

Cultures of Colonial Compilation: Settler Societies and Information Management in South Africa

Lindsay Frederick Braun – 18 February 2021

Dear Colleagues,

I have been going around in circles about how best to explain my goals, and what's changed for my project (both in new challenges and new opportunities), but I think the model of a covering letter explaining the project, its changes and my own, and last of all (p.4) my immediately current questions—as so well exemplified by Jim's write-up on the 4th—is the best way to go about it.

The essay I've sent to you is my 2018 *Cartographic Journal* article on the odd affinities and professional contacts of Friedrich Jeppe (1833-1898), who was a functionary in a settler colonial state (the Transvaal or South African Republic, one of the Boer Republics) that had an antagonistic relationship with Britain, the power that claimed suzerainty over it. At the same time, he was also an Anglophile, despite his position and his German origins. It's meant to provide a sense of what a portion of the social-professional network of such a compiler looked like in terms of politics and connections. It is, however, also very incomplete and many elements remained on the proverbial cutting-room floor in order to get the essay from 12,000 words to 7,500, most notably longer discussions of various informants, travelers' personal networks, and the strongly racial element of knowledgeability and its erasure in imperial and colonial contexts. With that caveat in mind, the article is the best thing to read first, because I refer back to it in this text.

My NIAS project studies the collection, processing, reissue, and at times recycling or revision of information as 'knowledge' in 19th-century colonial contexts, as well as the erasure of voices and ascriptions of authority that attended that activity. My central lens on this is map compilation through specific individuals within the precursor settler states of South Africa. The project is part of a larger move towards thinking about the creation of scientific knowledge and communication across professional and personal networks relative to colonies, *especially* settler colonies, and as such has applications far more widely. The intended result ultimately is a book manuscript.

My proposal asked a few questions, all linked: First, who were the compilers and how wide were their informational networks? Second, how did their output—mostly in maps for my purposes, but also in other types of writing for many—gain an authoritative status in southern Africa, but also in Europe? The third question is implied by the first two: what information was used, or hidden, and how was it adjudged as 'knowledge,' especially when it originated from sources who weren't European in background? To that end, my work seeks to highlight the various informational and promotional connections that crossed in the work of the compilers, as well as their effects. In this analysis, maps are texts (in the sense used by the late cartographic historian Brian Harley, who drew on Foucault and Derrida as elaborated in the 1980s) and they embody that network as mediated through local cartographers who far exceeded their peers in reputation and perceived reliability.

I chose maps both because cartography of that era with its admixture of numerical, textual, or graphical data is a familiar subject, but also because those maps' claims to represent objective reality with any accuracy is so stark. The irony is that these maps were stunningly incorrect, and a

lot of the compilers recognized these limitations openly very early on. However, it was only vital to be better and more 'authentic' and 'authoritative' than prior or competing maps, so precision along with attributions to other well-regarded sources of state or scientific authority formed ways to buttress the illusion of good data. Fortunately, grossly inaccurate precision gives us something to follow from sketch or text to map, and then from map to map, in a way that is generally harder with other types of information transfer or more recent mapping practices. In this era, other kinds of text could also become mapped knowledge, and mapped knowledge could feed into them in turn.

In terms of the initial questions, I am pushing their boundaries progressively further. All of the compilers—every single one—possessed some connection to a colonial state's bureaucracy. It was most obvious for those who ended up employed by survey offices as cartographers through their work, but others were government surveyors, military officers, mine officials, or otherwise on a commission of some kind. Almost all, however, also pursued their own identities as geographical authorities in some way and *used* offices to build their informant network among missionaries, local countrymen (emigrant Germans, Dutch, French, or others), and—for those who were missionaries or the like—local informants with multigenerational networks of their own. However, the identity of the informant, and the recipient of the information, were crucial to the acceptance of information as 'knowledge' in colonial and imperial cultures. Social and cultural capital as determined within the settler-colonial and imperial contexts mattered enormously to scientific communication around geography and maps. A comprehensive map fully credited to named amaTsonga informants would not fly, but one ascribed to a Swiss missionary (say, Henri Berthoud in 1885-1886) from the same information, showing the missionary's routes through the territory—thus setting up his own gaze and qualifications as authoritative—would.

This project itself follows up a number of loose threads from my work for my first book on competing visions and co-produced rural spaces in South Africa, *Colonial Survey and Native Landscapes*, from Brill in 2015. There I focused on local encounters and articulations of space by Africans, settlers, and imperial administrators, via the nexus of ostensibly objective survey operations. There, I included some discussion of maps and the subjectivity of image, but over time I began to realize the scope and meaning of the cartographers' work to the representation of colonial encounters, and how strangely subjective their moderation of this external vision was.

Another element in my work for the book that has moved more to the fore (and that I will raise at seminar) is the concept of 'information laundering.' In compilation texts or maps, the creators often give credit to those upon whom they draw, but over time and through multiple recyclings, those become less common. Especially noteworthy is the laundering-out of African or other credits that might be seen as less authoritative, which speaks to the erasure I mentioned in my proposal.

It will come as little shock that the development of this project has changed from what I first proposed, although new possibilities have opened along with the challenges of canceled plans. Originally, I had an ambitious research plan for the 2019 and 2020 seasons that I expected to complete before arriving in Amsterdam, which were essential because of the pre-1910 nature of my work. The absence of key files in British archives was a problem in 2019, though not a critical one. COVID, however, was more of a challenge for the more important 2020 leg, and my plans to descend on Dutch learned societies' archives are of course currently moot. However, I'm opening some new doors as well.

