

Utopian Archives, Decolonial Affordances

(Introduction to Special Issue)

Paul Basu and Ferdinand de Jong

Abstract: Colonial archives constituted a technology that enabled the collection, storage, ordering, retrieval and exchange of knowledge as an instrument of colonial governance. It is not surprising that when such archives were inherited by independent nation-states they were not given the authority previously granted them and have often been neglected. What, then, is the future of colonial archives in postcolonial nations? How should we rethink these archives in relation to decolonial futures? This essay introduces a collection of articles that explore the repertoires of action latent in archives and how colonial archives are being reconfigured to imagine decolonial futures.

Keywords: archives, decolonisation, memory, affordances, postcolonial futures

An archive may be largely about ‘the past’ but it is always ‘re-read’ in the light of the present and the future: and in that reprise, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, it always flashes up before us as *a moment of danger*. (Hall 2001: 92)

Established in the nineteenth century, colonial archives constituted a technology for the collection, storage, ordering, retrieval and exchange of knowledge as an instrument of colonial governance (Thomas 1993; Cohn 1996).¹ It need not surprise us, then, that the archives inherited by independent states have not been given the authority that imperial states originally granted them. Colonial archives have often been neglected by the nation-states to which they were bequeathed at independence (Buckley 2005). What, then, is the future of colonial archives in postcolonial nations? Does the disintegration of the colonial archive signify that the postcolonial state can do without its authority? Or, as Allman (2013: 127) asks, is this archival disintegration another symptom of the ‘failed state’? Do we simply accept archival decay as a sign of decolonialisation? Or should we perhaps look for the ‘second lives’ of archives; instances where the archive is appropriated and even turned against the state (Weld 2014)? How do we rethink the archive in relation to decolonial futures? This special issue reflects on these different aspects of the decolonial affordances of the archive.

In recent years, the archive has emerged as an object of interest in a range of disciplinary contexts. This ‘archival turn’ is partly indebted to a Foucauldian analysis of the archive as an artefact of knowledge production. Although its instruments of surveillance and classification seemed incommensurate to the landscape it sought to measure and map (Arondekar 2009: 12), the nineteenth-century imperial archive provided the conditions of possibility for the making of a global public sphere in which information circulated across the world. Since the colonial government was reluctant to open its archives to the colonised

(Chakrabarty 2010: 76), however, the archive's democratic potential remained limited. As a domain for matters of public interest, the public space produced by the colonial archive was and, to a large degree, has remained utopian. Always falling short of its promises founded in Enlightenment principles, the archive is a utopian institution (Richards 1993). But although Utopia was never realised in the colony, postcolonial citizens still pursue utopian projects through activating latent archival affordances that depart from those associated with imperial rule.

While a Foucauldian analysis of the archive privileges its capacity to exert epistemic violence, Appadurai may be right in stating that 'perhaps Foucault had too dark a vision of the panoptical functions of the archive' (Appadurai 2003: 16). Postcolonial authors have situated the archive squarely in postcolonial public spheres. Stuart Hall's (2001) observations on the archive do not emphasize its classificatory, taxonomic logic, but instead celebrate it as a 'living' institution that is by definition incomplete, and open to the future. Postcolonial authors see archives as 'interruptions' or 'interventions', privileging not so much the legislative aspect of such institutions, but their transformative capacities. Indeed, the concept of the postcolonial archive must privilege 'epistemic disobedience' in order to generate decolonial freedom (cf. Mignolo 2011). The essays presented here examine epistemic disobedience and uncertainty through exploring the unintended ability of archives to engage in postcolonial predicaments and contribute to the making of decolonial public spheres. As well as foregrounding anthropological voices in contemporary debates around the archive, these papers complicate archival dynamics in both time and space. Such dynamics exist neither 'here and now' nor 'then and there', but are caught up in multidirectional flows of texts, images, embodied practices and discursive strategies that transcend geographical and

historical boundaries and are as much about Europe as the many ‘elsewheres’ against which Europe imagined itself.

