



Utopian Archives, Decolonial Affordances (Introduction to Special Issue)

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Utopian Archives, Decolonial Affordances

(Introduction to Special Issue)

Ferdinand de Jong

University of East Anglia

and

Paul Basu

University College London

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

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3 An archive may be largely about ‘the past’ but it is always ‘re-read’ in the light of the
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5 present and the future: and in that reprise, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, it always
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7 flashes up before us as *a moment of danger*. (Hall 2001: 92)
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11 Established in the nineteenth century, colonial archives constituted a technology for the
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13 collection, storage, ordering, retrieval and exchange of knowledge as an instrument of
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15 colonial governance (Thomas 1993; Cohn 1996).¹ It need not surprise us, then, that the
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17 archives inherited by independent states have not been given the authority that imperial states
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19 originally granted them. Colonial archives have often been neglected by the nation-states to
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21 which they were bequeathed at independence (Buckley 2005). What, then, is the future of
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23 colonial archives in postcolonial nations? Does the disintegration of the colonial archive
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25 signify that the postcolonial state can do without its authority? Or, as Allman (2013: 127)
26
27 asks, is this archival disintegration another symptom of the ‘failed state’? Do we simply
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29 accept archival decay as a sign of decolonialisation? Or should we perhaps look for the
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31 ‘second lives’ of archives; instances where the archive is appropriated and even turned against
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33 the state (Weld 2014)? How do we rethink the archive in relation to decolonial futures? This
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35 special issue reflects on these different aspects of the decolonial affordances of the archive.
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43 In recent years, the archive has emerged as an object of interest in a range of
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45 disciplinary contexts. This ‘archival turn’ is partly indebted to a Foucauldian analysis of the
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47 archive as an artefact of knowledge production. Although its instruments of surveillance and
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49 classification seemed incommensurate to the landscape it sought to measure and map
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51 (Arondekar 2009: 12), the nineteenth-century imperial archive provided the conditions of
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53 possibility for the making of a global public sphere in which information circulated across the
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55 world. Since the colonial government was reluctant to open its archives to the colonised
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3 (Chakrabarty 2010: 76), however, the archive's democratic potential remained limited. As a
4 domain for matters of public interest, the public space produced by the colonial archive was
5 and, to a large degree, has remained utopian. Always falling short of its promises founded in
6 Enlightenment principles, the archive is a utopian institution (Richards 1993). But although
7 Utopia was never realised in the colony, postcolonial citizens still pursue utopian projects
8 through activating latent archival affordances that depart from those associated with imperial
9 rule.
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21 While a Foucauldian analysis of the archive privileges its capacity to exert epistemic
22 violence, Appadurai may be right in stating that 'perhaps Foucault had too dark a vision of the
23 panoptical functions of the archive' (Appadurai 2003: 16). Postcolonial authors have situated
24 the archive squarely in postcolonial public spheres. Stuart Hall's (2001) observations on the
25 archive do not emphasize its classificatory, taxonomic logic, but instead celebrate it as a
26 'living' institution that is by definition incomplete, and open to the future. Postcolonial
27 authors see archives as 'interruptions' or 'interventions', privileging not so much the
28 legislative aspect of such institutions, but their transformative capacities. Indeed, the concept
29 of the postcolonial archive must privilege 'epistemic disobedience' in order to generate
30 decolonial freedom (cf. Mignolo 2011). The essays presented here examine epistemic
31 disobedience and uncertainty through exploring the unintended ability of archives to engage
32 in postcolonial predicaments and contribute to the making of decolonial public spheres. As
33 well as foregrounding anthropological voices in contemporary debates around the archive,
34 these papers complicate archival dynamics in both time and space. Such dynamics exist
35 neither temporally 'here and now' nor spatially 'then and there', but are caught up in
36 multidirectional flows of texts, images, embodied practices and discursive strategies that
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3 transcend geographical and historical boundaries and are as much about Europe as the many
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5 ‘elsewheres’ against which Europe imagined itself.
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8 9 **The archival turn**