So what's happened lately? The purpose and subject haven't changed, but my processes have. My proposal indicated that I would visit archives in Bloemfontein, Pietermaritzburg, and Cape Town last summer in order to track the movements of map compilers to identify more contributors and their 'unspoken' sources. This approach worked very well for *Colonial Survey*, where I followed records to some unexpected corners and found powerful cross-cultural contests between many visions of landscape. However, the current project's analogous journey now must await (probably) until 2022. In the meantime, I am following up printed sources and making my notes for future manuscript collections and local visits, while writing as my existing material allows. It has produced some strange discoveries already, and I plan to share at least the most recent example(s) on Thursday, which concern the Jeppe/Merensky map of 1868 that I mention briefly in the essay.

The change in plans and my time at NIAS however have produced a net positive in regards to rethinking frameworks and methods. In my book, I relied on an idea of the proconsular colonial state as articulated in work like Jim Scott's (*Seeing Like a State* and related works on resistance) Crawford Young (*The African Colonial State in Comparative Perspective*), and perhaps John Weaver on law (*The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World*, 2003) as matters of intentions and procedures using 'knowledge' that clashed with reality to produce results of stunning yet ostensibly rational inhumanity or at least gross negligence. A corollary here is something my colleague Vera Keller pointed to in *History & Theory* last year: just as 'knowledge' grows out of information, so too does 'ignorance,' and both spread in various ways—but we rarely think about ignorance as a thing, just as the lack of something else. This is something I hadn't actively considered before, but it has some heft in considering institutional myopia.

Since arriving at NIAS, I have however been pushing more into the precepts and tools of actor-network theory (ANT), with vantage points that start from such networks and even institutions as composites of individuals. The latter development is important because it highlights actual processes at work instead of the failure of idealized ones, which I feel permits a more open view of seemingly irregular inputs. Even before this, I had begun to think about blackboxing (closed technical discourses where input and output are known, based on Latour's description in *Pandora's Hope*) but more in a sense of contemporaries' perceptions rather than those of historical analysts. My hope is that, through such tools, I can further interrogate the significantly raced and gendered content of cartographic and related textual discourses, including the 'laundering' process. The compilers here are not simple intermediaries, they are mediators who alter information, as are the others in their networks; I may even go so far as to divide those who select and transmit basic information as mediators, and the compilers who adjudge it as *moderators*. (This feeds into another one of my major questions for those of you who work with social theory more extensively.)

My experience is like many of yours in that the overall result has been less writing than I would like, but much more new, enriching reading and rethinking, much of it inspired here.

The ultimate book project's prospective structure is also in some flux. The rough chapter structure initially involved one introductory (and theory/method) chapter, the conclusion, and four chapters centering ostensibly on key figures in each of the four classic colonial divisions—although the body chapters would inevitably bleed into one another and extend outside of what is today South Africa.

Recently, however, I've been considering a chronological organization instead, because of that boundary issue and the nature of communication between contemporaries in different areas as you see in the essay. Taking an inspiration from Paul Landau's 2012 *Popular Politics in the History of South Africa 1400-1948*, I see great potential value in contrasting the actual fluidity of these informational arrays with the chimerical certainty of a colonial map and even the very colonial archives I employ. The periodization to use isn't yet clear, but it may better de-center the settler.

In either case, my original plan to propose the volume formally to the cartography/geography editors at the University of Chicago Press (who have expressed interest) has not changed, and it may even still happen this calendar year.

With this in mind, I ask the following questions:

First, how might one balance institutions and individuals in an analysis of colonial processes? I see a tension between thinking about colonial states institutionally and the individual roles of actors within an actor-network from ANT. Indeed some in the study of colonialism would suggest that even the most contrary of compilers was never free of serving the aims of 'the state.' Although I am a sociological neophyte, I do not think ANT is at all hostile to poststructural kinds of analysis, especially literary-derived ones, despite its critique of 'power' as a too-vague concept. How does institutional power, or social power / cultural practice (to drag Pierre Bourdieu into this), play within the various strands of actor-network theory most productively?

Second, how do we deal with the silences that are endemic to the very process under discussion in a way that does not simply repeat them? There is a distinct problem I have encountered and will encounter around 'information laundering,' that is, the qualitative erasure of most original messengers (particularly African and/or women) from the chain. As a project, this has a strong overlap with the Lorenzo Veracini/Patrick Wolfe school of settler colonial studies, which comes in for a fair bit of criticism for being old wine (imperial history) in new bottles. While I can call out to the shortfalls in my source material, I'm more interested in finding an analytically better way to treat the erasure of people at various intersections of race, gender, or even class status. Oral history has not been promising in identifying people, in part because of the subtlety of geographical information transfer relative to other massive social and cultural shifts (with many of the strongest in just the last 50-60 years) involving land, leadership, family, and work, to mention a few.

Third, and related to this, how much can we rely on circumstance and speculation? Even within the archives there are major gaps, and much communication was verbal; circumstantial evidence is thus a big part of tracking the movement and use of knowledge (or physical objects containing that knowledge). What tools might one suggest to bridge known gaps, or are we left with speculation based on circumstance in a way familiar to many historians? How much is too much? I raise this in part because one find, and several non-finds, in 2019 have complicated my initial supposition about the 1898 proof map in the essay you've read. There may be no good answer for this, but it's something I've struggled with to the point of exhaustion. At least statisticians have rules!

Finally, and as a kind of 'bonus round' question, does a chronological or geographical division in writing make more sense to you based on what I've described?