

Archive Stories, Archive Realities

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In May 1840, a furious William Hobson learned from a passing ship's captain that the New Zealand Company in Wellington had set up its own form of government. Stinging from the usurped authority and high treason of the colonists, Lieutenant-Governor Hobson issued two proclamations. In the name of Her Majesty, Hobson claimed sovereignty over Aotearoa New Zealand. The North Island was claimed by cession via Te Tiriti o Waitangi (despite the fact that hui with rangatira were still being held across the country, and despite having only two signed sheets in his possession). The South Island was claimed based on Captain James Cook's 'discovery'.

Having asserted sovereignty with the stroke of a pen and the stamp of a Paihia printing press, Hobson hastily despatched Colonial Secretary Willoughby Shortland to Wellington. With him were troops from the 80th Regiment, mounted police and orders to dismantle any New Zealand Company council, flags or insignia he found. They arrived on the evening of 2 June and sent copies of Hobson's proclamations ashore, but Wellington weather prevented an official landing. Shortland and four members of the police force finally landed near Pipitea Pā on the afternoon of 4 June, where they were met by Colonel Wakefield and others of the New Zealand Company. Here, Shortland read Hobson's proclamations, and the legal fiction of crown sovereignty was officially enacted.

The proclamations of sovereignty were indeed a legal fiction, for they ignored some crucial caveats: those who signed Te Tiriti o Waitangi signed a Māori-language document that never ceded sovereignty, and in tikanga Māori, or Māori law, ceding sovereignty was impossible.¹

Hobson's claim of discovery stretched legal fiction into pure fantasy. 'There is a certain strange magic in the belief that waving a piece of coloured cloth could transfer indigenous lands to someone



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else,' notes Moana Jackson, 'but it was a theatre that had long been established in the law of all European colonisers. The fact that it would have had no legitimacy in the law of the Indigenous Peoples being "discovered" was never deemed to be relevant.'²

This magical realism – 'legal and political gymnastics performed behind a veil of apparently reasoned justification' – was, and is, made possible by the stories, symbols and statecraft that are public archives.³ Te Tiriti o Waitangi is an obvious example. As legal documents and 'Talmudic symbols of imagined imperial symbiosis', writes Adele Perry, treaties, like flags, have served colonial projects the world over.⁴ Others include the 1839 appointment of Hobson as Lieutenant-Governor, the letters patent that made Aotearoa New Zealand a colony of New South Wales, the pre-Tiriti proclamations of 30 January 1840 that assumed a power not yet granted and the May

proclamations themselves, as bungled and back-dated as they were (the South Island proclamation had to be reissued because Hobson left off the grounds for sovereignty on the copy he sent to London, and the North Island proclamation was incorrectly back-dated to 5 February instead of 6 February).

Together these documents formed the earliest holdings of Aotearoa New Zealand's public archive, Te Rua Mahara o te Kāwanatanga Archives New Zealand.⁵ They joined the larger imperial archive, 'a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire'.⁶ In this fantasy, world mastery was possible through documentation and the public knowledge stored within the 'total-archive'.⁷

Fiction, magic and fantasy are not words most people would associate with public archives. As the official guardian of government records, Archives New Zealand is tasked with ensuring confidence in the integrity of public and local authority archives. Enabling trusted government information is its mantra. Weaving in and out of public discourse and supplementing the many sources of public knowledge, public archives often act as uncontested stand-ins for 'the facts' or 'the Truth'. As written documents of evidential value, they sit at the 'authentic' end of the knowledge continuum, where they are contrasted with less-trustworthy sources of public knowledge such as oral testimony and fake news.

Yet at their most basic, archives are stories. All peoples use archives as stories, whether transmitted through speech, written in text, woven within tāniko patterns or embodied in tā moko, performed as ritual or shared in everyday practices, or displayed in objects or in the land itself. Using Te Tiriti o Waitangi to weave a story of sovereignty was not limited to the colony's fledgling civil service. Many Māori descendants of those who signed, especially Ngāpuhi-nui-tonu, have pointed to the Māori-language document and the sacred covenant of its terms as a way of acknowledging both their tino rangatiratanga and their centrality to the event.

