The Henry Francis Fynn Letters: Assemblages, Ontologies and the Trace

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Please reference as: Liz Stanley (2017) The Henry Francis Fynn Letters: Assemblages, Ontologies and the Trace. Edinburgh: Whites Writing Whiteness Working Paper http://www.whiteswritingwhiteness.ed.ac.uk/publications/working-papers/Fynn-letters/ and also provide a paragraph number/s as appropriate when quoting.

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Acknowledgements

Liz Stanley thanks the ESRC for funding a Professorial Research Fellowship on 'Whites Writing Whiteness' (ES J022977/1), which research is drawn on here. Thanks are also due to the Pietermaritzburg Archives Depot, the Killie Campbell Library Durban, and the helpful staff of both.

1. Introduction

1.1 Henry Francis Fynn (1803-1861) was variously a trader, Resident Agent, Diplomatic Agent and Resident Magistrate in Natal, Pondoland (Eastern Cape) and then in Natal again; and his career occurred at a point in time that saw the earliest stages of settler colonialism and its expanding system of governance in the area (Pridmore, 2006; see also Davies, 1974; Wright, 1974; Ballard, 1981). Fynn is now perhaps best known for what it is usually referred to as his diary, although this has some hallmarks of a memoir and letters as well as a diary, and it also features signs of the assemblage work of editors in piecing together 'the diary' from an array of rather disparate materials (Stuart & Malcolm, 1950: ix, xi-xiv; see Wylie, 1995, 2000, for detailed discussion; and Stanley et al, 2013 on cultural assemblage).

1.2 In the past Fynn has been lauded as an adventurer, pioneer and a founding Natalian, although times change and some of his activities have later occasioned more criticism than praise. There has however been a recent resurgence of interest regarding, (a) Fynn's much referenced diary and how best to interpret its contents, (b) what are seen as Fynn's (or his editors') opinions and exaggerations in the diary about the Zulu king Shaka in relation to the colonial project of the day, (c) Fynn's changing relationship with other indigenous rulers, especially the Pondo King, Faku (ruling from 1815 to 1867), and (d) the winds of change over the period of Fynn's career and the fundamental changes that were occurring to the relationship between pre-colonial African states and the colonial system of governance in the making (Pridmore, 1994, 1996, 1997, 2004; Stapleton, 1998, 2001, 2006; Weir and

Etherington, 2008; Wright, 2010; Wylie, 1995, 2000).

1.3 In the considerable literature drawing on Fynn sources on such matters, the references made are almost invariably to the diary. The Fynn diary exists in a published form, which makes it an accessible read, but it is also generally agreed to have significant flaws. Is it a diary or actually a compendium of different kinds of writings? is it Fynn's work or significantly a product of editors Stuart and Malcolm in piecing together its different components from across different kinds of writing by him? How long after the event were some sections written by Fynn, what was added to by the editors, and so with many memory issues? And to what extent was some content exaggerated because formulated with publication in mind? However, while the Fynn letters have none of these problems, they are largely absent from discussions to date. There are many letters by Fynn and even more to him, including by many of the leading (colonial and African) figures of the day, in the archival sources but these are rarely referenced let alone discussed in any detail. They are the focus of discussion here.

2. The Fynn Letters

2.1 There are some 600-700 letters extant in the Henry Francis Fynn Papers, with the exact number depending on how 'a letter' is defined. It is notable that the letters, written at the time and in an unfolding and day-on-day way, and so escaping various of the issues about the retrospective character of the Fynn diary, have been largely ignored in academic discussion. There is no published version and the manuscript letters are in an archival location and so relatively inaccessible. In addition, the manuscripts are very fragile and hard to read, and written in many different and difficult handwritings. These issues of access and readability in large part explain the silence in the academic literature concerning their existence and import, with many scholars in the field as a result unfortunately unaware of their existence. 'Unfortunately' because they escaped the problems of the Fynn diary and they have richly detailed content on key matters of the day concerning the settler colonial project in the Natal and Pondoland areas.

