

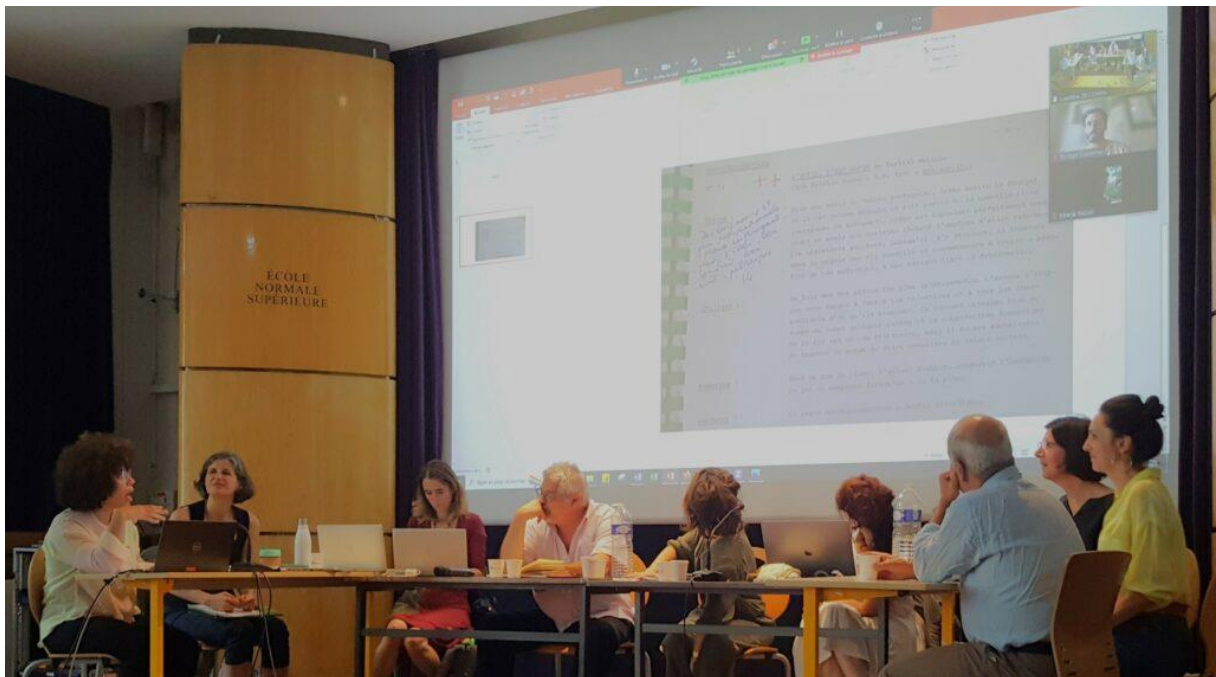
## EVENTS

### WORKSHOP REPORT

#### “POSTCOLONIAL PRINT CULTURES AND ARCHIVES: PRACTICES AND FIELDS, METHODS AND ISSUES ”

organized by Laetitia Zecchini on June 27 and 28, 2023 as part of the IRNPPC<sup>1</sup> (Paris, Ecole normale supérieure)

with Claire Riffard, Maëline Le Lay, Tristan Leperlier, Benedetta Zaccarello, Julie Peghini, Yves Chemla, Céline Gahungu, Francesca Orsini, Charles Scheel, Guy Dugas, Laetitia Zecchini.



A moment of the Parisian workshop. Credits: IRN PPC team.

#### **Archive plasticity**

The archive is not easily defined. Over the course of the two-day workshop, we questioned its meaning and its boundaries (evolving, in time and space), and often used images to try and represent it to us; for example, the archive as a “cupboard that crosses time” (Benedetta Zaccarello).

