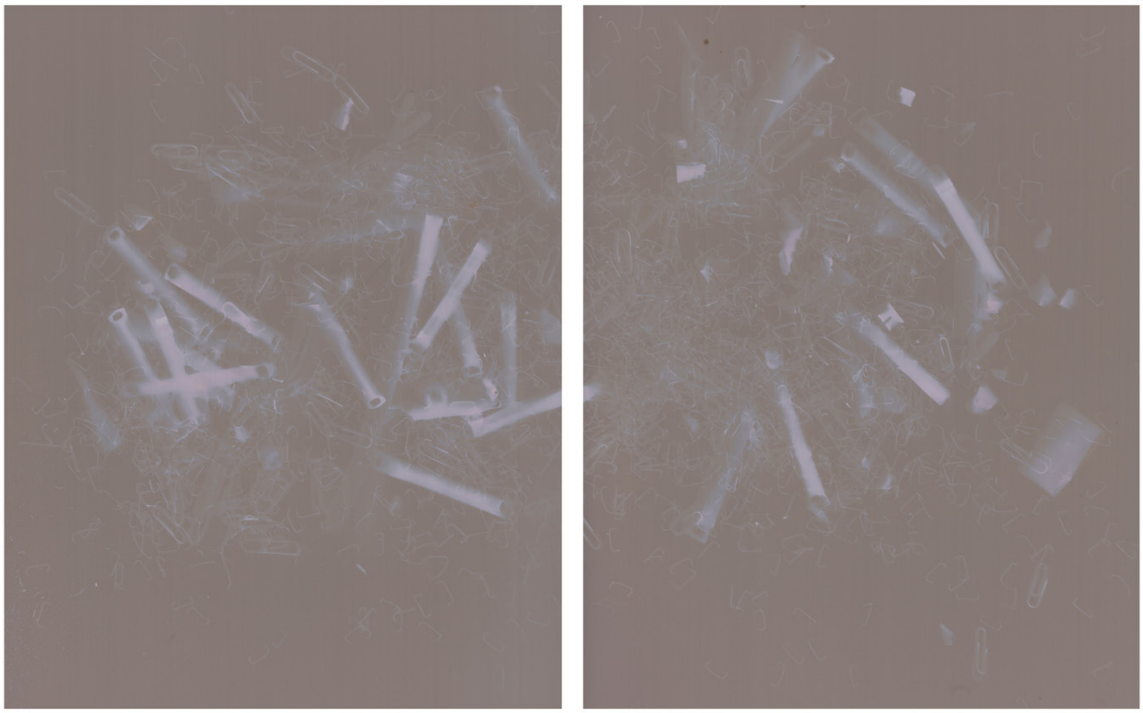

FIGURE **Nº 3**

Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal, *The gentle unfastening of time after time*, 2003. Lumen print diptych, 20 x 16 inch photopaper. Courtesy of Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal.

Through their work with archives, Kate Hennessy and Trudi Lynn Smith (2018:143) identify the 'anarchival properties' of archives as a set of interrelated processes that manage to escape the putative preservation drive. Their research develops around their term 'anarchival materiality' which they proclaim, 'exceeds the order of things. It presents weird phenomena that throw a wrench into human desire for permanence and order [and] is a powerful reminder of the generative force of entropy in archives' (Hennessy & Smith 2018:143).

I consider the visual and sonic signs of decay in the archive as representative of the *anarchival forces* at play, beyond the archivist's control, despite adherence to the principles of good preservation practice. By foregrounding these marginalised elements that persist and by decoding, activating and re-framing their aesthetic potential, I propose a decentered approach to the standard value systems applied in heritage practices – typically driven to centre the *contents* of the material and fix them accordingly. As socio-political climates shift, the value systems of the past are reassessed; I am not arguing against preservation

altogether, but rather, for the protocols to be expanded in considering alternative approaches to activating and recollecting cultural resonances.

Reading the archive in this decentered way through anarchival and abject material makes one aware of the infinite layers of contents and contexts available when all perspectives (nonhuman included) are engaged with. For example, mould is considered a marginal menace to the primary contents of a collection since it threatens to spoil them, but value might be regained or even elevated by refocusing on the aesthetic forms of their ruination. Another marginal example would be the silverfish that feast on the glue, sugar, and starch elements that make up the records, who may live up to eight years, and are essentially *intimates* of the archive, insiders furtively feeding while degrading its fundament. This network of frictions and relations instigated a series of chance compositions in the time-based medium of lumen printing to capture the spectral qualities of detritus as image-text palimpsests.

Spectres of decay: Signifiers floating to entropy

Spectres of decay I (2023) is a series of Giclée prints from a range of lumen print experiments by myself in collaboration[18] with photographer Jurie Senekal, which was exhibited at the Stellenbosch University Museum in November 2023.