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11 This special issue comes at a moment in which the archives are the subject of intense
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13 academic scrutiny. Considering this burgeoning attention to archives, it has been suggested
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15 that we are currently experiencing an ‘archival turn’. How do we account for the unparalleled
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17 attention to this subject? Some have suggested that this archival turn has no particular object,
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19 as the term ‘archive’ is used in a variety of ways that lack a consistent definition of the
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21 concept (Manoff 2004; Chivallon, this issue). The rise of interest in the archive is most often
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23 attributed to the publication of Derrida’s *Archive Fever* (1996), originally given as a lecture at
24
25 the opening of the Freud Museum in London in 1994, subsequently published in French, as
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27 *Mal d’archives* (Derrida 1995). Whilst it is undeniable that *Archive Fever* has contributed to
28
29 the feverish attention to archives, Stoler rightly points out that critical interest in the archive
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31 preceded its publication (Stoler 2009: 44). Academic engagement with the subject probably
32
33 derived its practical impetus from the experimentation of historians with ‘sources’. In the
34
35 1970s, whilst the *Annales* school was using large datasets to arrive at reliable statements
36
37 about the *longue durée*, some historians, such as Leroi Ladurie, Natalie Zemon Davis, and
38
39 Carlo Ginzburg, started to interrogate the archives of interrogators, reading these archives
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41 ‘against the grain’. Reading reports of the Inquisition, these historians looked for the
42
43 ‘testimonies’ of the interrogated. After the Eichmann trial in 1961, testimony was indeed
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45 increasingly valued for its ‘undocumented’ truths, which compensated for the silences of the
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47 archive; the voices never recorded (Wieviorka 2006). But even as historians experimented
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49 with the archive and its silences they failed to reflect on it in an epistemological sense
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51 (Steedman 2011).
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5 The philosophical inflection of the archival turn is best attributed to the publication of
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7 *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (Foucault 1972 [1969]), the single most important text to
8
9 initiate the deconstructivist turn in the social sciences and humanities. In it, Foucault
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11 examines how the production of knowledge is governed by tacit epistemologies, constituting
12
13 discourses that determine what can and cannot be said. In Foucault's understanding, the
14
15 archive is precisely that: 'The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that
16
17 governs the appearance of statements as unique events' (1972: 146). Rejecting the notion of
18
19 the archive as an institution, Foucault defines it as a 'practice that causes a multiplicity of
20
21 statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and
22
23 manipulated' (Ibid.). Departing from a definition of archive as a system of files, the archive is
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25 here defined as the practice that *determines* what is filed. This epistemic shift signalled a sea
26
27 change in academic interest in the archive. Stoler has identified this shift as a move from
28
29 'archive-as-source' to 'archive-as-subject' (2009: 44). The current archival turn, we suggest,
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31 should be seen as an engagement with the tension between the archive as institution and
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33 repository and as metaphor for 'the law of what can be said'.
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41 **The colonial archive and its postcolonial critique**

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43 The relationship between anthropology and the archive has already been explored in the
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45 context of imperialism. The first study to that effect, by Bernard Cohn, examined how the
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47 British employed in India a range of technologies of power, including that of the production
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49 of knowledge (Cohn 1987, 1996). Beyond the Orientalist study of texts (Said 1978), such
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51 knowledge included censuses and statistics, which were accumulated in archives of modern
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53 governmentality (Anderson 1991, Dirks 1993). In the gathering of knowledge in eighteenth-
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55 and nineteenth-century India, natives could only be informants or interpreters, but not
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3 scholars, and the production of colonial knowledge preceded – and informed – formats of
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5 ethnological and anthropometric data collecting later adopted by anthropology. Indeed it is no
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7 coincidence that the administrator H. H. Risley was both the Commissioner of the 1901
8
9 Census of India and the Director of the Anthropological Survey of India that commenced the
10
11 same year. Relying on the production of anthropological data, the colonial state turned the
12
13 colonial subject into a figure of ethnography and changed itself from a ‘revenue state’ to an
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15 ‘ethnographic state’ (Dirks 2001). Through the employment of native informants, the imperial
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17 state generated a mass of data that were subsequently transported to archives centred in