**The archive is characterized by its polysemy, its polymorphous, plastic and intermedial character.** It is therefore much more interesting to ask the question of what an archive is, as Benedetta has done in her own IRN “What is an Archive in India and Europe” than to attempt a definition. Benedetta, who invites us to distinguish “the archive” from “the archive institution”, also proposes the notion of “archive function”, and questions the ways in which this function is concretized or deployed in different contexts.

Guy Degas has also highlighted the crisis of the notion of archive as national memory, as national heritage. His own work as editor of the collection “Petits inédits maghrébins” (El kalima éditions), also seeks to explode the very notion of national heritage/literature/archive(s).

Beyond the polysemy, the **fragility of the archive** is obvious: it is often exposed to the threat of dispersal or damage, to the point of being rendered illegible (as in the case of the archives of the magazine *Algérie Action/Littérature* on which Tristan Leperlier is working). Is this a *postcolonial* specificity? We've asked ourselves a lot about this. Certainly, in many contexts, the archive is missing or inaccessible: what has become of the proofs and manuscripts of so many 20th-century Algerian writers (Tahar Djaout, among others), as Guy and Tristan have pointed out?

It should be noted here that **the institution is not necessarily the guarantor of preservation** (this is the case, for example, with the archives of the Union des Écrivains Algériens). Céline Gahungu also pointed out that most of the manuscripts sent in for the Concours Théâtral Interafricain, on which she works, have been destroyed; OCORA (Office de coopération radiophonique) and RFI (Radio France Internationale) cited a lack of resources, but also the idea that it wasn't their role.

And what about South Asia, where Francesca Orsini and Laetitia Zecchini point out that government institutions show little interest in literary archives: the archives of major Indian writers of the 19th and 20th centuries are very rarely preserved, and even the most important magazines/journals have no archives.

**Magazines/journals are themselves archives** (Francesca): a point also underlined by Yves Chemla in Haiti: given the disastrous political situation, there are no archives, nor reprints/re-editions: *the published text is itself an archive*.

Note the point made by Julie Peghini, who highlights the contrast between the absence of archival projects in French-speaking Africa, as far as performance art is concerned, and the importance of such projects in English-speaking Africa.

This raises the question of **what to do with the lack of archives**.

In India, for example, genetic criticism is more difficult (genetic criticism would be the next step?), because there are few manuscripts and few accessible archives. Benedetta's work on Aurobindo Ghose<sup>2</sup>, or the projects undertaken by the School of Texts and Records at Jadavpur University (see, in particular, all the Tagore manuscripts made accessible here <http://bichitra.jdvu.ac.in/index.php>), and there are many others, nevertheless qualify this assertion...

What can tools such as semi-structured interviews with resource persons, or even statistics (as in Tristan's work), do to compensate for the lack of archives? And what does it mean for a researcher to be entrusted with the mission of preserving or “saving” archives? How does this “mission” modify his or her relationship with the object, and what “second role” does it give him or her, over and above his or her main role as researcher?

**The question of the researcher's impact on the archival fonds under study, and the researcher's positioning, was addressed in various ways** (see also ethical issues, below).

For example, Claire Riffard pointed out – quoting Alain Ricard & Phyllis Clark – that **the actions taken by researchers on archive collections transform them into corpus**. From archive to corpus, then, for textual genetics specialists working on technical aspects (digitization, different types of transcription, spatialization). Can we see the opposite path, from corpus to archive, in the case of the collection of texts by the researcher who will be involved in presenting them as a whole and disseminating them, in print (anthology) and digital form (associated platform), as in the slam anthology project in Goma led by Maëline Le Lay and Goma Slam Session? The question of the “second role” in this specific case, where the researcher becomes co-editor, arises here.