FIGURE **Nº 4**

Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal, *Spectres of decay* I, 2023. Giclée print series. Installation view approx. 2m x 10m . Stellenbosch University Museum. Courtesy of Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal.

This anarchival investigation plays with the temporality of the lumen printing process[19] to explore the traces and markers of time passing. The contact print impressions require UV light exposure so the artefacts are brought outdoors for their shadows to be transferred by the sun onto vintage photographic paper to produce unusual visual effects of an unpredictable process. The productive element of chance lies in the interaction between *light, form* (of the decay-object and its transparency), *chemical coating* (of the paper in varying stages of expiration), and *time* (of exposure) to cast a radiant impression of vibrant (anarchival) matter – capturing what political theorist Jane Bennett (2010:6) identifies in her theory of vital materialism as *thing-power*: 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle' which she argues, 'draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings or purpose they express or serve' (Bennett 2010:20).

The range of photographic paper types used for this series stems from the personal archive of Jurie Senekal, whose collection was made between 1955-2000, the oldest being a 1955 box of Agfa Brovira Crystal paper.

FIGURE **Nº 5**

Range of photographic papers from Senekal's collection, 1955-2000. Courtesy of Jurie Senekal.

The medium of outdated paper provides significance as another form of decay – when light sensitive silver gelatin paper expires, it may continue to produce a good tonal range in a print but otherwise it will appear grey and flat, this is generally referred to as "age fog" – what would be considered unusable by industry standards that apply expiry dates to products, is repurposed, re-evaluated for another kind of capturing practice (outside of the dark room), relying on natural phenomena inter(e)acting in time.

FIGURE **Nº 6**

Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal, *Illuminated manuscripts I – III*, 2023. Lumen print series, sizes variable. Courtesy of Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal.

What connects the three personal collections mentioned here – of the collector, the archivist, and the photographer – is that none of them could bring themselves to throw the surplus detritus away, they were all holding on to physical material that represented something more or held potential beyond their immediate ken, except for the intuitive knowledge that it was somehow valuable. The marginalised materials featured in this series, which were kept in dark, deep, and damp recesses of the domestic archive,[20] were brought out into the harsh South African sun – their outlines, traces of contents and shadows then became alchemically imprinted.

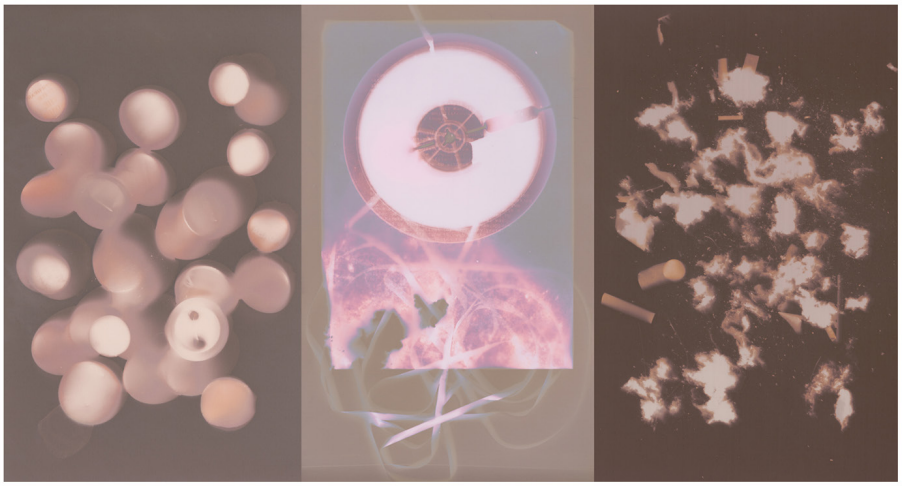

FIGURE Nº 7

Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal, *Buttons, reel & dust,* 2023. Lumen print series, sizes variable. Courtesy of Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal.

Another uncontrollable aspect of the process lies in the instability of the print images since the silver gelatin photo paper ultimately fades and darkens unless it is chemically preserved by fixative, but this may effectively bleach out the extraordinary array of colours that are generated by the unique conditions of the printmaking process (the sunlight exposure bringing out the latent colour of the black-and-white paper).

FIGURE Nº 8

Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal, *Anarchival fragments I – III,* 2023. Lumen print series, sizes variable. Courtesy of Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal.

We therefore choose not to fix the lumen prints but rather to embrace the ephemerality of this image-making process, which masks to abstraction the actual material status of the surplus-detritus of the archive in order to *unmask* other forms and traces. This process has provided a way for reinscribing archival matter to uncover alternative levels of heritage value, just as one decodes a palimpsest carrying different layers of information, different layers of time. It engages what I call a *masking methodology*[21] of abstracting the actual, of visualising the material (artefacts), of decoding, modifying and recoding information – in this case, a literal flattening of the items into two-dimensional representations via the medium of light, presenting a new form of materiality bearing different traces of information – as it translates across media, into fabricated palimpsests.