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19 London, described by Richards as ‘an archival complex’ (Richards 1993). The apparatus of
20
21 the Victorian archive operated as a prototype for a ‘global system of domination’ by creating
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23 an apparatus ‘for controlling territory by producing, distributing, and consuming information
24
25 about it’ (Richards 1993: 17), constituting the British Empire as the first information society.
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32 Paradoxically, at the very moment that the creation of national archives in European
33
34 nation-states enabled the writing of history, this form of knowledge production erased the
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36 historicity of the colonised. Reflecting on how this particular governmentality legitimised
37
38 colonial rule, Dirks suggests that while ‘history told the story of the nation, anthropology
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40 explained why a nation had not yet emerged’ (Dirks 2002: 57). After independence, this
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42 problem continued to haunt the historians of an independent subcontinent. As colonial
43
44 archives had erased the voice of the ‘natives’, Indian historians wondered to what extent the
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46 history of the subalterns could yet be written given their silencing. Considering their absence
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48 in the archives, Spivak (1988) asked: ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’
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54 The question to what extent histories ‘from below’ can be written from the colonial archive
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56 has raised an extensive debate across the global South. Historians have addressed the problem
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3 of subaltern silence as one of sources (Shetty and Bellamy 2000), but the problem remains
4 largely of an epistemological nature. In his poetic exploration of Haiti's history, Trouillot
5 (1995) asks what makes some narratives powerful enough to pass as 'history' while others
6 remain 'silenced'? His answer is summarised thus:
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14 Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the
15 moments of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the
16 making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the
17 moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).
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22 (Trouillot 1995: 26)
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28 In this systematic inventory of the production of 'silences', archives appear as the
29 decisive moment of fact assembly that determine what kind of stories can be told (Burton
30 2005). For many historians the archive has remained a source that must be read 'against the
31 grain'. This 'extractive' attitude towards the archive has been criticised by the anthropologist
32 Ann Laura Stoler (2009), who has advocated that one should instead read the archive 'along
33 the grain'. Adopting a Foucauldian approach to the archives of the Dutch Indies, Stoler has
34 proposed to mine the archive, not for historical data, but for those epistemological and
35 political anxieties that constitute the colonial common sense on which the archive was built in
36 the first place as a technology of rule. For Stoler, such anxieties pertain to race and sexuality.
37
38 By reading the archive for traces of doubt, fear, and uncertainty, Stoler establishes what the
39 most prevalent concerns were in establishing and maintaining a colonial common sense. In a
40 comparable project, Anjali Arondekar (2009) has read the imperial archive of colonial India
41 for its truth effects on sexuality, pursuing the question how sexuality was made visible in the
42 colonial archive and through this process disclosed the limits of that visibility (2009: 3). Both
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3 Stoler and Arondekar read the archive for traces of an order that was unstable, and thereby
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5 question the efficacy of the archive as a Panopticon, looking for the ‘recalcitrant events’ that
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7 show the mutability of the imperial archive.
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11 Stoler’s insistence that her study of the colonial archive constitutes an ‘ethnography’ is
12
13 well taken. While we laud such sophisticated attempts at ‘reading the archives’, we wish to
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15 establish that these engagements with the archive are necessarily indebted to the ‘literary turn’
16
17 and present a different epistemological engagement than ours. The essays presented in this
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19 special issue do not ‘read’ the archives, but engage with their materialities and
20
21 performativities instead. Following recent work in material and visual culture studies, which
22
23 has called attention to the materiality of the archive of colonial photography (e.g. Edwards
24
25 and Hart 2004; Banks and Vokes 2010), we analyze the archive as a material object rather
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27 than a text. Anthropology has largely left the archival turn unacknowledged, but the
28
29 anthropology of photography has recognised the legacy of visual documents as an archive of
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31 our discipline. In our engagement with the archive, we hope to make some steps towards
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33 further decolonisation of anthropology, acknowledging that its history is entangled with the
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35 history of the archive (Pels 1997: 175-77). But rather than approach the archive as an
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37 instrument of surveillance, we look at the appropriations of the archive as a technology. In the
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39 articles presented in this issue, the mutability of the colonial archive is acknowledged and
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41 explored through its multiple and unanticipated affordances in the present.
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49 **Utopian transcendences and archival affordances**