This question of the “second role” arises in another example given by Maëline in the context of her own work on a play by a Belgian director, Frédérique Lecompte, in Goma – her own intervention, as a spectator and “cultural expert”, helped to modify the “text” or framework of the theatrical performance.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than a progression from one to the other, anthropologist Johannes Fabian suggests a constitutive relationship between archive and corpus, asserting that **the Archive has a body, is a body, in all its evolving, moving and perhaps performative potential**:

“Like a body, a corpus has size, volume, weight, articulation of parts and members; **as long as it is alive it grows and changes**. The latter, growth and change, certainly fit the corpus of documents I produced (more often than found) in the course of my work as an ethnographer”<sup>4</sup>

Observing that archive collections are exploited successively and diversely, that they always have a history (often transcultural), Benedetta insists on the archive's fabrication, and even its dialogic genesis (in the case of Aurobindo, and his archives whose critical edition was carried out by the 'ashramites' themselves – Aurobindo's daily writing practice is even likened to yoga). It also underlines the virtuality of the archive, its latency linked to the intentionality of users, which implies a **performativity of the archive**.

We returned several times to Karin Barber's work, and to the complex processes of *entextualization* of the discourse she discusses.

Maëline's talk on performance and theatrical improvisation, and Julie's on the Cameroonian artist Goddy Ley, gave us the opportunity to reflect on what could be a **performance archive, an ephemeral archive, a sensory archive**. What happens, asks Julie, when the body of the spectator/actor is the only place of memory? Frédérique Lecompte's theatrical and performative work, in which the “text” or “canvas” is mobile, recreated or recomposed as the actors re-use and improvise, also prompts Maëline to ask: what is a text? And can we even speak of an archive in the case of this moving material?

Laetitia is interested in the uses and archival practices of writers. How do these uses and creative practices of the archive differ from those of researchers? Faced with the paucity of conservation/preservation programs in India, many writers have become not only archive “ragpickers” (a central term for both Laetitia and Maëline), but also propose other archive practices (such as translation) that have to do with recycling and re-creation, with the **“logic of performance, not permanence”** (Novetzke on oral traditions in India). To preserve is not to restore, but to reinvent.

## Archive & Politics

There is also a series of printed works in literary journals circulating in narrow circles formed by intellectual sociability, or even literary friendships, which appear as hidden fragments opposing the totalizing, vertical logic of the archive in the common sense of the term as an institution of power. As Laetitia shows in the case of the Bombay poets, the “choice of the small” and the “minority” can be conceived as a resource, and a strong bias of these poets.<sup>5</sup>

This refusal to be archived or listed in an official directory is reminiscent of the position of certain writers who have claimed a “chosen obscurity” for their texts. In short, to **remain in the shadows as a guarantee of freedom or independence, but sometimes also as a guarantee of survival, a bulwark against the processes of intimidation and censorship.**

Archives are (almost?) always political. Whether we question its access, its real or presumed absence, the modalities of its conservation protocols and uses, or its genealogies (notably colonial, for the contexts we're working on), we quickly come to questions that are variously political.

Our interest in archive issues and archive holdings can lead us to lose sight of the fact that **the archive is not necessarily desirable, often because it is embarrassing, for a variety of reasons.**

In other words, “*Who wants the archive?*” asks Francesca.

In many contexts, the disappearance of archives or the difficulty of accessing them is linked to political contexts (indeed, it is often unclear whether they have really disappeared or whether they are subject to unacknowledged bureaucratic and political logics), and this has been pointed out many times, notably by Tristan in the case of the archives of the Union des écrivains Algériens, by Guy in the case, for example, of a notebook of graffiti by the writer Jean Senac, by Yves in the Haitian context, or by Claire.

The fact that the conservation of certain archives can be embarrassing for institutions, and thus rendered inaccessible to researchers, has been observed time and again in the case of archives or colonial collections conserved in European institutions. However, these institutions are increasingly opting to make these problematic collections visible through the critical and aesthetic intervention of visual and performance artists.

Guy Dugas points out **that a history of colonial libraries has yet to be written**, and cites as an example the case of the colonial section of the municipal library in Oujda, Morocco (to which a parish priest was able to grant access - the question of intermediaries for archives is one that needs to be explored), which was closed to the public like a cubbyhole, a private room where a jumble, a mess, perhaps dirt, is hidden from view; in any case, something potentially a little shameful.