2.2 The Fynn letters were not written retrospectively but in an emergent and day-by-day way with no hindsight knowledge involved. There was never any thought of external readership, they were written as unfolding exchanges between a loosely connected figuration of people

composed by Fynn and others in his network, and there are no exaggerations in content beyond any that might be shared between the different letter-writers involved and their addressees. No editorial hand has been involved in re-shaping the letters, with these manuscripts existing in the form that the letter-writers inscribed them. There are a large number of letter-writers involved, and there are more letters to Fynn than by him, so the world-view the letters inscribe takes the form of a heterotopia which exists at the representational level as a co-construction of the over time figuration of the approximately 150 people who contributed and received letters.

2.3 Consequently, the contents of the Fynn collection of letters represent a lastly shared but at points disagreeing or even conflicting worldview on the matters of concern they deal with, many of which concern questions and issues surrounding influence and governance and the extension of colonial rule. As a result, the letters provide great insight into the ideas and working practices of members of a particular social and political milieu within the settler colonial community, not just Fynn himself.

2.4 Correspondences unfold over time as letters are written and responded to and as the correspondents take turns in writing and replying. The letters in the Fynn collection start in the 1820s and continue to 1860, just before Fynn died. This was the period over which a great transition of change occurred in Pondoland and Natal, the two locales he worked in for extended periods of time. The change was from African-controlled states and polities in which white functionaries such as Fynn were present only individually and on a grace and favour basis, and where the prevailing economy was based on stock-rearing and pastoralism; and a shift to colonial settler-controlled states and polities organised around a labour market and a semi-modern capitalist economy, in which the rules and regulations of white governance were administered by a large cohort of such functionaries.

2.5 Because of their serial (one after the other in a succession), longitudinal (over a long time-period) and emergent (each addresses the moment of writing without hindsight knowledge) characteristics and their related coverage of the crucial period from the 1820s to the end of the 1850s, the Fynn letters provide a particularly appropriate resource for investigating how a crucially involved figuration of people saw, promoted and responded to the ‘great change’ sketched above.

2.6 There are some ontological, epistemological and methodological complications in working with the Fynn letters as well. The form of their present existence raises some

questions concerning what are and where are ‘the letters’ in question. There are three instantiations of them, which are in two separate archives, and in three locations within these, although in a formal sense there is just one ‘real’ collection of them in manuscript form. Interesting issues arise from the existence of these linked but ontologically distinct sources, in particular concerning what ‘the trace’, the founding source, of the letters is and in what ways this is challenged by the co-existing instantiations.

3. The inventory: instantiation 1

3.1 There is an extensive typed Inventory of the Henry Francis Fynn Papers, with the Papers being ‘the’ collection of Fynn materials, the one which results when searching for Fynn sources, with both held in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Depot.

3.2 This Inventory provides a detailed overview of the contents of the collection, the Fynn Papers. Among other information, it contains an itemised list of the letters received and dispatched. These are in a date order preceded by the name of the letter-writer (which, as noted, is not always Fynn) and the recipient. Two entries, one from the Received part of the list and the other from the Dispatched part of it, are:

> Received...
> R Southey 5 1 1848 [From Richard Southey to Henry Francis Fynn, 5 January 1848]
> ...
>
> Dispatched...
> Thomas Jenkins 24 6 1849 [From Henry Francis Fynn to Rev Thomas Jenkins, 24 June 1849]

3.3 The information in the Inventory, then, is a massive list indicating who wrote and who received, together with names and dates, but is empty of any content. Because of these inclusions and exclusions, it highlights contributors and flows of letters over time without these being masked by the typically abundant specific content of ‘actual letters’. That is, it picks these things out and makes them immediately visible. It isolates these aspects of temporality and contributor, with the result that in a way there is no reader, for there is no

content, but rather more of an enumerator who, because of the structure of the list, is encouraged to count the two elements that compose it.

3.4 Rather than coming across as denuded of textual content, the effect is of the researcher/reader being presented with something that is replete with numerical information, then. The response is to set to work, to use the list, and to count. But what might this work consist of and why do it? The things that can be done with the information given are perhaps rather basic, but nonetheless important because they can give rise to insights into the structure and organisation of the Fynn letters and what these add up to in conceptual terms. They include:

a. How many letters? When do they start and when do they finish?
b. How many letters are there by each letter-writer? and how does Fynn figure in this?
c. When do letters to particular people (the addressees or recipients) start and when do they end?
d. What comparisons can be made in looking at the flows of letters by and to different people over time?