The commercially outdated photographic paper embeds more decay into the practice, 'flattening' the multiple levels of decayed evidence. For instance, the visible signs of decay spoiling paper documents, are transformed and flattened in its lumen print abstraction (pictured below). Still, the decay continues, is transposed through the image decay as it is not fixed – which serves the process of recoding decay, whereby one form of decay information is modified and recoded into another. What we initially expected the process to produce was a clean collection of interesting prints that could be fixed; what actually developed was a set of effects that could *not* be kept in their original state and would follow their own unique decay path.[22]

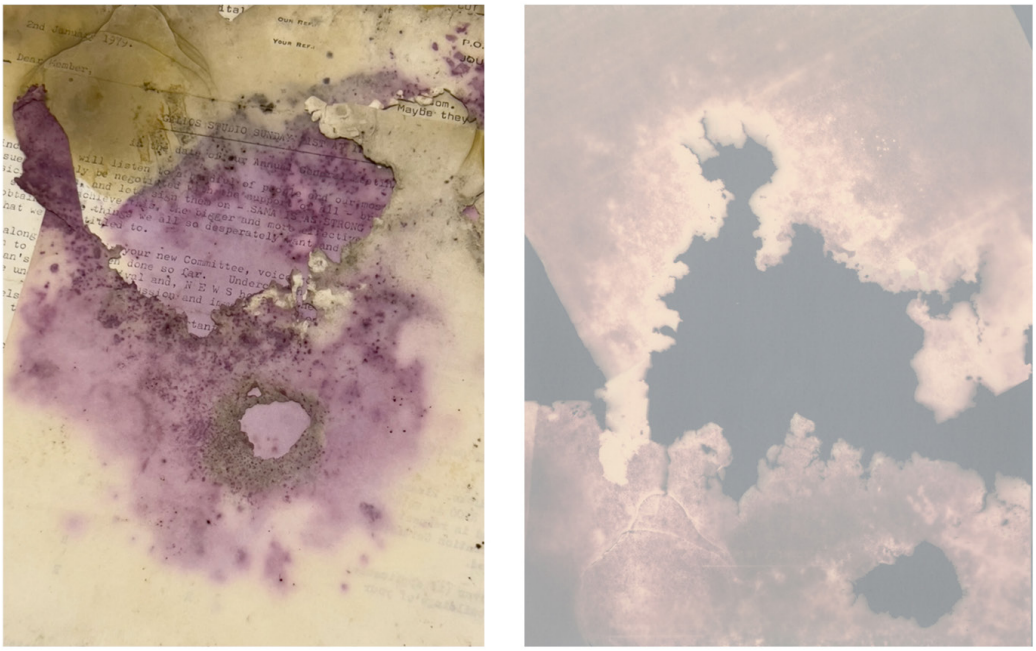

FIGURE **Nº 9**

Spoiled documents from the Decay Anarchive (left) translated to lumen print (right). *Fragment*, 2023, 20 x 16 inch photopaper. Courtesy of Nicola Deane and Jurie Senekal.

The lumen print series provides traces of an archival reality, but *a trace* is not a real presence according to Derrida (1973:156-157), '[it] is rather a simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces and refers beyond itself … as simultaneously traced and effaced, simultaneously alive and dead'. This time-based process, from the capturing to the fading of these image-inscriptions, is appropriate to the study since decay keeps us in touch with time – as a frame through which to perceive the organic side effects of its passing, the gradual ageing and breakdown of matter and the inevitable fading or loss of information. Time splits, according to Elizabeth Grosz's (2012:149) reading of Henri Bergson, 'into two trajectories: one virtual, the other actual; one that makes the present pass, and the other that preserves itself as past while still part of the present. One forms memory, the other perception; one is oriented towards reminiscence and the past, the other opens out to anticipation and the unknowable future'.

Decoding decay as a form of historical documentation

If decay inhabits the border membrane between the original content of the record and the outside world across time and space into the present, then that zone of trace-making provides a *coding system* of both what has passed and what is still to come. Decay signals the future and advances renewed contexts, through the fundamental breaking down of all things (materials/systems) and the endurance of a vital impetus – or *élan vital,* which Bergson linked with consciousness in *Creative evolution* (1911) – which inevitably and continually breeds new forms amongst the detritus through time. Supposing that evolution is 'a creation unceasingly renewed,' as Bergson (1911:103) argues, 'it creates, as it goes on, not only the forms of life, but the ideas that will enable the intellect to understand it, the terms which will serve to express it … its future overflows its present', *decay as code* imbues continuity across the lines, patterns and pathways of things, beings, and life. Mould presents growth out of apparently nothing and facilitates the patterns of further growth, which we observe in the timelapse captures of archival swab samples to inform our artistic explorations in making visible (and audible) the anarchival forces that transfigure archives.