The archival turn

This special issue comes at a moment in which the archives are the subject of intense academic scrutiny. Considering this burgeoning attention to archives, it has been suggested that we are currently experiencing an ‘archival turn’. How do we account for the unparalleled attention to this subject? Some have suggested that this archival turn has no particular object, as the term ‘archive’ is used in a variety of ways that lack a consistent definition of the concept (Manoff 2004; Chivallon, this issue). The rise of interest in the archive is most often attributed to the publication of Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1996), originally given as a lecture at the opening of the Freud Museum in London in 1994, subsequently published in French, as *Mal d’archives* (Derrida 1995). Whilst it is undeniable that *Archive Fever* has contributed to the feverish attention to archives, Stoler rightly points out that critical interest in the archive preceded its publication (Stoler 2009: 44). Academic engagement with the subject probably derived its practical impetus from the experimentation of historians with ‘sources’. In the 1970s, whilst the *Annales* school was using large datasets to arrive at reliable statements about the *longue durée*, some historians, such as Leroi Ladurie, Natalie Zemon Davis, and Carlo Ginzburg, started to interrogate the archives of interrogators, reading these archives ‘against the grain’. Reading reports of the Inquisition, these historians looked for the ‘testimonies’ of the interrogated. After the Eichmann trial in 1961, testimony was indeed increasingly valued for its ‘undocumented’ truths, which compensated for the silences of the archive; the voices never recorded (Wiewiora 2006). But even as historians experimented with the archive and its silences they failed to reflect on it in an epistemological sense (Steedman 2011).

The philosophical inflection of the archival turn is best attributed to the publication of *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1972 [1969]), the single most important text to initiate the deconstructivist turn in the social sciences and humanities. In it, Foucault examines how the production of knowledge is governed by tacit epistemologies, constituting discourses that determine what can and cannot be said. In Foucault's understanding, the archive is precisely that: 'The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events' (1972: 146). Rejecting the notion of the archive as an institution, Foucault defines it as a 'practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated' (*Ibid.*). Departing from a definition of archive as a system of files, the archive is here defined as the practice that *determines* what is filed. This epistemic shift signalled a sea change in academic interest in the archive. Stoler has identified this shift as a move from 'archive-as-source' to 'archive-as-subject' (2009: 44). The current archival turn, we suggest, should be seen as an engagement with the tension between the archive as institution and repository and as metaphor for 'the law of what can be said'.

The colonial archive and its postcolonial critique

The relationship between anthropology and the archive has already been explored in the context of imperialism. The first study to that effect, by Bernard Cohn, examined how the British employed in India a range of technologies of power, including that of the production of knowledge (Cohn 1987, 1996). Beyond the Orientalist study of texts (Said 1978), such knowledge included censuses and statistics, which were accumulated in archives of modern governmentality (Anderson 1991, Dirks 1993). In the gathering of knowledge in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India, natives could only be informants or interpreters, but not

scholars, and the production of colonial knowledge preceded – and informed – formats of ethnological and anthropometric data collecting later adopted by anthropology. Indeed it is no coincidence that the administrator H. H. Risley was both the Commissioner of the 1901 Census of India and the Director of the Anthropological Survey of India that commenced the same year. Relying on the production of anthropological data, the colonial state turned the colonial subject into a figure of ethnography and changed itself from a ‘revenue state’ to an ‘ethnographic state’ (Dirks 2001). Through the employment of native informants, the imperial state generated a mass of data that were subsequently transported to archives centred in London, described by Richards as ‘an archival complex’ (Richards 1993). The apparatus of the Victorian archive operated as a prototype for a ‘global system of domination’ by creating an apparatus ‘for controlling territory by producing, distributing, and consuming information about it’ (Richards 1993: 17), constituting the British Empire as the first information society.

Paradoxically, at the very moment that the creation of national archives in European nation-states enabled the writing of history, this form of knowledge production erased the historicity of the colonised. Reflecting on how this particular governmentality legitimised colonial rule, Dirks suggests that while ‘history told the story of the nation, anthropology explained why a nation had not yet emerged’ (Dirks 2002: 57). After independence, this problem continued to haunt the historians of an independent subcontinent. As colonial archives had erased the voice of the ‘natives’, Indian historians wondered to what extent the history of the subalterns could yet be written given their silencing. Considering their absence in the archives, Spivak (1988) asked: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’

The question to what extent histories ‘from below’ can be written from the colonial archive has raised an extensive debate across the global South. Historians have addressed the problem

of subaltern silence as one of sources (Shetty and Bellamy 2000), but the problem remains largely of an epistemological nature. In his poetic exploration of Haiti's history, Trouillot (1995) asks what makes some narratives powerful enough to pass as 'history' while others remain 'silenced'? His answer is summarised thus:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moments of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).