In the case of the archives of the generous and indefatigable researcher Dominique Malaquais, which Julie Peghini told us about, we find ourselves in a situation where the archives are highly desirable to her Cameroonian friends and artists, and in particular to the chieftaincy in which she worked for many years. In this case, the dialogue and fluidity of exchange between individuals (Dominique's archives belong to her ex-spouse) and institutions – in the North and South – as called for by Claire, came about because the return of the researcher's archives to the field was eagerly awaited by local players and institutions. Her former laboratory, IMAF, contributed to this return by financing the digitization of the archives, which provides a fine example of collaboration between research institutions in the North and South, through Julie.

This was also the case for the archives of Mouloud Feraoun in Algeria, who asked ITEM to take charge of preserving and promoting his father's archives.

The CTI radio archives, digitized by INA, can also be approached from a political angle. With Céline's broadcast of an extract from *L'Enfer, c'est Orfeo* (Sylvain Bemba, 1969), an exchange takes place on this subject. While there have been university agreements with the INA (Guy on the subject of Pierre-Marie Héron in Montpellier), Claire, Julie and Céline observe that nowadays, to download archives digitized by the INA, you have to pay/work in the audiovisual field (Ina Media pro). If this is not the case, for the vast majority of archives, only consultation in Inathèque centers is possible. These archives are linked to the cultural policy of Franco-African cooperation, which amplifies the questions. Maëline talks about the work carried out as part of the FMAN project (Sarah Frioux-Salgas) devoted to the archives of the First World Festival of Black Arts in Dakar and their sharing. *Broadcast by partner African radio stations, which were to collaborate more and more from the late 1970s onwards, this "inter-African" radio theater had been conceived as a means of democratizing culture.*

### **Ethical issues**

When it comes to working with the texts we encounter and creating a body of work (whether we call it an archive or a corpus), it's also fair to ask, in the case of texts intended for performance, whether we really need print at all. What need is there for print if distribution can be assured by another channel? Is there a particular value attributed to print, to the book format (prestige, recognition, etc.) or not at all? In the same way, it would be a good idea to question what digitalization is doing to the archive, and to what extent this operation on the archive is helping to modify its ontology.

Several points emerged:

- The careful **choice of vocabulary** to qualify our practices with texts, printed matter and archives in our fields ("cartography", "resources", "discovery", "deposit", "mission", "endangered" archives, etc.), testifies to our concern to work ethically in line with our desire for fairness in our relations with our interlocutors in the South. We emphasized the crucial importance of clarifying legal issues relating to copyright and the fair consideration of authors and their successors in title in the handling of these textual archives.
- Echoing Claire's article<sup>6</sup> on **dramatic and martial rhetoric, there has also been** much discussion of the rhetoric of urgency (which is often *strategic*, in that it enables funding to be obtained) used by a number of digitization programs in the North, such as the British Library's 'Endangered Archives' Programme.<sup>7</sup>

However, several examples have shown that it's not always easy (or even possible) to guard against the **risk of our approach being interpreted as textual/cultural extractivism, or even intellectual predation** (Julie even speaks of the feeling of "cannibalization" felt by some African writers and artists).

This is particularly true in the French Outremers (Martinique, French Polynesia), where the expression of resentment towards a central power still perceived as purely and simply colonialist complicates the work from the outset; or in Europe among African writers of the diaspora. On this subject, Charles Scheel recalls his experience as a researcher of metropolitan

origin, denied access since 2016 to the Joseph Zobel Fund – accumulated by the writer in France until his death in 2006, then ceded by his heirs to the Musée d'Histoire et d'Ethnographie in Fort-de-France, almost a decade ago. In his view, this situation clearly stems from the colonial history of the Antilles, and the integration of the former colonies into the French Republic in 1946 continues to arouse misgivings.