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51 As a technology of surveillance that aspired to generate a complete set of documents on a
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53 particular subject, the archive is a utopian institution (Richards 1996). As a Panopticon of
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55 knowledge, the archive is a Utopia. As with all utopias, this is an idea rather than a project
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3 realised in practice. But if we acknowledge that this utopian character of the archive pertains
4
5 to an archival logic that is not shared by postcolonial citizens (nor indeed by many others), we
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7 must reconsider this notion of an epistemological utopia. Here we follow Gordin, Tilley and
8
9 Prakash when they assert that ‘utopian visions are never arbitrary’, but are expressive of the
10
11 ‘conditions of possibility’ that give rise to them (2010: 4, citing Foucault). Like Gordin et al,
12
13 we are interested in examining utopian imaginaries not only insofar as they articulate people’s
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15 aspirations for the future, but also for what they reveal of the abiding social concerns and
16
17 cultural formations of the present – the conditions, that is, which generate the desire for
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19 utopian transcendence as well as the particular forms such transcendence takes (Gordin et al.
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21 2010: 4). While they are not exactly inverses of present day dystopic situations, utopian
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23 expressions are at least indexical to the circumstances for which they provide an ‘answering
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25 image’ or an escape. All utopias are thus structured by present conditions and are necessarily
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27 constructed, bricolage-like, from resources available in the present sociocultural milieu. Such
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29 resources are themselves legacies from the past, and thus, in a commonplace yet complex
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31 temporal conjunction, the past (or, at least, the ‘present past’) provides an important reservoir
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33 of possibilities informing the construction of future imaginaries (Basu and Modest 2015). We
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35 are interested, therefore, in how historically-situated actors access and manipulate the past in
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37 the present to serve their future-orientated projects. The archive, in particular, provides an
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39 effective technology through which traces of the past are made available in the present, and
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41 we are interested in how both literal and metaphorical archival spaces, materials and
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43 processes contribute to the shaping of future possibilities.
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52 Kirsten Weld’s (2014) study of the archives of the military dictatorship in Guatemala
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54 provides a telling example of the utopian possibilities of archives. After decades of political
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56 oppression, a small contingent of human rights activists acquired access to the long-lost secret
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3 archives of the National Police. As agents in the country's counterinsurgency, the National
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5 Police had gathered information on its alleged political opponents in an estimated 75 million
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7 documents. Weld examines how these archives had constituted a panoptical vision of
8
9 Guatemalan society and had been used to track and pursue political opponents. After
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11 democratisation of the political system, the Guatemalan government tried to keep the files
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13 secret from the post-conflict truth commission until the archives were re-discovered in a
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15 derelict building in the national capital. Weld's study is about the struggle of human rights
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17 activists to access the documents and uncover their contents. With great sensitivity, she
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19 documents how the files are made available for the persecution of those responsible for 'the
20
21 missing', and how the archive is appropriated for the struggle against impunity. For the
22
23 activists, Weld (2014: 237) states, the archives 'are sites of hope and aspiration'. But beyond
24
25 this, the archives are also sites of political struggle. It is this struggle that Weld explores,
26
27 establishing how the activists 'came to claim physical and intellectual control over documents
28
29 that had once been used to control them' (Ibid: 31). Indeed, after the initial logic of
30
31 surveillance and social control, the National Police archives afford a secondary logic of
32
33 transitional justice. In that process of transition, whilst the activists became historians of the
34
35 counterinsurgency, the archives shaped their sense of self and transformed their subjectivities.
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37 Thus, in the different ways in which the archives have been constituted and used, Weld
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39 discerns different 'archival logics' (Ibid: 6).
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47 The archive, we might say, affords access to the past in the present and in so doing
48
49 shapes futures. The contribution of archives in the 'development of society' has been
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51 recognised and is foregrounded by international agencies such as UNESCO. We note, for
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53 example, the definition of archival value articulated in the universal declaration on archives
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55 adopted by the International Council on Archives and endorsed by UNESCO in 2011:
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5 Archives record decisions, actions and memories. Archives are a unique and
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7 irreplaceable heritage passed from one generation to another. Archives are managed
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9 from creation to preserve their value and meaning. They are authoritative sources of
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11 information underpinning accountable and transparent administrative actions. They play
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13 an essential role in the development of societies by safeguarding and contributing to
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15 individual and community memory. Open access to archives enriches our knowledge of
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17 human society, promotes democracy, protects citizens' rights and enhances the quality
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19 of life. (International Council on Archives 2011)
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25 Alas, as David Anderson's (2011) work on the controversy over the 'lost' (now 'migrated')
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27 colonial archives relating to the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya demonstrates, these visions of
28
29 transparency and open access are themselves utopian. As Derrida has argued, 'There is no
30
31 political power without control of the archive' (1995: 11), and nowhere was this more evident
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33 than in the context of the colonial archive, in which the colonial state held a monopoly over
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35 the production of knowledge used as instruments of rule, and where one finds the most
36
37 explicit demonstration of archival power representing a 'breach of democracy' (Derrida 1995:
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39 11).
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45 Thus, while the archive affords access to the past and shapes futures, it does so in
46
47 particular, power-inflected ways. Our objective in this collection of essays, then, is to
48
49 consider the affordances of the archive as a political technology of memory and locus of
50
51 authority in the imagining of decolonial futures. We adopt the concept of affordances from
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53 Gibson (1977), who used the term to refer to the 'action possibilities' latent in the
54
55 environment, and from subsequent scholarship that has applied the concept to technology and
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3 materiality (e.g. Gaver 1991; Knappert 2004). As Gaver notes, the concept of affordances
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5 ‘encourages us to consider devices, technologies and media in terms of the actions they make
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7 possible. ... [I]t allows us to focus not on technologies or users alone, but on the fundamental
8
9 interactions between the two’ (1991: 83). The affordance of an object, as Knappert notes, is a
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11 relational property shared between an object and agent, and is also highly situational – ‘an
12
13 artefact’s affordances may change according to the situation in which they are found’ (2004:
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15 46). Furthermore the repertoire of actions that an object affords may be more or less apparent
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17 to different actors in different situations, and such affordances may also be subject to social
18
19 negotiation and contestation (Knappert 2004: 46-47).
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26 The concept of affordances helps us to understand what repertoires of action an
27
28 archive makes possible. As originally conceived, the colonial archive afforded forms of
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30 surveillance and statecraft that were fundamental to the governance of people, territories and
31
32 other resources (Cohn 1996; Pels 1997; Stoler 2002). For historians, the same archival
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34 deposits constitute a source of primary data and evidence that affords academic practices of
35
36 verification used to substantiate the truth claims of their scholarly exegeses (Dirks 2002;
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38 Burton 2005). As discussed above, the archive affords the possibility for researchers to read
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40 both along the archival grain and, more typical of postcolonial scholarship, against it,
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42 enabling scholars to investigate historical cultures of colonialism, but also to critique them
43
44 and resist the continuing legacy of colonial power relations. Though largely about the past, as
45
46 Hall argues, the archive is always “re-read” in the light of the present and the future’ (2001:
47
48 92). For Hall such re-readings constitute an archival ‘reprise’: *moments of danger* that may
49
50 subvert archival intent even while invoking the archive’s own authority. Latent within the
51
52 archive, it might be said, is the archive’s own dissolution – but also its rebirth. Such archival
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54 dissolutions and resurrections are described in a number of the articles collected together here.
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3 As these essays attest, in different situations and for different actors, the archive (as form,
4 content, institution and, indeed, myth) affords many other action possibilities in the present,
5 not least actions that may be mobilised in people's ongoing attempts to transcend ongoing
6 conditions of coloniality (Quijano 2007).
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11 **Defining the archive: substrates and traces**

