

# **A Woman's Work is Never (Un-)Done: A Response to "Contemplating Women's Imperial Service: Mabel Bent as Photographer, Travel Writer, and Collector," by Esther Wetzel**

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Esther Wetzel's essay on the British explorer, writer, and photographer Mabel Bent (1847–1929) joins in on a larger scholarly project of recovering the work of women in their various professions and social roles in the British Empire. Wetzel specifically aims to uncover Mabel Bent's implication as a married woman in the matrix of British colonial rule and its systems of knowledge production and epistemic power. As Wetzel shows in her reading of Mabel Bent's published diaries of the 1891 expedition to Rhodesia (today's Zimbabwe), she matched her husband, archeologist and anthropologist Theodore Bent, in terms of verve, adventurous spirit, ambition, and ingenuity. He, in turn, held her in high regard not only as his companion but also as a skilled and resourceful collaborator. Together, the Bents were remarkably successful in generating what Walter Mignolo calls "a narrative of difference" (470), which directly fed and perpetuated the discourse of coloniality. Investigating Mabel Bent's "involvement in colonial knowledge production" as a photographer, writer, and collector, Wetzel contributes not only to the "de-colonial epistemic shift" that "brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics" (Mignolo 453). First and foremost, Wetzel's work promotes gender equality.

Wetzel's argument rests on the presupposition that, while being equally privileged by race and class on their African journey, the Bents' genders played out very differently, especially so once the fieldwork was done and the process of colonial knowledge production went to the next, discursive stage. Incorporated into Theodore's publications, Mabel's photographs and travel texts worked mainly for her husband's benefit. Unremunerated and unacknowledged as was typical for female labor, her contributions helped to solidify his status as an expert author, while she was denied full acknowledgment of her competence and authorship. By conceptualizing Mabel Bent's productivity within the framework of service, that is "the application of competence for the benefit of another" (Maglio and Spohrer 18), Wetzel finds a way to disentangle the married woman from what she calls a "complex network of service-relations" that appropriated her work and rendered her invisible as an author.

Mabel Bent's diaries relay the couple's expedition to Mashonaland, which culminated in the spectacular find of the so-called Soapstone Birds at the Great Zimbabwe ruins. Removed from the site by the Bent party as centerpieces of British colonial *Raubkunst*, the Birds were restituted to the African country as late as 2020 (see Matenga). Commissioned by Cecil Rhodes, who opened South African territories for "unabashed plunder" (Brisch 37), Theodore carried out archeological investigations and Mabel acted both as chronicler and field photographer during the trip. For *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland: Being a Record of Excavation and Exploration in 1891*, his most successful publication with both an academic and a general audience, Theodore Bent sifted through the notes, letters, and photographs his wife had made during the expedition. Whatever material Theodore considered useful was excavated like an archeological find: dislodged, collected and prepared to organically blend into his narrative in a process which resembles, if on a discursive level, the "translocation of cultural heritage that has affected Africa for the benefit and profit" of the colonizers (Savoy and Sarr 62). As the beneficiary of his wife's many talents, Theodore was unfazed by the exploitative nature of the collaborative arrangement. Colonizing his wife's texts and photographs to absorb them in his composite *oeuvre*, Theodore made sure that public recognition was mostly his. Mabel Bent was eclipsed by her husband. Mabel, it seems, played the exemplary part of a 19<sup>th</sup>-century married woman and productive amateur. But even if Mabel Bent was just any wife backing any old husband (and clearly Wetzel thinks she was not), twenty-first-century feminist, decolonial scholarship is obliged to "de-link" the partners and discursively reconstitute, if you will, to the (collaborating) wife the work and credits that rightly

belong to her. The concept of service facilitates such a “de-linking.” It exposes not only the limitations of marriage that held productive women at bay in the 19<sup>th</sup> century but also acknowledges the very aspects of married life that promoted their activities in the first place.