Decay erases as it propels itself, making marks along the way, decay consumes and excretes, destroys and builds, detracts and sustains, emanates and resonates. Multiple levels of information are encoded in decay – in both the material and immaterial signs of decay. Decay presents progress *and* decline simultaneously, building while breaking down, operating in that productive border zone between living and dying as the site for regeneration – the *palimpsest*. It's the falling apart that allows us to carry on looking – to really look through the evidence of decay of what *was* to what *is*, that change is real and

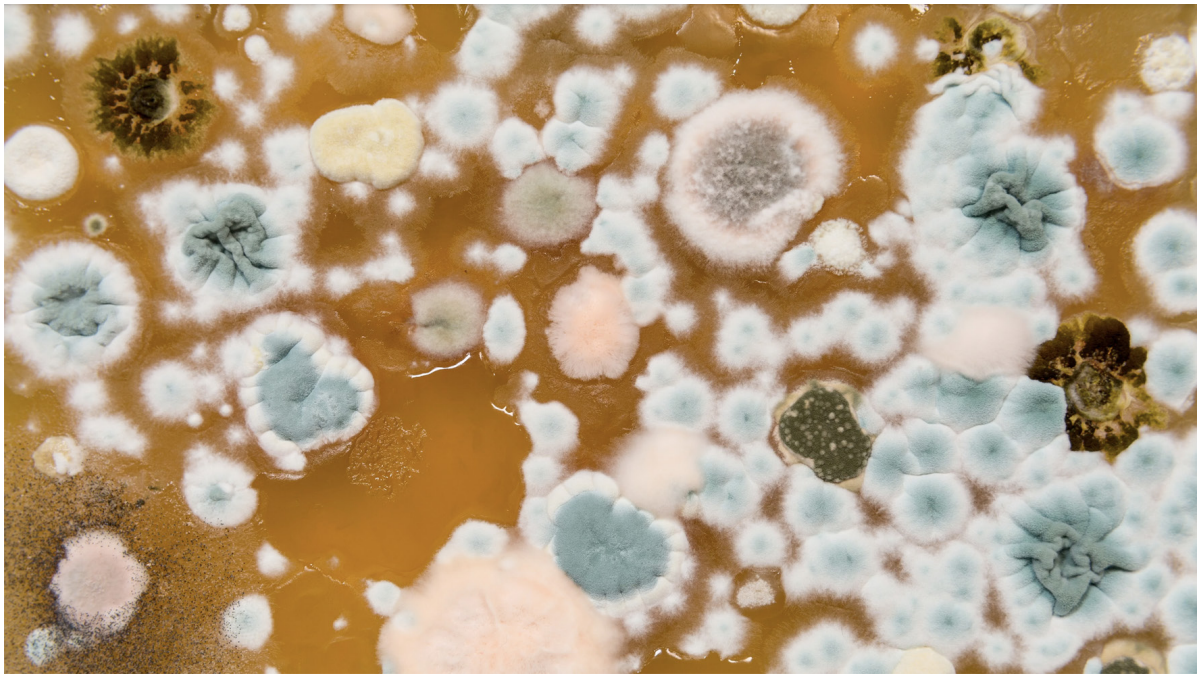

FIGURE **Nº 10**

Anarchival samples collaborating, 2023. Still from timelapse video (1:11). Courtesy of Jurie Senekal and Karen Jacobs Laboratory, Stellenbosch University.

visible across time – to acknowledge its temporal depth. As David Gross (2002:36) points out the paradox of objects 'deserted by capitalism':

> they have to fall into desuetude at one level in order to come more fully into their own at another. Only when they are degraded or discardable (in market terms) do objects at last begin to reveal their true nature.

It is apparent that the organic relations between the various elements, or *chance operations*[23] of the decay process upon materials, are unceasing and unpredictable, and they produce unusual effects that enrich the record by adding aesthetic value – as on photographic negatives presenting complex visual phenomena. By my own observations of the materials stored within archives, evidence of what has been lost bears an aesthetic tracking of the passage of time upon the surface of the record, hence the aged patina (occupying that frayed border zone), while effectively arousing nostalgia,[24] also creates a buffer or filter by which to gaze unflinchingly upon the more intimate or disturbing visions from the past. Here, the archive allows access to process and possible reconciliation with the traumas of the past through the anarchival materiality of decay.

In his article 'Ruin, archive and the time of cinema: Peter Delpeut's lyrical nitrate', André Habib (2006:136) suggests that the fragment 'has become a mode of knowledge and of

poetic expression, carrying its own history,' and posits that 'a fragment of film is often more poetic and more historically charged than a restored, pristine copy of the same film'. Habib (2006:136) goes on to refer to the film artefact in terms of the aesthetic or poetry of ruins, 'here it is the dirt deposits, scratches and colour blots that signal the passage of time, and its ruinous effect' that impact our senses of perception, 'what creates the emotion is not the objective history of film but time's presence, which the archive – fragmented, in ruin – can represent'.