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14 In 1974 the Society of American Archivists' committee on terminology published a list of
15 over 200 key terms which, in aggregate, might be said to delineate a technical understanding
16 of the archival apparatus (Evans et al 1974). This glossary includes core processes,
17 procedures and practices such as 'accessioning', 'authentication', 'classification' and
18 'declassification'. It includes archival artefacts such as 'records', 'registers', and 'planning
19 documents', as well as archival principles such as 'access', 'archival integrity',
20 'custodianship', and 'provenance'. Within this glossary, 'archives' themselves are defined in
21 three ways:
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36 (1) The noncurrent records of an organization or institution preserved because of their
37 continuing value; also referred to, in this sense, as archival materials or archival
38 holdings. (2) The agency responsible for selecting, preserving, and making available
39 archival materials; also referred to as an archival agency. (3) The building or part of a
40 building where such materials are located; also referred to as the archival repository.
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47 (Evans et al 1974: 417)
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52 As with the universal declaration on archives, the apparent neutrality of such a
53 definition can be misleading, but it also provides an opportunity for interrogating more
54 closely these core attributes, including the nature of archival holdings, the agency of archival
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3 institutions, and the architecture of the archival repository itself (physical spaces, but also
4
5 architectonic systems of archival storage, retrieval and management). This complex
6
7 agglomeration of buildings, institutions, techniques and technologies is all too readily bound
8
9 up in the overarching concept of the archival 'substrate', and regarded as providing merely a
10
11 material support for extractable deposits of immaterial 'knowledge'. At the same time,
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13 however, it is this substrate that makes possible the retrieval and reconfiguration of such
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15 knowledges (or, on the contrary, bars access and wards off those Benjaminian moments of
16
17 danger). There is, in fact, no separation between the archival substrate and the 'content' that it
18
19 bears: the archived past is knowable only through its material, visual, sonic or performative
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21 trace.
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27 When considering the different affordances of the archive, we need to remember its
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29 'inescapable materiality' to which Achille Mbembe (2002) has drawn our attention. Indeed,
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31 national archives are often housed in impressive buildings of Neoclassical design that assume
32
33 authority by indexing the Ancient Greek polis. In classical Greek, *arkheion* designated a
34
35 residence, the domicile of the *archon* that kept the legal documents of its owner. Although it
36
37 does not only contain legal documents, the modern archive still betrays its origins. Mbembe
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39 suggests that the 'status and power of the archive derive from this entanglement of building
40
41 and documents' (Mbembe 2002: 19). It is for this reason that Mbembe claims that the archive
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43 itself is not 'a piece of data, but a status' (Ibid: 20). We can now see how the archives
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45 authorise the information that they hold inscribed in substrates.
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52 This sets up a series of fundamental tensions between the materiality of the archive, the
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54 authority that it is assigned, and the memory it is supposed to keep. How these tensions
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56 should be understood in relation to each other is, if anything, an anthropological question par
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3 excellence. In his study on collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs reminded us that ‘no
4
5 memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and
6
7 retrieve their recollections’ (Halbwachs 1992: 43). Rather than posit the existence of some
8
9 ‘authentic’ memory that can exist without support, Halbwachs recognised that memory
10
11 requires a framework. Of course, the question about memory and its relation to history has
12
13 been at the heart of an ongoing debate about cultural transmission. Pierre Nora, in his
14
15 important contribution to this debate, posited an antagonism between history and memory,
16
17 arguing that the acceleration of history has eroded memory to the point where we try hold on
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19 to memory in *lieux de mémoire* because our *milieux de mémoire* have vanished. As a result of
20
21 this process of modernisation, Nora suggested that ‘modern memory is, above all, archival
22
23 [...] – hence the obsession with the archive that marks our age’ (Nora 1992: 13). Nostalgic for
24
25 the kind of primordial memory that is preserved in gestures and rituals, Nora’s admission that
26
27 modern memory relies on the archive situates it in an experience of loss. But Derrida, as
28
29 might be expected, deconstructs the opposition between *mnēmē* and *hypomnēma*: ‘There is no
30
31 archive without a place of consignment, without a technology of repetition, without a certain
32
33 exteriority. No archive without outside’ (Derrida 1995: 11). Using the example of
34
35 circumcision, the sign that consigns one to the tribe, he wonders whether this is an exterior
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37 mark or a trace within the body. To Derrida, the archive is by definition *hypomnesic*: an
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39 impression on a substrate. With the invention of writing, a technology for the consignment of
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41 signs to a substrate of clay substituted for the original memory. The trace remembers.
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50 Most scholarship in the archival turn has been concerned with the question how
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52 documents have been selected, gathered, consigned, and how they have been, or should be
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54 read. This orientation towards the archive betrays the over-arching legacy of Foucault’s
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56 definition of the archive, the ‘literary turn’ in the humanities and our subsequent
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3 preoccupation with culture-as-text. But in tandem with the contemporary ‘material turn’, the
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5 moment has come to look at the materiality and performativity of archives, the physicality of
6
7 their buildings, and the increased ephemerality of documents in digital memory banks. The
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9 articles in this special issue look at the inherited, textual archive of the colonial state, but also
10
11 at the objects and performances that constitute alternative archives.
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14 15 16 **Repertoires of action**