Mabel Bent’s is the case of an unconventional, restless woman who met a like-minded soul to escape a dreary, homebound existence and who actively sought and created an opportunity to hone her talents and be productive in her own right (Brisch xii). It was married life and collaboration with her husband that let her explore her power as an imperial British subject abroad and to forge her expressive range, mainly her skills as a field photographer. But marriage also provided the legal and emotional grounds on which the husband appropriated her work without legal consequence. With Mabel Bent’s diaries recovered from the archive, both her writerly and photographic influence on her husband’s monograph can be traced in detail. And if, so far, her photographic work had only survived as etchings in Theodore’s text, her views on Mashonaland now also exist as ekphrases in her diaries, doubly mediated by Mabel Bent’s camera and pen.

Gerald Brisch’s commented first edition of diaries of 2012 acknowledges Mabel Bent in her own right, and Wetzel’s scholarship follows suit. A close reading of the edition’s title page proves the piecemeal procedure by way of which Brisch disentangles the wife from the husband. Respectively adorned by the poetic titles and subtitles *World Enough, and Time: Greece and the Levantine Littoral*, *Make our Sun Stand Still: The African Journeys*, and *Deserts of Vast Eternity: Southern Arabia and Persia*, the edited volumes I, II, and III of Mabel Bent’s diaries nod to the Romantic diction and sentiment of 19<sup>th</sup>-century British travelogues. The titles specifically emulate Theodore Bent’s monograph *The Ruined Cities of Mashonaland: Being a Record of Excavation and Exploration in 1891*.

Brisch’s edition piggybacks not only on the titular stylistics of Theodore Bent’s travelogue, which propelled the self-trained archeologist and anthropologist to fame with the British general audience. He also jumps on the bandwagon by explicitly naming Theodore Bent in the over-title of Mabel’s edited diaries. If “sets of several volumes” typically share an “over-title” to provide the “generic indication” (Genette 696), *The Travel Chronicles of Mrs. J. Theodore Bent* does more. It scaffolds the author’s marital status—clearly an anachronism—to linguistically reenact the legal doctrine of coverture, which, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, subsumed the wife’s name, identity, and accomplishments under her husband’s.

Yet, covering Mabel under Theodore's famous name scrambles the chronology of the Bents' textual productions. Mabel's *Chronicles* trail her husband's *Ruined Cities*, but her original diaries precede it. As Brisch states in the introduction to Volume II of *Chronicles*, "Mabel logged their journeys for ... fifteen years — Theodore using the diaries liberally for his own writings as *aides memoires*" (xxi–xxii). Contrary to what the front matter of Brisch's edition suggests at this point, Mabel's diaries came first, and Theodore's monograph was crafted from textual material that Mabel (only maybe) provided entirely selflessly as a source to be used without attribution, to be overwritten, and relegated to the sidelines. To phrase it in narratological terms, Brisch's titular coverture rearranges the chronology and thus the relationality between the two texts. Mabel's diaries supplemented Theodore's fieldnotes both of which functioned as intertexts to *Ruined Cities*. Contrary to what the overttitle suggests, Theodore's *Ruined Cities* is not the hypo-text to Mabel's *Chronicles* as hypertext.

Appearing within a year after the expedition ended, *Ruined Cities* is built on textual territory that was searched and ransacked for valuable data, detailed commentary, idiosyncratic observations all of which not of the author's own making. To be fair, and putting aside polemic suggestions of Theodore's colonizing practice as a writer, it must be mentioned that he does acknowledge his wife in the opening chapter of *Ruined Cities*. Here he crows over his sponsors' doubts "as to the advisability of a lady undertaking such a journey" (4). He praises Mabel's experience as a traveler and, oddly, hails her sturdy health along with her skills as a photographer and, generally, her positive influence on the expedition's "ultimate success" (4–5). Theodore publicly applauds his wife for managing "to take a good many photographs under circumstances of exceptional difficulty" during the expedition (4–5). Yet he fails to name her in the list of illustrations. Later in the text, he even implies that he himself was involved in the photographic work: "One herd of zebra, numbering about fifty, stood staring at us so long, at a distance of not more than a hundred yards, that we were able to photograph them twice" (337). Speaking in the plural, he appears as much as a photographer as Mabel Bent, whose contribution as a writer, let alone as co-author of this work, go unmentioned.