3.5 What these counts provide is access to seriality, longitudinality and changing network membership, that is, to the patterning of repetitions and flows and membership over time. What they add up to is a schematic overview of the figurational aspects of the letters in the Fynn Papers – who, when, at what particular points in time, and changes in this over time. This is why it is helpful to use the schematic information in the Fynn Inventory: it makes visible and opens up something very complex and makes accessible crucial changes occurring over time, and it does so in a visible and pared down way.

4. The manuscripts: instantiation 2

4.1 As noted earlier, the Fynn Papers in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Depot are 'the' collection of Fynn materials, with the hundreds of letters that the collection contains being the manuscripts written at the time by Fynn and his associates. Opening its boxes and folders reveals the overwhelming amount of content that is involved in making sense of these c600 items, many of which are many sheets of paper long, some also being more than one actual item, in the sense of being composed by linked letters, reports, receipts, lists…

4.2 The manuscript letters are immense: there are so many, in so many different handwritings, and writing on many different topics. Their content is a feast for the eyes and an assault on the mind. The eye followed by the mind catches an outpouring of names and words and phrases: the widow of Capayi, aggressive movements, circulate reports, will Faku, go soon, d'Urban has, bring it, his children, their intention, Panda insisted, …. Such glimpsed details could go on almost forever, nearly 700 letters-worth of words and names and phrases in different writing and where the 'same' names or words may be spelt or simply look very different because inscribed by different people in varied hand-writing. Knowing their order and realising their import, both individually and as a set or collection of letters, is no swift or easy matter, because the vastness of content overwhelms and requires much time and concentrated attention.

4.3 The letters and the plenitude they represent might be considered graspable because they can be literally grasped, that is, held and read. But they are of great fragility and many are encased in sealed protective folders and cannot in the literal sense be grasped without imposing considerable wear and tear on the items within. The plenitude is there, but protectively sealed away. The result is a kind of bafflement – many specific particularities of content are glimpsed, but these cannot be fully read because the fragilities would mean that grasping them would entail their damage or even destruction.

4.4 These manuscripts, the 'actual letters', are 'the trace' in the originatory sense. But they are sealed within their containers – wrappers, folders and boxes – so their plenitude of content returns the research gaze to surface matters, to words and phrases here and there, rather than attentively reading their immense narrative detail. This invites familiarity because the eye often catches sight of a name – Dear Col Smith, Dear Mr Jenkins, Yours HF Fynn – but the researcher/reader is unable to follow these names into the rest of a letter's content.

5. The typescripts: instantiation 3

5.1 The Killie Campbell Library in Durban has within it a Fynn Collection. This has a different ontological character from the Fynn Papers in Pietermaritzburg. Its contents are variously a draft typescript by James Stuart regarding his wider work when editing Fynn's diary, typescripts of the diary and of Fynn's letters, Fynn's evidence to an 1852 Native Commission, the script of an interview carried out when the Fynn papers at the Killie

Campbell were opened for use in 1946, and some other items, including some manuscript originals.

5.2 On the surface, the contents of the Killie Campbell's Fynn Collection look like they were all produced by or came from James Stuart, the initial editor of the Fynn diary who was later joined by D. Malcolm, although the dates on some items seem out of synch with this. However, looking beyond this, what is in the Killie Campbell Fynn Collection are predominantly meta-versions, that is, they are typescripts, copies, of a biographical account, a diary, letters, evidence, an interview, with just a few associated manuscript originals. And focusing on the typescripts of the letters specifically, their existence has implications regarding thinking about originals and the ontology of 'the trace', especially given the fragile sealed off state of the manuscripts in the Pietermaritzburg Archives Depot.

5.3 'The trace' is generally assumed to refer to 'originals' where these exist, and a close proxy for them where they do not. Clearly the Fynn letter transcripts are not 'originals', because the manuscript letters exist elsewhere, in Pietermaritzburg. But the transcripts are not 'just' copies either, for someone other than their first or original writer has been at work in producing them, in the shape of a second writer/editor busily following the written words but doing something else as well.