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18 While some of the essays in this issue address collections of documents and photographs that
19
20 are ‘domiciled’ or ‘consigned’ to formal and self-signifying archival repositories (to employ
21
22 Derrida’s (1995) archontic vocabulary), others test the boundaries of the archive. In so-doing,
23
24 it might be argued that we have engaged in an exercise in semantic over-extension that
25
26 renders the archive categorically meaningless (cf. Berliner 2005). However, as well as serving
27
28 our analytical interests, the slippage between the literal archive and the metaphorical, between
29
30 the formal archive and the informal, is also employed strategically by those who appropriate
31
32 the archival form and reconstitute it to serve their future-making purposes. As Derrida
33
34 reminds us, the attainment of democracy can be measured not only by the degree to which the
35
36 public have access to the archive, but by their ability also to participate in its constitution and
37
38 its interpretation (1995: 11, note 1). What, then, do these archival appropriations have in
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40 common? Let us briefly examine the articles brought together in this issue.
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48 In the Purari Delta of Papua New Guinea, the ruination of the landscape through
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50 resource extraction has left its local inhabitants marginalised and looking for ways to claim
51
52 ownership. In his account of the archival tactics adopted by the Delta inhabitants, Joshua Bell
53
54 tells us of the various objects people keep that enable them to tell ancestral histories that
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56 legitimise claims to ownership. While these stories were previously passed on within the
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3 lineage, they are now increasingly entextualised in order to prevent their forgetting.
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5 Heirlooms, historical photographs, planners, and magazine cuttings are incorporated in
6
7 assemblages of things mobilised to bear testimony. In addition, the anthropologist himself has
8
9 offered to map the sites 'where the ancestors sat', using GPS technology, in order to make
10
11 them legible to state agencies and corporations. Bell's mapping of sites reveals the Purari
12
13 Delta itself as an archive animated through the telling and hearing of *airu omoro* (ancestral
14
15 histories). This mapping might have supported the local community's struggle for
16
17 recognition, but, when the anthropologist left, the maps were used by individuals in internal
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19 political contests rather than constituting the collective resource they were intended to be.
20
21 Bell's article demonstrates that the archive affords a repertoire of actions that may be
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23 actualised in relation to quite contradictory projects, including those that, despite the
24
25 anthropologist's utopian intentions, seem to perpetuate a dystopic state.
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32 In his analysis of the performance of an annual commemoration of a prayer uttered by
33
34 the Sufi Saint, Sheikh Amadu Bamba, in colonial Saint-Louis, Senegal, De Jong explores the
35
36 appropriation of archival authority to substantiate an undocumented event. The disciples of
37
38 Bamba, who commemorate the Saint's prayer spoken in defiance of the French authorities,
39
40 cannot rely on the documents available in the National Archives. The disciples *know* that
41
42 Bamba prayed his prayer, even though the archives do not support this claim. In order to
43
44 authorise the commemorative prayer, the disciples have gathered a range of testimonies which
45
46 are on display in an exhibition composed of various archival documents and photographs.
47
48 Moreover, a number of colonial buildings have been identified in which the Saint was kept in
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50 custody by the colonial authorities, constituting an alternative archive animated by the
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52 legends told about the Saint's sojourn in these places. Like the landscape of the Purari Delta,
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3 this cityscape constitutes an archive that supports claims to recognition for a disenfranchised
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5 population. These archives afford utopias of decolonial subjectivities.
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10 The articles by Elizabeth Edwards, Christine Chivallon and Marie-Aude Fouéré
11 engage with the role of archives in the transmission of collective memory. The authors
12 approach the relation between archives and memory from different angles. Where Edwards
13 explores forgetting and aphasia as a result of colonial guilt, Chivallon addresses the continued
14 remembrance of a slave revolt through collective memory, and Fouéré the remembrance of
15 postcolonial massacres through the re-examination of a documentary film. In such different
16 circumstances, how do archives afford divergent engagements with the documentary traces
17 they hold?
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30 In her contribution Edwards attributes to archives the potential to unsettle and disturb
31 contemporary accounts of the colonial past. She explores how European museums use (or,
32 indeed, choose not to use) their archives of colonial-era photographs in order to negotiate
33 histories of colonialism. In spite of occasional attempts to represent narratives of the slave