Perceiving value in the after-effects of decay processes upon materials allows us to reassess our expectations of the records and possibly abandon our expectations of a perfectly preserved and representable past, since heritage is never stable or fixed. It involves re-evaluating the material status of the artefact as dynamic – responsive to organic processes, analogous with the passage of time. This includes acknowledging decay as a (coded) form of ongoing historical documentation, when considering the production of cultural memory as 'an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continually modified and redescribed even as it continues to shape the future' (Bal, Crewe & Spitzer 1999:vii).

Miles Ogborn (2004:240) reports on the 'nature' of cultural memory as 'chemical and biological' since archives, 'the central cortices of social formations of print and the written world, are ecologies where the materials of remembrance are living, dying, and being devoured'. In terms of the organic interference of decay upon heritage materials Caitlin DeSilvey (2006:329) considers memory to be, 'based on chance and imagination as much as evidence and explanation; forgetting brought on by decay allows for a different form of recollection [that] fosters an acknowledgement of agencies usually excluded from the work of interpretation'. As such DeSilvey (2006:323) maintains that decay 'reveals itself not (only) as erasure but as process that can be generative of a different kind of knowledge', and so, by reframing and recontextualising decay as an inherent process of archivisation bearing alternative epistemological potential, it becomes possible to reimagine one's relationship to the past in less Anthropocentric terms and radically turn the project of archiving to future-thinking practices – from preserving the past to safeguarding the future.

Conclusion

My reflection upon decay from my domesticated position follows a path from the bucket of vegetable remains at my kitchen sink to the forgotten ginger in my fruit bowl colonised by *Penicillium brevicompactum* (or is it *Cladosporium sphaerospermum*?), along to the growing grime of *Aspergillus niger* in the corner of the shower, and finally, up to the

Stachybotrys chartarum stain on the lounge ceiling signalling a sporous invasion. This has led me to read the mould growth of the archive samples from a counter-preservation perspective, since it is all too familiar within the domestic realm of dealing with fresh, live, dead or decaying matter. That bucket for compost holds a lively archive of decay. My trusted relation to the archive is always personal, always intimate. The anarchival allows the personal, through the continuous spillage of the archive, to seep into the objective institutional space. In the case of the Hidden Years collection, the inextricable personal history of the collector running through it is now fully incorporated and made available for public consumption. This spillage is valuable, just as the root of artistic practice within the project is driven by personal spillage from the unconscious, towards the project of decoding and recoding heritage.

Decentering the archive through the anarchival medium of decay proposes a post-preservation perspective that foregrounds the vibrant materiality of cultural artefacts and highlights the ephemerality of cultural production, thereby challenging the assumption that heritage objects should be fixed to resist their organic decline. It unmasks other modes of decoding cultural artefacts, paying closer attention to the subtler continuities within the hidden recesses of collected heritage that defy our best efforts to suspend time in capsules salvaged for the future.

What might decay-centred heritage look and sound like, and what hidden knowledge might it reveal? Archiving has always been occupied with preserving the past – but now, in such unstable, uncertain times, there is the need for a radical paradigm shift in which *decay* is key. Registering the vibrant and contested nature of cultural heritage[25] via an expanded decay perspective may transform preservation protocols for the future and its territories of intangible, transient, and ephemeral heritage. Just as dynamic and evolving as the organic processes upon matter across time-space, anarchival forces will endlessly transform and encode (re)collections.

This anarchival experiment in the art-making process has shown decay to be subtly active and never-ending, unpredictable and surprising – decay is a steadily dynamic process. The archive is never static, whole, or complete – an archive cannot contain an entire life or an entire history, there will always be missing, dispersed, or forever lost parts, but time is made visible through decay in the archive. These three collections of intimate detritus have been transformed through processes of decay, used for artistic purposes that will follow their own trajectory of decay to complete the relational (Möbius) loop. Begin again.

Acknowledgements

This article is based on work funded by the Riksbanken Jubileumsfond as part of the *Global Issues* call by the Volkswagen Foundation. Thank you to Prof. Lizabé Lambrechts for her invaluable insights and support in the writing up of my research process.

Notes

1. According to Hal Foster (2004:5) the 'anarchival' describes an archival impulse that is more concerned with 'obscure traces' than with 'absolute origins.' He argues that archival artists' work of this type of drive not only draws on 'informal archives but produces them as well, and does so in a way that underscores the nature of all archival materials as found yet constructed, factual yet fictive, public yet private' (Foster 2004:5).

