

## GUEST LECTURE

### Cedric Van Dijck

#### ***Blue Books: Woolf, Forster and Mockerie on British Africa, 1919-34***

Thursday, November 17

8:30-10:00 am

HS F



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Modernist literature about Sub-Saharan Africa is littered with paperwork, from school certificates in Wole Soyinka's *The Interpreters* and account books in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to passports in Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa*. While often overlooked, these functional documents constituted the way individuals first encountered the relentlessly bureaucratic machine of empire. Taking its cue from recent work on Global Modernism, this paper asks how red tape could be harnessed to make the case *against* empire. To answer this question, I turn to three blue books on the British presence in North and East Africa: Leonard and Virginia Woolf's *Empire and Commerce in Africa* (1919), E.M. Forster's *Notes on Egypt* (1920) and Parmenas Githendu Mockerie's *An African Speaks for his People* (1934). Presented to political committees and published by small presses, these memoranda constituted, as Mockerie puts it, "our honest efforts for making the truth known to the outside world, especially to the British people." What image of modernism can be drawn—and what kind of history of the modernist engagement with colonial Africa can be told—if we approach the movement through this overlooked genre? My paper draws on a new book-length project, *Paperwork*, which will explore the material artefacts of the bureaucratic state in Sub-Saharan Africa (1884-1966). By digging through piles of paperwork, often discarded and unnoticed, I aim to assemble a new understanding of modernism—as a politically engaged and globally oriented phenomenon.