5.4 This 'something else' is that the second writer/editor is an intermediary, a go-between whose work links present readers and original writers. The activity they carry out involves interpretation because their reading and re/writing necessarily includes deciding on handwriting issues, mistakes and omissions and so on, the whole range of editorial interventions in producing a 'readable' text that third parties – 'the reader' – will read. It involves in addition transmutation, because it shifts a letter from one form or ontology to another, from a basically private communication between the letter-writer and their addressee, to one with public third-party aspects, and it also shifts it from one genre of writing to another.

5.5 What this work produces is regularised and tamed content, in the sense that any issues are removed or ignored in achieving a smoothed-out text which third-party readers can easily grasp and read. Editorial violence is involved in this, in executing interpretational decisions regarding what and how and why aspects of the writing of the originals. But this is behind-the-scenes, for the convention is that few signs of this work appear on the surface and so for practical purposes can be ignored by third-party readers. The smoothed-out text of a

transcription brings together the work of following the name – the letter-writer, the addressee – and the work of following the detail – the widow of Capayi, aggressive movements, what Faku did and so on. But what it loses, pushes out of sight, leaves behind-the-scenes, is the frequently messy baffling content of manuscripts, and the often fierce tussles involved in coming to know them.

5.6 There is also something else going on here, concerning the character of 'the trace' itself, or rather what 'the trace' has become. If the Inventory delivers a shorthand or proxy for the structure of the Fynn collection of letters, and the manuscripts letters exist as a baffling cornucopia which highlights the content, then a set of transcriptions may seem to provide both structure and content in harmony. But, but: the Inventory and the transcriptions are shortcuts, and the manuscript letters are 'the trace', the point of origin. While transcriptions have a strong seductive appeal they are not in fact 'the thing itself', although they may appear close enough to be treated as a portal through which engaging with the thing itself can occur.

5.7 All transcriptions have this seductive appeal, and their siren song is entrancing: why struggle for hours making sense of just short passages of a manuscript, when many pages of transcripts can be easily read in minutes and then later perhaps checked against the originals? This is not an entrapment, the seduction is real, for there is indeed the delivery of something graspable and accessible, the easily read smoothed-out transcriptions.

5.8 However, this is not archive research without tears or fears, but an activity different in kind, rather than just degree, from such research. This is because 'later check the originals' is usually in practice either infinitely deferred or perhaps was never really on the agenda. It is likely, more than likely, that the majority of readers of letters in transcription projects such as, for instance, my own *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* (www.oliveschreiner.org), will both start and stop by engaging with the transcriptions, although in this particular case there are built-in mechanisms to (try to) push the reader's activity back to whole Schreiner letters, thence to the manuscripts, collections and archives.

5.9 The reader response, that 'the transcripts become the thing', cannot be treated as simply recalcitrance or lack of awareness, not least because this is to ignore great changes happening to 'the trace' (origins, the source) because of such projects and the digital technologies that underpin them. It is also important to recognise that their deferral and transmutation of the trace is by no means new – it exists wherever there has been editorial interpretation and the transmutation of manuscript to typescript/print, and so it is associated with all editions of

letters and not just present-day electronic ones.

5.10 What is new in the current context is the paradox of vanishing or bracketing the editorial function – the software engineers, data managers, transcribers, editors, who have been at work – in digital projects, the very medium which could most readily give expression to them. It could most readily do so because its capacities can include more material and editorial commentary with just incidental marginal cost. Rather than those of paper, postage and reproduction, its costs are intellectual and ethical: the editorial 'I' did it like this, because, resulting in, so the reader… Preserving silence about such matters also preserves the ability of editors, or rather of the editorial function, to remain unscrutinised even though it is central to what is produced. What is lost by bracketing away the work involved in the editorial function, not by definition but by choice, is making available for reflection and analysis the work of interpretation and transmutation that is central to the editorial function. These are crucial matters for readers, because knowing about such work enables them to make better sense of the resulting edited version that is produced.