(Trouillot 1995: 26)

In this systematic inventory of the production of 'silences', archives appear as the decisive moment of fact assembly that determine what kind of stories can be told (Burton 2005). For many historians the archive has remained a source that must be read 'against the grain'. This 'extractive' attitude towards the archive has been criticised by the anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler (2009), who has advocated that one should instead read the archive 'along the grain'. Adopting a Foucauldian approach to the archives of the Dutch Indies, Stoler has proposed to mine the archive, not for historical data, but for those epistemological and political anxieties that constitute the colonial common sense on which the archive was built in the first place as a technology of rule. For Stoler, such anxieties pertain to race and sexuality. By reading the archive for traces of doubt, fear, and uncertainty, Stoler establishes what the most prevalent concerns were in establishing and maintaining a colonial common sense. In a comparable project, Anjali Arondekar (2009) has read the imperial archive of colonial India for its truth effects on sexuality, pursuing the question how sexuality was made visible in the colonial archive and through this process disclosed the limits of that visibility (2009: 3). Both

Stoler and Arondekar read the archive for traces of an order that was unstable, and thereby question the efficacy of the archive as a Panopticon, looking for the ‘recalcitrant events’ that show the mutability of the imperial archive.

Stoler’s insistence that her study of the colonial archive constitutes an ‘ethnography’ is well taken. While we laud such sophisticated attempts at ‘reading the archives’, we wish to establish that these engagements with the archive are necessarily indebted to the ‘literary turn’ and present a different epistemological engagement than ours. The essays presented in this special issue do not ‘read’ the archives, but engage with their materialities and performativities instead. Following recent work in material and visual culture studies, which has called attention to the materiality of the archive of colonial photography (e.g. Edwards and Hart 2004; Banks and Vokes 2010), we analyze the archive as a material object rather than a text. Anthropology has largely left the archival turn unacknowledged, but the anthropology of photography has recognised the legacy of visual documents as an archive of our discipline. In our engagement with the archive, we hope to make some steps towards further decolonisation of anthropology, acknowledging that its history is entangled with the history of the archive (Pels 1997: 175-77). But rather than approach the archive as an instrument of surveillance, we look at the appropriations of the archive as a technology. In the articles presented in this issue, the mutability of the colonial archive is acknowledged and explored through its multiple and unanticipated affordances in the present.

Utopian transcendences and archival affordances

As a technology of surveillance that aspired to generate a complete set of documents on a particular subject, the archive is a utopian institution (Richards 1993). As a Panopticon of knowledge, the archive is a Utopia. As with all utopias, this is an idea rather than a project

realised in practice. But if we acknowledge that this utopian character of the archive pertains to an archival logic that is not shared by postcolonial citizens (nor indeed by many others), we must reconsider this notion of an epistemological utopia. Here we follow Gordin, Tilley and Prakash when they assert that ‘utopian visions are never arbitrary’, but are expressive of the ‘conditions of possibility’ that give rise to them (2010: 4, citing Foucault). Like Gordin et al, we are interested in examining utopian imaginaries not only insofar as they articulate people’s aspirations for the future, but also for what they reveal of the abiding social concerns and cultural formations of the present – the conditions, that is, which generate the desire for utopian transcendence as well as the particular forms such transcendence takes (Gordin et al. 2010: 4). While they are not exactly inverses of present day dystopic situations, utopian expressions are at least indexical to the circumstances for which they provide an ‘answering image’ or an escape. All utopias are thus structured by present conditions and are necessarily constructed, bricolage-like, from resources available in the present sociocultural milieu. Such resources are themselves legacies from the past, and thus, in a commonplace yet complex temporal conjunction, the past (or, at least, the ‘present past’) provides an important reservoir of possibilities informing the construction of future imaginaries (Basu and Modest 2015). We are interested, therefore, in how historically-situated actors access and manipulate the past in the present to serve their future-orientated projects. The archive, in particular, provides an effective technology through which traces of the past are made available in the present, and we are interested in how both literal and metaphorical archival spaces, materials and processes contribute to the shaping of future possibilities.