34 trade and colonial exploration, the museums discussed in her article would rather forget these
35 uncomfortable truths, and instead ‘displace’ the colonial past in different spatial and temporal
36 ‘elsewheres’. The legacy of the colonial past is disavowed in order not to disrupt utopian
37 narratives of a multicultural present in which the legacy of colonialism has no place.
38
39 Although photographs constitute the connective tissue of colonial experience, their traces are
40 deliberately erased from public history in an elsewhere that dissipates ‘its dystopic potential
41 by dispersing its threat across space and time’ (Edwards, this issue). The memory of
42 colonialism is thus ‘distanced’ and prevented from encroaching on the safe space of the
43 museum. In this context, Edwards discerns a particular potential for the colonial photograph.
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3 The immediacy of the photographic trace can unsettle monolithic accounts of colonial
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5 histories, and this makes photographs potentially dangerous documents. Thus the archive of
6
7 colonial photography offers possibilities of disrupting consensual accounts of the colonial
8
9 past by breaking the silence of postcolonial aphasia.
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14 In her article on the memory of a slave rebellion in Martinique, Chivallon approaches
15
16 the relationship between the trace and the archive from a very different angle. Her theoretical
17
18 contribution examines how the philosopher Paul Ricoeur and the writer Édouard Glissant have
19
20 explored the concept of the 'trace' in a context of archival memory. Coming from different
21
22 directions, both authors have expressed their suspicion of the archive as an institution for the
23
24 production of certain 'truth effects'. Instead, they suggest, it is in the trace of an event that
25
26 experience is laid down and can be recalled in testimony: 'This emotional, living, lived trace,
27
28 left by previous experience, is to be found only in memory, not in the archive' (Chivallon, this
29
30 issue). Chivallon demonstrates very clearly how both Ricoeur and Glissant privilege the trace
31
32 of lived experience, without giving up the archive as a place of preserved representations.
33
34 However, her informants seem less concerned about the distinction between different traces.
35
36 When conducting her fieldwork, Chivallon deposited in a local library copies of the archival
37
38 documents that she had brought from the Bibliotheque Nationale de France. The descendants
39
40 of the rebels to whom the 'memory' of the rebellion had been passed on, consulted these
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42 documents, not so much to subject their oral traditions to the 'test of truth' but to find the
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44 'evidence' that could restore their dignity.
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52 Situating the trace in the colonial photograph or in oral transmission, both Edwards
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54 and Chivallon attribute to the 'trace' the capacity to invoke memory. The documentary trace
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56 as found in the archive exists alongside cerebral and affective traces that are not properly
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3 archived, but for which one could nevertheless understand through archival metaphors. It is in
4
5 that sense that we appropriate the notion of archive for multiple anthropological uses. Hence
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7 Bell analyses the landscape of the Purari Delta as archive, while De Jong conceives a series of
8
9 colonial buildings as an alternative archive. Like Edwards and Chivallon, these authors
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11 examine how such archives animate the collective memories buried in material and
12
13 immaterial traces.
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18 Transmitted in the materiality of the photograph or the performativity of oral
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20 transmission, the trace remembers *against* public history. This also seems to hold true for the
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22 traces of historical events found in the ‘parafictional’ documentary film *Africa Addio* (1966),
23
24 that records the massacres perpetrated shortly after Zanzibar’s independence which were
25
26 subsequently erased from public history. In her article on the belated reception of this
27
28 controversial film, Fouéré examines how contemporary inhabitants of Zanzibar explore *Africa*
29
30 *Addio* for the evidence of the historical events that they have turned to in order to reconstruct
31
32 the massacres perpetrated in the name of the island’s revolution, events that have been
33
34 suppressed from national memory by the postcolonial state’s self-inflicted amnesia. Although
35
36 the status of the documentary footage in the film has always been contested – with some
37
38 arguing that critical scenes have been staged – Fouéré demonstrates how young intellectuals
39
40 mine the film for ‘evidence’ of the massacre, and in a historical quest, weigh this evidence
41
42 against that of memories of an older generation who, unwillingly, can still provide testimony.
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44 Different traces are thus mobilised in an attempt to explore the conditions of possibility
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46 through which, by overcoming the racist legacy of the Revolution, a postracial Zanzibar
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48 can be imagined.
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55 56 **Archival utopias** 57 58 59 60