Correctly assessing that his monograph benefits from the evidential function of photography, more than it would from the merely decorative sketches he himself painted in Zimbabwe, Theodore opts to employ etchings of Mabel's images to validate his account. As far as we can tell, the married partners were happy enough with their travel and work arrangement which, dividing labor but not recognition, reflects the gender inequality typical of their time and class. Or

rather, it goes to show how the Bents privately respected each other as partners, travel companions, and collaborators. But by playing by the skewed rules of academic professionalism and married propriety, Mabel was left with no other choice but to see her contribution efface in the public realm.

By the next line of the *Chronicles*' rather complex "title apparatus" (Genette 695), *Mabel Bent's Diaries of 1883–1898, from the Archive of the Joint Library of the Hellenic and Roman Societies, London*, Brisch finally uncovers the coverture, signaling that his quotation of the historical obscuration strategy is ironic. The line contradicts the titles, subtitles as well as the over-title as it performs two acts of uncovering. Firstly, it explicitly mentions the name Mabel Bent. Acknowledging the handwritten manuscript as her rightful intellectual property effectively welds the wife from the repressive reaches of the English common law. It acknowledges her as an independent legal entity and a female person who is also a writer.

Secondly, the line also explicates the name and location of the archive in which the manuscript had been buried in oblivion. Implicitly, this line thus uncovers a series of processual steps that elevate Mabel Bent's diaries to the status of a published work of significance. The practices of transcribing and supplementing the archival find with additional material that comments, contextualizes, and visualizes the original text not only recognizes cultural value but such is the implication also affords it. Dug up from the archive, the manuscript gets supplemented and re-signified. No longer just preliminary and auxiliary, it changes from secondary relevance into valuable work. Thus prepared, the published work circulates both discursively and materially in the public realm where it interferes in ongoing processes of knowledge formation. To the community of readers, scholarly in particular, the editors' quasi-archeological excavation of the diaries from the archival mounds complements the spectacular find of the Soapstone Birds.

Organized in different levels on the page, which also imply a hierarchy, each part of the title correlates with the others. Together they form a narrative. To phrase it with Roland Barthes discussing Tzvetan Todorov, any "unilateral investigation" of these lines fails to grasp their meaning (87). To understand the narrative that the title page tells, attention must be paid to its "construction in 'storeys'" (87). The story told by the storeyed title apparatus is the following: Published as *Chronicles* the diaries are retroactively identified as independent texts. Resurrected from the archive by Brisch, the diaries assume the form and status of a published text, questioning the status of the work which they saturated by being effaced. No longer dismissible as auxiliary notes, a second-order text that is rightfully absorbed by the first-order project to which it contributes, the *Chronicles* con-

sequently, albeit somewhat incorrectly, become the hypo-text to Theodore Bent's *Ruined Cities*, which now appears as the hypertext. In other words, Mabel's published diaries compete with Theodore's monograph over which text is the original and who is its author. Given the intricate entanglement of both writers and texts, one cannot any longer rightfully assert Theodore's sole authorship.

To conclude, Brisch's fine titular procedure establishes Mabel Bent as an author on par with her husband. Yet, in an era of epistemic de-colonialization, full recognition comes with full responsibility, and thankfully so. Conceptualizing Mabel's activities in terms of service, Esther Wetzel's intersectional feminist approach seconds Brisch but additionally brings into focus Mabel Bent's role as a colonial agent who was actively engaged in the production of colonial knowledge and epistemic violence. As Wetzel notes, exploiting "her service relationships to fashion a life to her liking," Mabel Bent was unfazed by the disservice done by her both to African cultural heritage and to Black African subjects. In this respect, too, Mabel and Theodore Bent were kindred spirits.

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