Kirsten Weld’s (2014) study of the archives of the military dictatorship in Guatemala provides a telling example of the utopian possibilities of archives. After decades of political oppression, a small contingent of human rights activists acquired access to the long-lost secret

archives of the National Police. As agents in the country's counterinsurgency, the National Police had gathered information on its alleged political opponents in an estimated 75 million documents. Weld examines how these archives had constituted a panoptical vision of Guatemalan society and had been used to track and pursue political opponents. After democratisation of the political system, the Guatemalan government tried to keep the files secret from the post-conflict truth commission until the archives were re-discovered in a derelict building in the national capital. Weld's study is about the struggle of human rights activists to access the documents and uncover their contents. With great sensitivity, she documents how the files are made available for the persecution of those responsible for 'the missing', and how the archive is appropriated for the struggle against impunity. For the activists, Weld (2014: 237) states, the archives 'are sites of hope and aspiration'. But beyond this, the archives are also sites of political struggle. It is this struggle that Weld explores, establishing how the activists 'came to claim physical and intellectual control over documents that had once been used to control them' (Ibid: 31). Indeed, after the initial logic of surveillance and social control, the National Police archives afford a secondary logic of transitional justice. In that process of transition, whilst the activists became historians of the counterinsurgency, the archives shaped their sense of self and transformed their subjectivities. Thus, in the different ways in which the archives have been constituted and used, Weld discerns different 'archival logics' (Ibid: 6).

The archive, we might say, affords access to the past in the present and in so doing shapes futures. The contribution of archives in the 'development of society' has been recognised and is foregrounded by international agencies such as UNESCO. We note, for example, the definition of archival value articulated in the universal declaration on archives adopted by the International Council on Archives and endorsed by UNESCO in 2011:

Archives record decisions, actions and memories. Archives are a unique and irreplaceable heritage passed from one generation to another. Archives are managed from creation to preserve their value and meaning. They are authoritative sources of information underpinning accountable and transparent administrative actions. They play an essential role in the development of societies by safeguarding and contributing to individual and community memory. Open access to archives enriches our knowledge of human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality of life. (International Council on Archives 2011)

Alas, as David Anderson's (2011) work on the controversy over the 'lost' (now 'migrated') colonial archives relating to the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya demonstrates, these visions of transparency and open access are themselves utopian. As Derrida has argued, 'There is no political power without control of the archive' (1995: 11), and nowhere was this more evident than in the context of the colonial archive, in which the colonial state held a monopoly over the production of knowledge used as instruments of rule, and where one finds the most explicit demonstration of archival power representing a 'breach of democracy' (Derrida 1995: 11).

Thus, while the archive affords access to the past and shapes futures, it does so in particular, power-inflected ways. Our objective in this collection of essays, then, is to consider the affordances of the archive as a political technology of memory and locus of authority in the imagining of decolonial futures. We adopt the concept of affordances from Gibson (1977), who used the term to refer to the 'action possibilities' latent in the environment, and from subsequent scholarship that has applied the concept to technology and

materiality (e.g. Gaver 1991; Knappert 2004). As Gaver notes, the concept of affordances ‘encourages us to consider devices, technologies and media in terms of the actions they make possible. ... [I]t allows us to focus not on technologies or users alone, but on the fundamental interactions between the two’ (1991: 83). The affordance of an object, as Knappert notes, is a relational property shared between an object and agent, and is also highly situational – ‘an artefact’s affordances may change according to the situation in which they are found’ (2004: 46). Furthermore the repertoire of actions that an object affords may be more or less apparent to different actors in different situations, and such affordances may also be subject to social negotiation and contestation (Knappert 2004: 46-47).

The concept of affordances helps us to understand what repertoires of action an archive makes possible. As originally conceived, the colonial archive afforded forms of surveillance and statecraft that were fundamental to the governance of people, territories and other resources (Cohn 1996; Pels 1997; Stoler 2002). For historians, the same archival deposits constitute a source of primary data and evidence that affords academic practices of verification used to substantiate the truth claims of their scholarly exegeses (Dirks 2002; Burton 2005). As discussed above, the archive affords the possibility for researchers to read both along the archival grain and, more typical of postcolonial scholarship, against it, enabling scholars to investigate historical cultures of colonialism, but also to critique them and resist the continuing legacy of colonial power relations. Though largely about the past, as Hall argues, the archive is always “‘re-read’ in the light of the present and the future” (2001: 92). For Hall such re-readings constitute an archival ‘reprise’: *moments of danger* that may subvert archival intent even while invoking the archive’s own authority. Latent within the archive, it might be said, is the archive’s own dissolution – but also its rebirth. Such archival dissolutions and resurrections are described in a number of the articles collected together here.