2. This contextualisation is derived from my PhD featured in the online publication *herri #5* that you may navigate from the following link: https://herri.org.za/5/nicola-deane-decentering-archive/
(click red block arrow on middle right of page to access different chapters of the dissertation)

3. The call to decolonise archives encourages the repatriation of cultural heritage items, the development of ethical guidelines for archival practices, and the inclusion of multiple perspectives in the representation and interpretation of archival materials, to create more just and equitable archival systems that reflect the true complexity and diversity of human experiences. A key aim is to challenge existing power structures and contribute to the process of healing historical wounds caused by colonialism, oppression and segregation. For a broad range of discussions on decolonising practices see *L'Internationale Online* publications: *Decolonising Museums* (2015) and *Decolonising Archives* (2016).

4. More than 70 collections, including the Hidden Years Music Archive, which is the research site for the DECAY project.

5. An English conductor and lieutenant commander of the Royal Navy who emigrated to South Africa after the Second World War, and meticulously built his rich, however Eurocentric, collection of books, music and recordings over about three decades. See Ross (2007).

6. Muller's preservation drive envisioned DOMUS as an active collecting archive of South African music material, with the purpose of expanding and diversifying the existing collections dominated by Western art music perspectives and as an institute enabling innovative research practices and collaborations. For an in-depth account of the creation of DOMUS, its collection policy, and public programmes, see Lambrechts (2020).

7. Persuaded by the decolonial fever of the time and Walter Mignolo's authority on the subject, his terms 'epistemic de-linking' and 'border thinking' informed the building blocks of my doctoral research: 'De-linking requires analysis of the making and re-making of the imperial and colonial differences and it requires visions and strategies for the implementation of border thinking leading to de-colonization of knowledge and of being' (Mignolo 2007:498).

8. The theory of decentering is often used in the context of decolonising practices to challenge dominant narratives, perspectives, and power structures shaped by colonial histories. This theory encourages individuals and communities to shift their focus away from the centre or dominant viewpoint to consider alternative perspectives, voices, and experiences.

9. The decolonial option, as posited by Mignolo and Vázquez (2013), 'operates from the margins and beyond the margins of the modern/colonial order. It posits alternatives in relation to the control of the economy (market value), the control of the state (politics of heritage based on economic wealth), and the control of knowledge'.

10. According to Mignolo (2013:141) 'Sociogenesis is sustained in and by border epistemology, not in and by the territorial epistemology that undergirds the diversity of all existing disciplines'.

11. I refer to Jean-Francois Lyotard's description of 'The Great Ephemeral Skin' in his *Libidinal Economy* 'Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces … perform the dissection of the polymorphous perversion, spread out the immense membrane of the libidinal 'body' which is quite different to a frame. … All these zones are joined end to end in a band, which has no back to it, a Möbius band which interests us not because it is closed, but because it is one-sided' (Lyotard 1993:1).

12. 'At the base of the creativity of all large familiar forms of life, symbiosis generates novelty,' according to Lynn Margulis, 'it brings together different life-forms, always for a reason. Often, hunger unites the predator with the prey or the mouth with the photosynthetic bacterium or algal victim. Symbiogenesis brings together unlike individuals to make large, more complex entities' (Margulis 1999:11-12).

13. Sound samples include: 'Princess Waltz' (1960); 'Toespraak Deur Die Eerste Minister, Dr. H.F. Verwoerd By Die Voortrekkermonument, Pretoria' (31 May 1966); 'Bayeza' – Invocation from *Bantu Choral Folk Songs: The Song Swappers and Pete Seeger* (1955); Eoan Opera Group (voice: May Abrahamse), *'Ah, fors' é lui… Sempre libera*', aria from *La Traviata* (1964).

14. 'Dehiscence is a partial or total separation of previously approximated wound edges, due to a failure of proper wound healing' as defined by Ryan D. Rosen and Biagio Manna in *National Center for Biotechnology Information* (2020).

15. 'The Human Microbiome Project revealed that an adult body contains about ten times more microbial cells than human cells …. In a healthy adult, most internal organs such as the brain, spleen, liver, and heart are devoid of microorganisms because the immune system keeps them in check. After death, however, the immune system falters and microorganisms proliferate throughout the body beginning in the ileocecal area, spreading to the liver and spleen, and continuing to the heart and brain' (Can, Javan, Pozhitkov & Noble 2014:1).

16. See Lambrechts (2018), 'Letting the tape run: The creation and preservation of the Hidden Years Music Archive'.

17. The seven tons worth of material making up the Hidden Years Music Archive was processed between 2013 and 2022, a project led by the principal archivist Lizabé Lambrechts as it was being transferred to DOMUS at Stellenbosch University.

18. Collaboration is key in this practice-based component of the DECAY research project as we are opening our thinking and doing to a broader community of practitioners in finding alternative modes of processing, decoding and re-presenting heritage material through image, sound, installation and performance. Through working with decay and decaying material from the archive our practices seek to register and understand the connections that create heritage in the present.