6. The trace rejuvinax?

6.1 It may seem to be the case that 'transcription plus digital image = the thing itself', the trace rejuvinax because made available to all who have a computer at their disposal. But as a moment's thought indicates, this is not 'the thing itself' but in fact a two-dimensional parallax – it is not a thing-in-itself but image thereof that exists in parallel to the manuscript sources, and it does so in a way that is context-bereft and accompanied by interpretational violence. That is, it removes the substance, seriality, provenance, of the letters or other manuscript originals concerned by rendering them into another representational medium with its own ontology, and does this in effect by definition because this is characteristic of the representational medium involved.

6.2 Many, perhaps even the most, editors of digital projects appear to assume that if a digital image is provided then the scattered letters of X or Y are in effect brought together and presented to readers, and underlying this is the view that this is as good as, and perhaps even better than, the originals because what is scattered is brought together in a transmuted form and made whole. In fact this makes something that never existed, for letters are written in order to be dispersed and never existed as a collection, a whole. And – something that needs

to be highlighted – for the now very large number of people engaging with letters and other historical sources through a 'secondary' electronic medium, there is no secondary about it, because for them for all practical purposes the trace is seen to inhere in the representational parallel form.

6.3 'Send me all the Olive Schreiner letters', I was asked a while back, with the researcher concerned having little patience with my explanation that these were scattered in many collections and archives world-wide, nor with my comment that what was on the website were transcripts not originals, and especially not with my suggestion that they could assemble the entire 5000 transcripts themselves. For them, the letters were what the *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* contains, and what they wanted sent were 'the letters' complete and delivered to their desk in one tidy folder so they could read and not do anything else. This is in a way where electronic projects came in the door, to provide something complete and undivided as a meta-collection re-representing the trace and which readers could engage and read 'the lot'. Since then, the conceptual universe has continued to shift and now the parallax form of electronic editions have re-positioned what was once seen as a meta-level re-representation as though the trace itself. And for many, like my interlocutor, it has become so.

7. Some observations

7.1 So where does this leave 'the trace' and the related matter of WWW work on the Henry Francis Fynn letters? The discussion is unfinished, for the debates are ongoing and necessarily so because developments in technology and representational media continue apace. Also, the points raised here are not a matter of good and bad but of people with different agendas struggling to make sense of and response to the possibilities in productive ways, and of course issues also arise in other ways of working with letters, including print editions. That being said, there are some broad observations to be made.

7.2 The technology genie is now out of the bottle and is not going to be put back in. The bifurcated character of 'the trace' (traceness now inheres both in originals and in digital versions), and that there are consequently overlapping ontologies here, need to be grappled with. This would become more widely apparent if the conventional bracketing of the editorial function and the work involved in producing meta-versions did not hold continue to sway and protect the editorial function from scrutiny.

7.3 In relation to the Fynn letters, once the Inventory and the transcriptions of them are

reckoned with, there is no turning back. Like it or not, ‘the trace’ here has become both the manuscripts and these related meta-forms, the transcriptions especially. And as with triangulation generally, these are less three different ways in which the ‘same’ thing can be seen and compared, than they are three different forms or genres. They share an object at the core – some observations made in writing by one person to another, about people and events of times now gone but of the moment when they wrote – while they represent or re-represent this in very different ways. There are three ontologies here, not one and two proxies.

7.4 As I have argued across various published work (see website in References), an epistolarium (all the letters written by someone, and where possible also those sent to them) develops with characteristic practices, particularly when there are long-term correspondences involved. These include an emergent frame of reference, favoured topics of discussion, meaningful turns of phrase, avoided subjects and so on. And while letters remain wedded to their referential base of the things that happened and the people who did them, these writerly aspects also lend a fictive (artfully represented), rather than fictional (made up), cast to what is inscribed and read. For Maurice Blanchot (1955), all fictions have strong heterotopic aspects. That is, these are representational worlds or spaces that have their own temporal orders, casts of characters, rhythms and plot motifs, ethical concerns and so on, with a complex interrelationship existing between this and the material world that these writings are of and about.

7.5 A similar argument can be made about the fictive elements of epistolarity. A future interrogation of the content of the Fynn letters will discuss the heterotopic aspects of the different sources, including how they orientate to or re-orient ‘the trace’.

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