As these essays attest, in different situations and for different actors, the archive (as form, content, institution and, indeed, myth) affords many other action possibilities in the present, not least actions that may be mobilised in people's ongoing attempts to transcend ongoing conditions of coloniality (Quijano 2007).

Defining the archive: substrates and traces

In 1974 the Society of American Archivists' committee on terminology published a list of over 200 key terms which, in aggregate, might be said to delineate a technical understanding of the archival apparatus (Evans et al 1974). This glossary includes core processes, procedures and practices such as 'accessioning', 'authentication', 'classification' and 'declassification'. It includes archival artefacts such as 'records', 'registers', and 'planning documents', as well as archival principles such as 'access', 'archival integrity', 'custodianship', and 'provenance'. Within this glossary, 'archives' themselves are defined in three ways:

- (1) The noncurrent records of an organization or institution preserved because of their continuing value; also referred to, in this sense, as archival materials or archival holdings.
 - (2) The agency responsible for selecting, preserving, and making available archival materials; also referred to as an archival agency.
 - (3) The building or part of a building where such materials are located; also referred to as the archival repository.
- (Evans et al 1974: 417)

As with the universal declaration on archives, the apparent neutrality of such a definition can be misleading, but it also provides an opportunity for interrogating more closely these core attributes, including the nature of archival holdings, the agency of archival

institutions, and the architecture of the archival repository itself (physical spaces, but also architectonic systems of archival storage, retrieval and management). This complex agglomeration of buildings, institutions, techniques and technologies is all too readily bound up in the overarching concept of the archival ‘substrate’, and regarded as providing merely a material support for extractable deposits of immaterial ‘knowledge’. At the same time, however, it is this substrate that makes possible the retrieval and reconfiguration of such knowledges (or, on the contrary, bars access and wards off those Benjaminian moments of danger). There is, in fact, no separation between the archival substrate and the ‘content’ that it bears: the archived past is knowable only through its material, visual, sonic or performative trace.

When considering the different affordances of the archive, we need to remember its ‘inescapable materiality’ to which Achille Mbembe (2002) has drawn our attention. Indeed, national archives are often housed in impressive buildings of Neoclassical design that assume authority by indexing the Ancient Greek polis. In classical Greek, *arkheion* designated a residence, the domicile of the *archon* that kept the legal documents of its owner. Although it does not only contain legal documents, the modern archive still betrays its origins. Mbembe suggests that the ‘status and power of the archive derive from this entanglement of building and documents’ (Mbembe 2002: 19). It is for this reason that Mbembe claims that the archive itself is not ‘a piece of data, but a status’ (*Ibid*: 20). We can now see how the archives authorise the information that they hold inscribed in substrates.

This sets up a series of fundamental tensions between the materiality of the archive, the authority that it is assigned, and the memory it is supposed to keep. How these tensions should be understood in relation to each other is, if anything, an anthropological question par

excellence. In his study on collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs reminded us that ‘no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections’ (Halbwachs 1992: 43). Rather than posit the existence of some ‘authentic’ memory that can exist without support, Halbwachs recognised that memory requires a framework. Of course, the question about memory and its relation to history has been at the heart of an ongoing debate about cultural transmission. Pierre Nora, in his important contribution to this debate, posited an antagonism between history and memory, arguing that the acceleration of history has eroded memory to the point where we try hold on to memory in *lieux de mémoire* because our *milieux de mémoire* have vanished. As a result of this process of modernisation, Nora suggested that ‘modern memory is, above all, archival [...] – hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age’ (Nora 1992: 13). Nostalgic for the kind of primordial memory that is preserved in gestures and rituals, Nora’s admission that modern memory relies on the archive situates it in an experience of loss. But Derrida, as might be expected, deconstructs the opposition between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēma*: ‘There is no archive without a place of consignation, without a technology of repetition, without a certain exteriority. No archive without outside’ (Derrida 1995: 11). Using the example of circumcision, the sign that consigns one to the tribe, he wonders whether this is an exterior mark or a trace within the body. To Derrida, the archive is by definition *hypomnesic*: an impression on a substrate. With the invention of writing, a technology for the consignation of signs to a substrate of clay substituted for the original memory. The trace remembers.