19. The Lumen print process was discovered by the polymath William Henry Fox Talbot in 1834, what he termed "the art of photogenic drawing" whereby the impression of an object, for example, plant matter, was made, by placing it on paper sensitised by sodium chloride and silver nitrate and exposing it to the sun for a period. The exposed parts of the paper darkened while the shadow cast by the object, the unexposed parts, remained light, an inversion of sorts in which the shadows become the highlights of the image.

20. The Hidden Years Music Archive was originally stored in David Marks' home along the south coast of KwaZulu-Natal, where the salt air and high humidity characteristic of this area impacted the condition of the collection. The detritus kept by Lambrechts, the archivist, formed a kind of connection to that domestic life – keeping the scraps of somebody's life. Senekal's collection was stored in the DIY darkroom attached to his childhood home.

21. In terms of an art technique *masking* is about protecting a layer or element of a composition from being altered by another layer in a process like painting, in the case of the lumen printing process, parts of the paper are protected from being altered by the sunlight. Masking obscures one layer while introducing another. In the context of data obfuscating, *masking* hides one level of information (actual data) while facilitating another (modified content), an alternate version that protects sensitive information. In the context of psychology, *masking* refers to the actions or coping strategies that individuals use to conceal their actual thoughts, emotions or challenges. The mask always hides one level while revealing another – a mask always invites an *unmasking*.

22. While the originals of these fugitive prints represent the transience of images and materials, all is not lost, for the purpose of recording and expanding on the experiment they are digitised, before the onset of their dissipation, for the growing archive of our artistic research.

23. Appropriately related to the creative concept of indeterminacy, appreciated and explored in compositional practices in art, music, and poetry – decay provides a fertile field of surprising inspiration.

24. Via the phenomenological experience of the materiality of anachronistic mediums like vinyl and Super 8 (the amateur film medium for home movies that immediately degraded by its first circuit through the reel), we are transported to a different time – that temporal shift shimmers within and through our senses, that are furthermore connected to our own associative memory banks. What do our memories look and sound like? Decay is always framing *our* past.

25. The Hidden Years Music Archive is a collection born of an individual's desire and *will* to record, collect and store, the marginalised voices, sounds, and music of his time.

References

Armand, L. 2023. *Entropology*. Michigan: Anti-Oedipus Press.

Bal, M, Crewe, J & Spitzer, L. 1999. *Acts of memory: Cultural recall in the present*. Hanover & London: University Press of New England.

Bayley, L, Cranfield, B & Massey, A. 2014. Institute of Contemporary Arts: An archival experiment – Lucy Bayley, Ben Cranfield and Anne Massey. *Mnemoscape Magazine* 1(1) (September). Available: https://www.mnemoscape.org/single-post/2014/09/02/institute-of-contemporary-arts-an-archival-experiment-by-lucy-bayley-ben-cranfield-and Accessed 21 October 2024.

Bennett, J. 2010. *Vibrant matter: A political ecology of things*. Durham & New York: Duke University Press.

Bergson, H. 1911. *Creative evolution.* Translated by A Mitchell. New York: Henry Holt & Company.

Carruthers, L, Chai-Elsholz, R & Silec, T (eds). 2011. *Palimpsests and the literary imagination of medieval England*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230118805_1

Can, I, Javan, GT, Pozhitkov, AE & Noble, PA. 2014. Distinctive thanatomicrobiome signatures found in the blood and internal organs of humans. *Journal of Microbiological Method*s 106:1-7. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.mimet.2014.07.026

Cocker, E. 2009. Ethical possession: Borrowing from the archives, in *Cultural borrowings: Appropriation, reworking, transformation* (A Scope E-Book), edited by IA Smith, 92-110. Nottingham: Scope.

Coldwell, M. 2021. Score-makers. *herri* 6: ekaya. [O].
Available: https://herri.org.za/6/score-makers/
Accessed 29 September 2024.

Deane, N. 2021. Decentering the archive: Visual fabrications of sonic memories. PhD Dissertation, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch.

Deane, N (dir). 2018. *On the Passage of a Few Ants Through a Rather Brief Unity of Time*. [HDV]. Colour. (13:33). Cape Town: African Noise Foundation.
Available: https://vimeo.com/264413165

Deleuze, G & Guattari, F. 1977. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and schizophrenia.* Translated by R Hurley, M Seem, & HR Lane. New York: Viking Press.

DeSilvey, C. 2006. Observed decay: Telling stories with mutable things. *Journal of Material Culture* 11(3):318–338. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183506068808

Derrida, J. 1973. *Speech and phenomena: And other essays on Husserl's theory of signs.* Translated by David B. Allison. Evanston: Northwestern University Press.

Douglas, M. 1966. *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Foster, H. 2004. An archival impulse. *October* 110 (Fall):3-22. https://doi.org/10.1162/0162287042379847

Gross, D. 2002. Objects from the past, in *Waste-site stories: The recycling of memory,* edited by B Neville & J Villeneuve. Albany: State University of New York Press:29-37.