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3 If the incomplete and partial nature of the archived past places limits on the truth claims of the
4 narratives that we construct, it also produces the conditions of possibility for the construction
5 of alternative narratives, which have similar claims to truth. The fragmented nature of the
6 archival record, together with archival technologies of storage and retrieval, make possible the
7 disaggregation and reconfiguration of material traces of the past in multiple ways in the
8 present (Fouéré, Bell and De Jong in this issue). The relationship between parts and wholes,
9 disjoined fragments and imagined totalities, is a fundamental dynamic in archival knowledge
10 production.
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23 As a discipline defined by participant observation as its guiding method, anthropology
24 does not often rely on the consultation of archives. As Matthew Engelke has recently argued
25 in a collection of essays exploring the issue of 'evidence', 'the roots of anthropology are
26 grounded in social experience, not documents' (Engelke 2008, S3). Although anthropologists
27 increasingly do conduct research in archives, the oft-heralded breakdown of the disciplinary
28 boundary between history and anthropology is still to happen. Of course, the primary
29 distinction between these disciplines lies exactly in the evidentiary protocols that the
30 disciplines embrace in their different methodologies. In this special issue we are not
31 concerned with the archive as 'source' for anthropological evidence, but with the archive as a
32 'subject' and site of contestation for the communities we research and engage with. As the
33 essays presented here suggest, the panoptic function of the colonial archive is now being
34 appropriated by communities around the world who were formerly subjected to it. Objects of
35 evidence have turned themselves into subjects that produce, and judge, evidence.
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54 In his contribution to Engelke's collection, Sharad Chari (2008) examines the various
55 strategies employed by inhabitants of the neighbourhood of Wentworth, Durban, to fight the
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3 pollution caused by corporate industries in the South Durban Industrial Basin and to assert
4 their ownership of land rights. Some of these inhabitants have collected various forms of
5 documentary evidence, even if they have little faith in the judiciary system to prove them
6 right. Although these archival strategies may not always be effective in the face of failing
7 judicial procedures, it is clear that they constitute 'evidence'. Such evidence is mobilised in
8 the production of forms of knowledge that in Wentworth's case, might contribute to the
9 making of anti-racial futures. These people demonstrate a 'faith in archival technologies to
10 vindicate the truth, if not now, then at some point in the future' (Ibid: S71). There is, suggests
11 Chari, a certain utopianism in their archival strategies.
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25 In the articles assembled in this special issue we find a similar utopianism at work. As
26 other technologies of heritage, archives lend themselves to 'the recognition of past suffering
27 and the creation of futures of hope' (Rowlands and De Jong 2007: 13). Such utopianism is
28 inherent in the action possibilities afforded by the archive *and* in the documents produced for
29 these archives. As Fouéré's article demonstrates so well, the documentary status of the film
30 *Africa Addio* has remained undetermined for those who scrutinise it for its 'truths'. To this
31 day, many Zanzibaris have not been able to decide how to read this film. This returns us to
32 Achille Mbembe's observation, already invoked above, that the archive is not 'a piece of data,
33 but a status' (2002: 20). Engaging with this observation, the contributors to this special issue
34 interrogate the processes and procedures through which this status is established and
35 contested. For Martinique's descendants of the slaves who revolted against their master, the
36 colonial archive holds no more authority than their private memories. For Bamba's disciples
37 in Saint-Louis, the testimonies of contemporary witnesses hold more authority than historical
38 documents. And for the inhabitants of the Purari Delta, the quest is precisely for recognition
39 of their forms of knowledge in a context of their increased marginalisation.
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5 The appropriation and production of archives serves local agendas for the production
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7 of ‘situated knowledges’. That such a production will go against the grain of Western
8
9 epistemologies seems inevitable. As our cases demonstrate, the appropriation of archives
10
11 benefits alternative forms of knowledge and thereby supports the decolonisation of
12
13 epistemologies imposed by the metropolis, a position long embraced by postcolonial scholars.
14
15 In his prolific critiques of Euro-centric knowledge production, Walter Mignolo has questioned
16
17 the West’s control of epistemological rules and procedures and has called for ‘epistemic
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19 disobedience’ (2011: 122-3). Such disobedience is in evidence in all the cases discussed in
20
21 this special issue, as well as their potential to contribute to the making of decolonial futures.
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23 But what the archival impulse discussed in some of our articles seems to bring out even more
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25 clearly is not so much the rejection of a European epistemology, but the impulse to do so in
26
27 public. Chakrabarty’s (2010) argument that the creation of archives is part of a wider project
28
29 to create a public sphere is very convincing, but his description of the production of archives
30
31 in colonial India brings out very clearly how this project was perverted from the start. Since
32
33 the French Revolution, access to the archives has been seen as a civic right and although
34
35 colonial subjects have been systematically denied access, the right has been claimed with
36
37 increased assertiveness. Fairly recently, the revelation and circulation of secret documents by
38
39 Wikileaks (Silfry 2011), or Edward Snowden’s breach of national security protocols
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41 (Greenwald 2014), has demonstrated that in the age of digitisation this is an increasingly
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43 transnational process. This suggests that the archive affords aspirations to an alternative,
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45 transnational public sphere situated well beyond the boundaries of the postcolonial state.
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Notes

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37 ¹ This special issue is the result of reflections on the subject and presentations of papers in a
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40
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42
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