When brought together as a public archive in the form of a state institution, archives are amplified into a grandiose narrative of

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nationhood—a metanarrative. Indeed, some theorists go so far as to claim there is no state without archives.⁸

This is because archives have power. And in turn, archives are created and shaped by ever-contested power relations. Public archives are not ‘passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed.’⁹ Their holdings ‘wield power over the shape and direction of historical scholarship, collective memory, and national identity, over how we know ourselves as individuals, groups, and societies’.¹⁰ Archives allow people to marshal stories and to make meaning. Archives are the very possibility of politics.¹¹

As Hobson’s actions and subsequent governments show, Aotearoa New Zealand’s public archive has always been about power. Straddling the intersection of past, present and future, it has its origin in capitalism’s vampire-like need to turn all of life into work for its own reproduction.¹² Many of the seven million plus archives held in the repositories of Archives New Zealand reflect, and serve as justification for, the gendered, racialised class relations that created them. Because of this, certain voices in the archive have been privileged over others. Silences abound.

Archival power is, in part, the power to allow voices to be heard. It consists of highlighting certain narratives and of including certain types of records created by certain groups. The power of the archive is witnessed in the act of inclusion, but this is only one of its components. The power to exclude is a fundamental aspect of the archive. Inevitably, there are distortions, omissions, erasures, and silences in the archive. Not every story is told.¹³

Despite this, public archives are also potential sites for resistance, counter-narratives and enriching the public knowledge commons. In today’s cybernetic vortex of class power and commodification, archives and their emphasis on context are more relevant than ever.¹⁴

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There is a huge body of work on the relationship between memory and stories, archives and power. It weaves through many disciplines and in and out of academia. We might think of the novels of George Orwell,

such as *1984*, or the importance of archives in *Star Wars*, from the plans of the Death Star to the location of the last Jedi. In the final season of *Game of Thrones*, Bran Stark reveals the archival motive of the Night King: ‘He wants to erase this world and I am its memory.’ As an archive, Bran becomes a target for erasure.

Those of the nascent labour force in Europe – whose activities were recorded and controlled by the state to become more legible to the state (hence the creation of parish registers, birth certificates and censuses) – certainly knew of their power. It is telling how many peasant rebellions began with the destruction of official archives. Writing of the introduction of the capitalist wage relation and the violent enclosure of the commons, Silvia Federici notes how people organised themselves into bands, raided manors and land registries and destroyed the archives ‘where the written marks of their servitude were kept’.¹⁵

The state knew too. Countless examples of the state destroying archives litter history—the recent Mau Mau and Windrush scandals in Britain are prime examples.¹⁶ In New Zealand, there was no public archive institution until 1956. Government agencies could pretty much do what they liked with their archives. As a result, only 3 to 4 per cent of everything ever created by government has survived. The New Zealand Police Force archives, for example, are woefully patchy for the years between 1900–1950 due to an in-house purge of records – only a sample of high-profile murder cases were kept. Police record books note detailed files on labour movement leaders and others deemed threatening to the state, but the files themselves no longer exist.¹⁷

The state also launched successive waves of attack on the archives of te ao Māori, for these represented te māramatanga o ngā tikanga, the philosophy of law deeply interwoven throughout Māori life, and were therefore incompatible with colonial authority.¹⁸ Pākehā governments suppressed tā moko, punished the practice of tohunga, sanctioned the beating of Māori-language speakers in school and paved highways over wāhi tapu, violently divorcing Māori from their philosophical base. In doing so, the colonial archive not only dismissed the Māori word and replaced it with the Pākehā word, it made

colonised 'others' available to the extractive enterprises of colonial capital.¹⁹

Despite this acknowledgement of archival power by the state, throughout the twentieth century, public archives were seen as passive, objective and neutral. The public archivist was an impartial custodian – interpretation was the job of those using archives and not that of the archivist. 'The good Archivist', wrote Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the grandfather of the Western archival canon, was 'perhaps the most selfless devotee of Truth the modern world produces.'²⁰ Archives were the evidence from which Truth (with a capital 'T') could be found.