Grosz, E. 2012. Time out of joint, in *Time and history in Deleuze and Serres*, edited by B. Herzogenrath. London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group:147-152.

Guss, DM. 1989. *To weave and sing: Art, symbol, and narrative in the South American rain forest.* Berkeley: University of California Press.

Habib, A. 2006. Ruin, archive and the time of cinema: Peter Delpeut's lyrical nitrate. *SubStance* 35(2):120-139. https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2006.0034

Harrison, S, Pile, S & Thrift, N. (eds.). 2004. *Patterned ground: Entanglements of nature and culture.* London: Reaktion Books.

Hennessy, K & Smith, TL. 2018. Fugitives: Anarchival materiality in archives. *Public 57 (Archive/Counter-Archives)* 29(57):128-144. https://doi.org/10.1386/public.29.57.128_1

Herzogenrath, B (ed). 2012. *Time and history in Deleuze and Serres.* London & New York: Continuum International Publishing Group.

Jabès, E. 1984. *The book of questions: El, or, the last book*. Translated by R Waldrop. Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press.

Ketelaar, E. 2001. Tacit narratives: The meanings of archives. *Archival Science* 1:131-141. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435644

Lambrechts, L. 2018. Letting the tape run: The creation and preservation of the Hidden Years Music Archive. *South African Journal of Cultural History* 32(2):1-23.

Lambrechts, L. 2020. The becoming of an archive: perspectives on a music archive and the limits of institutionality. *Social Dynamics* 46(2):310-322. https://doi.org/10.1080/02533952.2020.1804122

L'Internationale Online. 2015. *Decolonising Museums*. [O].
Available: https://archive-2014-2024.internationaleonline.org/library/#decolonising_museums
Accessed 15 January 2025.

L'Internationale Online. 2016. *Decolonising Archives*. [O].
Available: https://archive-2014-2024.internationaleonline.org/library/#decolonising_archives
Accessed 15 January 2025.

Lyotard, J. 1993 [1974]. *Libidinal economy*. Translated by IH Grant. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Marks, D. Photographic negative. Hidden Years Music Archive, Documentation Centre for Music, Stellenbosch University, South Africa.

Margulis, L. 1999. *The symbiotic planet: A new look at evolution.* London: Phoenix Paperbacks.

May, J & Thrift, N. 2003. *TimeSpace: Geographies of temporality*. London & New York: Routledge.

McClintock, A. 1995. *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial contest.* New York & London: Routledge.

Merriam-Webster. S.v. 'decenter.' *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*.
Available: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/decenter
Accessed 8 August 2024.

Mignolo, WD. 2013. Geopolitics of sensing and knowing: On (de)coloniality, border thinking, and epistemic disobedience. *Confero* 1(1):129-150.

Mignolo, WD & Vazquez, R. 2013. Introduction to decolonial aesthesis: Colonial wounds, decolonial healings. *Social Text-Periscope*. [O].
Available: https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/
Accessed 25 March 2025.

Neville, B & Villeneuve, J (eds). 2002. *Waste-site stories: The recycling of memory.* Albany: State University of New York Press.

Ogborn, M. 2004. Archives, in *Patterned ground: Entanglements of nature and culture*, edited by S Harrison, S Pile and N Thrift. London: Reaktion Books:240-242.

Rosen, RD & Manna, B. 2020. S.v. 'wound dehiscence' [Updated 2023 May 1]. *National Library of Medicine* [O]. Treasure Island (FL): StatPearls Publishing.
Available: https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK551712/
Accessed 20 January 2025.

Ross, B. 2007. Maestro and commander: The Michael Scott Collection at the University of Stellenbosch. *Fontes Artis Musicae* 54(3):331-358.

Smith, IR (ed). 2009. *Cultural borrowings: Appropriation, reworking, transformation* (A Scope E-Book). Nottingham: Scope.

Tsing, AL. 2015. *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins.* Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Discography

Eoan Group Opera. 1964. 'Ah, fors' é lui… Sempre libera'. Aria from *La Traviata*. [Digitised reel-to-reel tape]. South Africa.

The Song Swappers and Pete Seeger 1955. 'Bayeza – Invocation'. *Bantu Choral Folk Songs.* [Vinyl]. South Africa: Folkways Records.

Verwoerd, H.F. 1966. 'Toespraak Deur Die Eerste Minister, Dr. H.F. Verwoerd By Die Voortrekkermonument, Pretoria. 31 Mei 1966 [Part 1]'. *Dr. H.F. Verwoerd*. [Vinyl]. South Africa: Brigadiers.

Wende, H. & His Orchestra. 1960. 'Princess Waltz (Agnes Waltz)'. *Africana: Africa in Rhythm*. [Vinyl LP Record]. South Africa: Polydor.