Most scholarship in the archival turn has been concerned with the question how documents have been selected, gathered, consigned, and how they have been, or should be read. This orientation towards the archive betrays the over-arching legacy of Foucault’s definition of the archive, the ‘literary turn’ in the humanities and our subsequent

preoccupation with culture-as-text. But in tandem with the contemporary ‘material turn’, the moment has come to look at the materiality and performativity of archives, the physicality of their buildings, and the increased ephemerality of documents in digital memory banks. The articles in this special issue look at the inherited, textual archive of the colonial state, but also at the objects and performances that constitute alternative archives.

Repertoires of action

While some of the essays in this issue address collections of documents and photographs that are ‘domiciled’ or ‘consigned’ to formal and self-signifying archival repositories (to employ Derrida’s (1995) archontic vocabulary), others test the boundaries of the archive. In so-doing, it might be argued that we have engaged in an exercise in semantic over-extension that renders the archive categorically meaningless (cf. Berliner 2005). However, as well as serving our analytical interests, the slippage between the literal archive and the metaphorical, between the formal archive and the informal, is also employed strategically by those who appropriate the archival form and reconstitute it to serve their future-making purposes. As Derrida reminds us, the attainment of democracy can be measured not only by the degree to which the public have access to the archive, but by their ability also to participate in its constitution and its interpretation (1995: 11, note 1). What, then, do these archival appropriations have in common? Let us briefly examine the articles brought together in this issue.

In the Purari Delta of Papua New Guinea, the ruination of the landscape through resource extraction has left its local inhabitants marginalised and looking for ways to claim ownership. In his account of the archival tactics adopted by the Delta inhabitants, Joshua Bell tells us of the various objects people keep that enable them to tell ancestral histories that legitimise claims to ownership. While these stories were previously passed on within the

lineage, they are now increasingly entextualised in order to prevent their forgetting. Heirlooms, historical photographs, planners, and magazine cuttings are incorporated in assemblages of things mobilised to bear testimony. In addition, the anthropologist himself has offered to map the sites ‘where the ancestors sat’, using GPS technology, in order to make them legible to state agencies and corporations. Bell’s mapping of sites reveals the Purari Delta itself as an archive animated through the telling and hearing of *airu omoro* (ancestral histories). This mapping might have supported the local community’s struggle for recognition, but, when the anthropologist left, the maps were used by individuals in internal political contests rather than constituting the collective resource they were intended to be. Bell’s article demonstrates that the archive affords a repertoire of actions that may be actualised in relation to quite contradictory projects, including those that, despite the anthropologist’s utopian intentions, seem to perpetuate a dystopic state.

In his analysis of the performance of an annual commemoration of a prayer uttered by the Sufi Saint, Sheikh Amadu Bamba, in colonial Saint-Louis, Senegal, De Jong explores the appropriation of archival authority to substantiate an undocumented event. The disciples of Bamba, who commemorate the Saint’s prayer spoken in defiance of the French authorities, cannot rely on the documents available in the National Archives. The disciples *know* that Bamba prayed his prayer, even though the archives do not support this claim. In order to authorise the commemorative prayer, the disciples have gathered a range of testimonies which are on display in an exhibition composed of various archival documents and photographs. Moreover, a number of colonial buildings have been identified in which the Saint was kept in custody by the colonial authorities, constituting an alternative archive animated by the legends told about the Saint’s sojourn in these places. Like the landscape of the Purari Delta,

this cityscape constitutes an archive that supports claims to recognition for a disenfranchised population. These archives afford utopias of decolonial subjectivities.

The articles by Elizabeth Edwards, Christine Chivallon and Marie-Aude Fouéré engage with the role of archives in the transmission of collective memory. The authors approach the relation between archives and memory from different angles. Where Edwards explores forgetting and aphasia as a result of colonial guilt, Chivallon addresses the continued remembrance of a slave revolt through collective memory, and Fouéré the remembrance of postcolonial massacres through the re-examination of a documentary film. In such different circumstances, how do archives afford divergent engagements with the documentary traces they hold?