More recently, the post-custodial turn has challenged this view. A questioning of the profession's objectivity has reframed or refigured archives and archival institutions. There has been a move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject.²¹ Archives are increasingly viewed as social constructs – they don't simply 'arrive or emerge fully formed, nor are they innocent of struggles for power in either their creation or their interpretive applications . . . all archives come into being in and as history as a result of specific political, cultural, and socioeconomic pressures.'²² Feminist and indigenous scholarship has exposed the gendered, colonial nature of archives, while ethnographic approaches denaturalise the archive to show how people encounter, interpret and make use of them as living and dynamic spaces.²³ The evidential nature of their contents have also been questioned: no longer can we think of archives as the simple bearers of fact or truth. Just as much as oral testimony, a written document reflects the biases and needs of its creator.

What does this mean for public knowledge? It means that public archives should be viewed not as mere sites of knowledge retrieval, but as sites of knowledge production in both the past and the present.²⁴ And this is a good thing. For it is as a site of knowledge production that public archives become important for counter-narratives. It allows us to read its holdings against and along the grain, to notice the gaps, to hear the silences and to tell the stories that have not been told.²⁵ Archives read this way can challenge state power or hold that power to account. And, ideally, it can help the circulation of struggles and

create possibilities that go beyond hierarchical, statist forms of power. If in one reading there is no state without archives, another reading suggests that ‘the very existence of the archive constitutes a threat to the state’.²⁶

The value of public archives for those challenging power or creating counter-power depends on its use. Free and open access to public archives is therefore an important issue. Like Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the metanarrative of the public archive is ever vulnerable to changing governments and changing priorities. Or, in plain speak, the public archive is a political football – where it lands depends on who is kicking it.

In the archival profession access often comes second to the acquisition or preservation of records. Faced with unwieldy paper-finding aids or online search engines with outdated, incorrect or zero metadata, users not only have to deal with organising principles totally different from those of a library, such as provenance and original order, but often have no meaningful way to find and access what they need. This is even more telling in our colonial context. Māori users of the public archive must also grapple with the privileging of Pākehā terms over te reo Māori (many of which are misspelt), non-indigenous systems of knowledge, monocultural spaces and institutional anxiety, and the historical trauma of dispossession and deprivation.²⁷ As one Māori participant in a study of non-users noted:

there are all sorts of ways that people are disenfranchised from accessing information [at archives] – whether that’s various kinds of literacy i.e. the most basic literacy, or literacy on the level of being able to filter and understand the particular languages that are used by officialdom. And also that emotional reality of being disenfranchised – what’s your motivation to access information and know about the particulars of your disenfranchisement if you don’t have hope for things being different?²⁸

The post-custodial turn has thankfully placed a greater importance

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on access within public archives. As well as culturally appropriate spatial design and the increasing use of Māori-intuitive metadata, there has been a steady investment in digitisation. Digitisation is not the cure-all solution many think it is, but it has undeniably changed the nature of archival access.²⁹ Digital divides and digital literacies aside, the digitisation of archives has made them more accessible than ever before, allowing users to shape public discourse and dissent within the information age. Online search engines, global databases and crowdsourcing platforms have made millions of digital surrogates available to view or download from one's personal device. Where before a researcher had no choice but to visit the archive, they can now access, use and re-use digital archives anywhere, any time – unless, of course, they are locked behind a paywall. More and more digital archives are finding their way into educational resources, policy documents, family and local histories and mainstream media, while machine-reading technology allows the automated transcription of digitised handwritten documents, making them discoverable to Google and other web crawlers.

However, we need to remind ourselves that today's knowledge economy rests on very material relations of domination and exploitation; automation and immiseration; colonisation and incarceration. It is no coincidence that internet fibre optic cables trace the trade routes of former empires, or that the cloud – which the New Zealand government has directed its agencies to privilege over other digital storage systems – has its data warehouses in disputed post-colonial territories in order to exploit their ambiguous status, raising the issue of Māori data sovereignty.³⁰ The extraction of raw materials needed for the information age destroys both land and labour across the globe, while the computer industry's use of toxic substances makes places like Silicon Valley – the bastion of cybernetic capital – home to some of the highest concentrations of hazardous waste sites in the United States.³¹ The gap between the rich and poor there is particularly stark, as the work of elite, highly paid programmers (the *cognitariat*) is made possible by low-paid and gendered labour.³² For Marxist author Nick Dyer-Witheford, 'the conjunction of automation and globalization

enabled by information technology raises to a new intensity a fundamental dynamic of capitalism – its drive to simultaneously draw people into waged labour and expel them as superfluous un- or underemployed.³³ Like the service workers of Silicon Valley, these are often women, indigenous peoples or people of colour. They are the same people who fill prison cells and whose labour is then used to continue the circulation of capital. FamilySearch, one the world's biggest genealogical sites and the host of digitised archives from Archives New Zealand, uses prison labour to digitise and index its holdings.³⁴