In these contexts, it's not always possible “to move beyond the quarrels that paralyze us through experience in the field”, as Benedetta puts it, and which we would like to be able to overcome by assuming our heritage (with all its heaviness).

While we may wish to look beyond the nominative dimension of this change of vocabulary, considering that it represents a necessary (but perhaps superficial) step in the paradigm shift in our ways of working on these objects located in the South, which have indeed for too long been the object of predation by the North, the question then remains open as to how to continue our work around texts in spite of everything. Beyond the substitution of one term for another, how can we ensure that our practices and uses of texts, printed matter and the archives we work on evolve in line with an ethic that everyone – in the South as in the North – is calling for?

**The institutional and even ethical positioning of the researcher, which** Claire's presentation immediately raised, sparked off a particularly interesting debate.

To ensure access to archives in the South, where we work in **a quest to de-asymmetrize**, Claire has decided to deal only from institution to institution, in order to respect local representations of national sovereignty. As a representative of the institution that pays her salaries and sends her on missions (CNRS), she feels it is essential to make her professional position clear in negotiations with local institutions, and to no longer take on the task of conserving and valorizing these archives without having been officially invited to do so.

Taking up the notion of “digital imperialism” put forward by Marie Rodet, Fabienne Chamelot and Vincent Hiribarren, she explains that cataloging and digitization actions can lead to encroachment on the sovereignty of states.

For Claire, it's a **question of betting on institutions in the South, partly in order to make them happen.**

Laetitia wonders whether this sort of “ethical charter” to which Claire is so attached should not be understood in the context of a very specific history: *Françafrique*.

And then, what to do in contexts where institutional archives are ghost archives or inaccessible; or when the archives come from collectives/writers/artists who have risen up *against* the institutions (and have only been able to exist outside them); or in contexts where states pay no heed to the archives of writers, publishers, artists, censor access to them or instrumentalize them for ends, whether nationalist or otherwise...

In India, moreover, as Francesca has pointed out, a growing number of private initiatives to archive artistic and literary materials have taken over from the state and government bodies ...

Elara Bertho and Laetitia (who returned several times to this notion, borrowed from Leela Gandhi, of “minority” as a resource) also stressed the importance of inter-personal and friendly relationships. It's a **relational network, a network of sociability and affectivity** – with all the

equally random or unstable dimension that this relational dimension can take on, which often makes access to archives possible.

No doubt we need to take into account several scales of analysis, several local ecosystems.

**Notes :**

1 Collective text, written by several hands – I am very grateful to all the contributors.

2 'Transferts et philologie d'auteur en contexte indien. Remarks on the genetic study of Aurobindo Ghose manuscripts', in *L'Espace du sens, approches de la philologie indienne / The Space of Meaning, Approaches to Indian Philology*, eds. Sylvia d'Intino & Sheldon Pollok, Paris: De Boccard, 2019, pp. 535-562.

3 Maëline Le Lay, "Du chiffonnier à l'anthropologue : statut du texte et positionnement du chercheur sur un terrain littéraire et théâtral", *Continents Manuscripts* [Online], 'Théâtres d'Afriques : des traces aux archives', 13 : 2019.

4 Johannes Fabian, *Ethnography as commentary. Writing from the virtual archive* (Durham & London, Duke University Press, 2008), p. 15.

5 'Archives of Minority: "Little" Publications and the Politics of Friendship in Postcolonial Bombay', 'Postcolonial Archives', eds. Anjali Nerlekar & Francesca Orsini, *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies*, 45:2, 2022

6 Claire Riffard, 'Dans les archives littéraires francophones africaines : Approche génétique et constitution de corpus', *Sources* [Online], 5 : 2022.

7 The British Library, for example, has funded a lot of archival projects in the South, without actually moving these objects, documents or prints. But as the BL has retained copyright over these images, cooperation (and image sharing) with other institutions in the South is complicated.