In her contribution Edwards attributes to archives the potential to unsettle and disturb contemporary accounts of the colonial past. She explores how European museums use (or, indeed, choose not to use) their archives of colonial-era photographs in order to negotiate histories of colonialism. In spite of occasional attempts to represent narratives of the slave trade and colonial exploration, the museums discussed in her article would rather forget these uncomfortable truths, and instead ‘displace’ the colonial past in different spatial and temporal ‘elsewheres’. The legacy of the colonial past is disavowed in order not to disrupt utopian narratives of a multicultural present in which the legacy of colonialism has no place.

Although photographs constitute the connective tissue of colonial experience, their traces are deliberately erased from public history in an elsewhere that dissipates ‘its dystopic potential by dispersing its threat across space and time’ (Edwards, this issue). The memory of colonialism is thus ‘distanced’ and prevented from encroaching on the safe space of the museum. In this context, Edwards discerns a particular potential for the colonial photograph.

The immediacy of the photographic trace can unsettle monolithic accounts of colonial histories, and this makes photographs potentially dangerous documents. Thus the archive of colonial photography offers possibilities of disrupting consensual accounts of the colonial past by breaking the silence of postcolonial aphasia.

In her article on the memory of a slave rebellion in Martinique, Chivallon approaches the relationship between the trace and the archive from a very different angle. Her theoretical contribution examines how the philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the writer Édouard Glissant have explored the concept of the ‘trace’ in a context of archival memory. Coming from different directions, both authors have expressed their suspicion of the archive as an institution for the production of certain ‘truth effects’. Instead, they suggest, it is in the trace of an event that experience is laid down and can be recalled in testimony: ‘This emotional, living, lived trace, left by previous experience, is to be found only in memory, not in the archive’ (Chivallon, this issue). Chivallon demonstrates very clearly how both Ricoeur and Glissant privilege the trace of lived experience, without giving up the archive as a place of preserved representations. However, her informants seem less concerned about the distinction between different traces. When conducting her fieldwork, Chivallon deposited in a local library copies of the archival documents that she had brought from the Bibliotheque Nationale de France. The descendants of the rebels to whom the ‘memory’ of the rebellion had been passed on, consulted these documents, not so much to subject their oral traditions to the ‘test of truth’ but to find the ‘evidence’ that could restore their dignity.

Situating the trace in the colonial photograph or in oral transmission, both Edwards and Chivallon attribute to the ‘trace’ the capacity to invoke memory. The documentary trace as found in the archive exists alongside cerebral and affective traces that are not properly

archived, but which one could nevertheless understand through archival metaphors. It is in that sense that we appropriate the notion of archive for multiple anthropological uses. Hence Bell analyses the landscape of the Purari Delta as archive, while De Jong conceives a series of colonial buildings as an alternative archive. Like Edwards and Chivallon, these authors examine how such archives animate the collective memories buried in material and immaterial traces.

Transmitted in the materiality of the photograph or the performativity of oral transmission, the trace remembers *against* public history. This also seems to hold true for the traces of historical events found in the ‘parafictional’ documentary film *Africa Addio* (1966), that records the massacres perpetrated shortly after Zanzibar’s independence which were subsequently erased from public history. In her article on the belated reception of this controversial film, Fouéré examines how contemporary inhabitants of Zanzibar explore *Africa Addio* for the evidence of the historical events that they have turned to in order to reconstruct the massacres perpetrated in the name of the island’s revolution, events that have been suppressed from national memory by the postcolonial state’s self-inflicted amnesia. Although the status of the documentary footage in the film has always been contested – with some arguing that critical scenes have been staged – Fouéré demonstrates how young intellectuals mine the film for ‘evidence’ of the massacre, and in a historical quest, weigh this evidence against that of memories of an older generation who, unwillingly, can still provide testimony. Different traces are thus mobilised in an attempt to explore the conditions of possibility through which, by overcoming the racialist legacy of the Revolution, a postracial Zanzibar can be imagined.

Archival utopias

If the incomplete and partial nature of the archived past places limits on the truth claims of the narratives that we construct, it also produces the conditions of possibility for the construction of alternative narratives, which have similar claims to truth. The fragmented nature of the archival record, together with archival technologies of storage and retrieval, make possible the disaggregation and reconfiguration of material traces of the past in multiple ways in the present (Fouéré, Bell and De Jong in this issue). The relationship between parts and wholes, disjoined fragments and imagined totalities, is a fundamental dynamic in archival knowledge production.