Archives do not exist in a vacuum. It would be wrong to believe the power of archives is present outside of concrete relations between people, and that archives in themselves possess all the powers attributed to them. Archives, like information, must be made and used.³⁵ It is also naïve to believe that discourse informed by public knowledge is enough to undo these relations.

Which brings us all the way back to archives as stories and public archives as sites of knowledge production. Despite what this chapter³⁶ might seem to suggest, understanding archives as social constructs shaped by material social relations is a strength. If 'the task is less to distinguish fiction from fact than to track the production and consumption of those facticities themselves', then context is everything.³⁷ After all, the most cherished organising principle of the archival profession is context. It is context that allows us to make sense of an archive and its content, and to place it in relation to others. It is context that can unveil the legal fictions and metanarratives both inside and outside of the public archive. It is in this sense that an understanding of context is radical, in the original meaning of the term (of relating to a root, to get to the root of something). Because if we truly want to get at the root of the social and ecological disaster that is capitalism, knowledge in itself is not enough. Knowledge must be used, and in ways that radically rupture and reorient our current modes of relationship – including our relationship to knowledge itself.

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Notes

1. Moana Jackson, "The Treaty and the Word: the Colonization of Māori Philosophy" in Justice, Ethics, and New Zealand Society, eds. Graham Oddie and Roy W. Perrett (Australia and New Zealand: Oxford University Press, 1992), 1–10. This was confirmed by the Waitangi Tribunal's 2014 finding that by signing Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Ngāpuhi – and by extension other signatories – never ceded sovereignty. Waitangi Tribunal, He Whakaputanga me te Tiriti/The Declaration and the Treaty: The Report on Stage 1 of the Te Paparahi o Te Raki Inquiry (Wai 1040, 2014).
2. Moana Jackson, "James Cook and our monuments to colonisation," E-Tangata, accessed June 3, 2019, <https://e-tangata.co.nz/comment-and-analysis/james-cook-and-our-monuments-to-colonisation/>.
3. Jackson, "The Treaty and the Word."
4. Adele Perry, "The Colonial Archive on Trial: Possession, Dispossession, and History in Delgamuukw v. British Columbia," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 325.
5. Incidentally, the largest repository of Archives New Zealand sits on the former lands of Pipitea Pā in Wellington.
6. Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verso, 1993), 6.
7. Tony Ballantyne, "Archive, Discipline, State: Power and Knowledge in South Asian Historiography," *New Zealand Journal of Asian Studies*, 3, no. 1 (2001): 90.
8. Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid and Razia Saleh (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2002), 23.
9. Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," in *Archival Science*, no. 2 (2002): 1–2.
10. Schwartz and Cook, "Archives, Records, and Power," 2.
11. Verne Harris, *Archives and Justice: A South African Perspective* (Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 2007), 345. See also Randall Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009).
12. For an indigenous understanding of Marx's concept of primitive accumulation and capitalist modes of production as 'modes' or 'forms of life' see Glenn Coulthard, "The Colonialism of the Present," *Jacobin*, accessed May 30, 2019, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/01/indigenous-left-glen-coulthard-interview/> and Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014).
13. Rodney Carter, "Of Things Said and Unsaid: Power, Archival Silences, and Power in Silence," in *Archivaria*, no. 61 (2016): 216.