As a discipline defined by participant observation as its guiding method, anthropology does not often rely on the consultation of archives. As Matthew Engelke has recently argued in a collection of essays exploring the issue of ‘evidence’, ‘the roots of anthropology are grounded in social experience, not documents’ (Engelke 2008, S3). Although anthropologists increasingly do conduct research in archives, the oft-heralded breakdown of the disciplinary boundary between history and anthropology is still to happen. Of course, the primary distinction between these disciplines lies exactly in the evidentiary protocols that the disciplines embrace in their different methodologies. In this special issue we are not concerned with the archive as ‘source’ for anthropological evidence, but with the archive as a ‘subject’ and site of contestation for the communities we research and engage with. As the essays presented here suggest, the panoptic function of the colonial archive is now being appropriated by communities around the world who were formerly subjected to it. Objects of evidence have turned themselves into subjects that produce, and judge, evidence.

In his contribution to Engelke’s collection, Sharad Chari (2008) examines the various strategies employed by inhabitants of the neighbourhood of Wentworth, Durban, to fight the

pollution caused by corporate industries in the South Durban Industrial Basin and to assert their ownership of land rights. Some of these inhabitants have collected various forms of documentary evidence, even if they have little faith in the judiciary system to prove them right. Although these archival strategies may not always be effective in the face of failing judicial procedures, it is clear that they constitute ‘evidence’. Such evidence is mobilised in the production of forms of knowledge that in Wentworth’s case, might contribute to the making of anti-racial futures. These people demonstrate a ‘faith in archival technologies to vindicate the truth, if not now, then at some point in the future’ (*Ibid*: S71). There is, suggests Chari, a certain utopianism in their archival strategies.

In the articles assembled in this special issue we find a similar utopianism at work. As other technologies of heritage, archives lend themselves to ‘the recognition of past suffering and the creation of futures of hope’ (Rowlands and De Jong 2007: 13). Such utopianism is inherent in the action possibilities afforded by the archive *and* in the documents produced for these archives. As Fouéré’s article demonstrates so well, the documentary status of the film *Africa Addio* has remained undetermined for those who scrutinise it for its ‘truths’. To this day, many Zanzibaris have not been able to decide how to read this film. This returns us to Achille Mbembe’s observation, already invoked above, that the archive is not ‘a piece of data, but a status’ (2002: 20). Engaging with this observation, the contributors to this special issue interrogate the processes and procedures through which this status is established and contested. For Martinique’s descendants of the slaves who revolted against their master, the colonial archive holds no more authority than their private memories. For Bamba’s disciples in Saint-Louis, the testimonies of contemporary witnesses hold more authority than historical documents. And for the inhabitants of the Purari Delta, the quest is precisely for recognition of their forms of knowledge in a context of their increased marginalisation.

The appropriation and production of archives serves local agendas for the production of ‘situated knowledges’. That such a production will go against the grain of Western epistemologies seems inevitable. As our cases demonstrate, the appropriation of archives benefits alternative forms of knowledge and thereby supports the decolonisation of epistemologies imposed by the metropolis, a position long embraced by postcolonial scholars. In his prolific critiques of Euro-centric knowledge production, Walter Mignolo has questioned the West’s control of epistemological rules and procedures and has called for ‘epistemic disobedience’ (2011: 122-3). Such disobedience is in evidence in all the cases discussed in this special issue, as well as their potential to contribute to the making of decolonial futures. But what the archival impulse discussed in some of our articles seems to bring out even more clearly is not so much the rejection of a European epistemology, but the impulse to do so in public. Chakrabarty’s (2010) argument that the creation of archives is part of a wider project to create a public sphere is very convincing, but his description of the production of archives in colonial India brings out very clearly how this project was perverted from the start. Since the French Revolution, access to the archives has been seen as a civic right and although colonial subjects have been systematically denied access, the right has been claimed with increased assertiveness. Fairly recently, the revelation and circulation of secret documents by Wikileaks (Silfry 2011), or Edward Snowden’s breach of national security protocols (Greenwald 2014), has demonstrated that in the age of digitisation this is an increasingly transnational process. This suggests that the archive affords aspirations to an alternative, transnational public sphere situated well beyond the boundaries of the postcolonial state.

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Notes

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