14. For more on the cybernetic vortex, see Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat: Global Labour in the Digital Vortex* (London: Pluto Press, 2015) and his earlier work, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-technology Capitalism* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1999), which draw upon autonomist Marxist traditions. For Dyer-Witheford, 'contemporary capital increasingly subordinates the reproduction of variable capital (humans) to that of the fixed capital (machines) of which the capitalist class is the personified representative. This is an accelerating movement that proceeds by intermediate cyborg or symbiant stages towards even higher levels of automation. In this process, the creation of surplus populations, appearing in various forms of precarity, informal work, unemployment and destitution in differentiated global zones becomes the characteristic form of proletarianization,' *Cyber-Proletariat*, 196.
16. In 2012 it was discovered that thousands of documents detailing crimes committed during the final years of the British empire were systematically destroyed or secretly withheld from the public. The discovery came after a group of Kenyans detained and allegedly tortured during the Mau Mau rebellion won the right to sue the British government, and access previously hidden files. More recently, in 2018, it was discovered that the British Home Office had destroyed thousands of landing card slips recording Windrush immigrants' arrival dates in the United Kingdom, an important source of residency status for older Caribbean-born residents. For a useful introduction to state destruction of archives, see Eric Ketelaar, "Recordkeeping and Societal Power," in *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, eds. Sue McKemmish, Michael Piggott, Barbara Reed and Frank Upward (Wagga-Wagga: Charles Sturt University, 2005), 277–298.
17. For more on this topic, see Jared Davidson, *Dead Letters: Censorship and Subversion in New Zealand 1914–1920* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2019).
18. Jackson, "The Treaty and the Word."
19. Tony Ballantyne, "Littoral Literacy: Sealers, Whalers, and the Entanglements of Empire," in *Critical Perspectives on Colonialism: Writing the Empire from Below*, eds. Fiona Paisley and Kirsty Reid (New York: Routledge, 2014), 160. See also Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand's Colonial Past* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, 2012).
20. Hilary Jenkinson, "British Archives and The War," in *The American Archivist* 7, no. 1 (1944): 1–17.
21. Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form" in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid and Razia Saleh (Cape Town: New Africa Books, 2002), 86.
22. Antoinette Burton, "Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005), 6.
23. Kirsty Reid and Fiona Paisley, "Introduction," in *Sources and Methods in Histories of Colonialism: Approaching the Imperial Archive*, eds. Kirsty Reid and Fiona

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- Paisley (New York: Routledge, 2017), 5. See also Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002).
24. Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 85.
 25. For more on reading archives along the archival grain, see Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009). For a summary of 'history from below' see Jared Davidson, "History from Below: A Reading List with Marcus Rediker," *History Workshop Journal*, accessed June 10, 2019, <http://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/history-from-below-a-reading-list-with-marcus-rediker/>.
 26. Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 23.
 27. See Jared Davidson, "Colonial Continuum: Archives, Access and Power," in *Archifacts* (April 2015): 17–24.
 28. Jared Davidson, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind? Non-user Understandings of Archives in Aotearoa New Zealand" (Master's Thesis, Victoria University of Wellington, 2014), 23.
 29. Issues of labour time and the cost of both digitisation equipment and ongoing digital storage costs often gets lost in the demand to 'digitise everything and put it online', as do questions of data sovereignty and cultural and intellectual property rights.
 30. See James Bridle, *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future* (London: Verso, 2018).
 31. Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx*, 235.
 32. On the cognitariat and the role of knowledge and knowledge commons in cognitive capitalism, see Carlo Vercellone, "From the Mass-Worker to Cognitive Labour: Historical and Theoretical Considerations" in *Beyond Marx: Theorising the Global Labour Relations of the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Marcel van der Linden and Karl Heinz Roth (Leiden and Boston: Brill 2014), 440.
 33. Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Proletariat*, 15. On the phenomenon of capital's creation of surplus populations and resistance to it, see Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprisings* (London: Verso, 2016).
 34. Shane Bauer, "Your Family's Genealogical Records May Have Been Digitized by a Prisoner," *Mother Jones*, accessed June 4, 2019, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2015/08/mormon-church-prison-geneology-family-search/>. See also Archives and the Old Mole, "Ancestry, Ancestry, White Power, and Corpsefucking," accessed June 4, 2019, <https://archivesoldmole.wordpress.com/2016/01/23/ancestry-ancestry-white-power-and-corpsefucking/>.
 35. To paraphrase Richards, *The Imperial Archive*, 73.
 36. This article was originally published as a chapter in the 2019 issue of 'Radical Futures: Public Knowledge'. 'Public Knowledge
 37. Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," 85.