Power, Possession and Post-Modernism: Contemporary Readings of the Colonial Archive

By: Bronwen Masemann

Bronwen Masemann is a second-year student in the Master of Information Studies Program at the University of Toronto, enrolled in the collaborative program in Book History and Print Culture. She received a B.A. in 2006 from the University of Toronto and an M.A. in History from McGill University in 2007. She has worked as a digital collections cataloguer at the Royal Ontario Museum and the Iter database, and as a student reference archivist at Library and Archives Canada. She combines ongoing research on the history of the book in the eighteenth century French and British Atlantic with interests in digital humanities scholarship and information literacy for special collections.

Introduction

When the first major historian of Canada, the French Jesuit Pierre-François Xavier de Charlevoix, began to write his Histoire et Description Générale de la Nouvelle France in the late 1720s, he was able to conduct his research without leaving Paris. Officials from the French Ministry of the Marine, the government department charged with colonial administration, allowed him to use documents held in the Marine archives to write his monumental work and to keep them in his private rooms.1 Canadian historians of later centuries have reason to envy him; although the immense document copying programme carried out in the early twentieth century by the Public Archives of Canada, as well as later microfilming campaigns2, brought copies of

---


many of the documents in French archives back to Canadian soil, any historian of the French and British colonial periods in Canada can expect to travel to numerous European archives in search of material.

This problem of history-writing and remembering in colonial and post-colonial societies, whose records may be found hundreds or thousands of kilometres removed from the places and peoples they describe, has emerged as a central concern in scholarly discussions of colonial archives over the last two decades. Drawing on theory and practice in the fields of anthropology, history, literary criticism, and archival studies, the literature of this field is concerned with both the form of colonial archives – as administrative institutions and as sites for the construction of knowledge and power – and with their contents. These are records that remain crucial to post-colonial history and identity despite the silences and biases imposed by colonial regimes. This paper will first survey prominent institutions and themes addressed by scholars working on colonial archives in a range of colonial contexts from South Asia to the United States, then focus in depth on the work of two scholars from outside the archival profession who are concerned with the form and content of colonial archives in South Asia and Oceania: New Zealand historian Tony Ballantyne and American anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler.

Colonial archives: their definition, history and scope

Narrowly defined, “colonial archives” refers to any of the archival repositories developed by European states (and later, by the United States of America) to store the records of their colonies. As an institution, therefore, it is a product of the early modern period, a period when “archival centralization accompanied and translated the bureaucratic ambition of the State” (Delsalle 1998, 136, my translation). Colonial administrative records, which might include letters, reports, maps, statistics, surveying, travel narratives, and other scientific data, could be preserved in the colony itself, but were often preserved in government archives of the colonizing state, alongside the records of other administrative bodies. The custodial history of colonial records was further complicated when possession of colonies was transferred between colonizing powers through conquest, purchase, and diplomacy. European law dating from the Middle Ages dictated that “if territory was annexed the new owner needed the documents that were evidence of prior and present
ownership of the property,” and was entitled to any “public property within the ceded territory,” including documents (Posner 1942, 142-3).

The complex custodial history of colonial records and the ramifications of archival custody for historical research and cultural identity have been the subject of much recent scholarship. Perhaps the most well-known example of this type of study is the work of Jeanette Allis Bastian, the former Territorial Librarian and archivist of the United States Virgin Islands. Bastian has shown how the purchase of the Danish West Indies (later the United States Virgin Islands) by the United States in 1919 led to the removal of the vast majority of archival records from the territory by United States and Danish government officials, thereby depriving generations of Virgin Islanders of the source material needed to write their history and remember their heritage. In the absence of archival sources, Bastian argues, Virgin Islanders have relied largely on oral traditions to supplement meager published historical sources (Bastian 2009, 35-71).

In contrast, the residents of another former American colony, the Philippine Islands, are able to access a large body of archival material on the periods of both Spanish and American colonization. Ricardo Punzalan has argued that the continuous presence of these records in the Islands and the development by the United States of a centralized archival institution to house them has contributed to the development of Philippine national identity (Punzalan 2006). Alfred E. Lemmon’s case study of the colonial records of Louisiana provides an additional example of the impact of changes of sovereignty on colonial records in North America; the territory was originally colonized by the French in the late seventeenth century, ceded to Spain in 1762 in gratitude for military assistance, returned to France in 1800, and finally purchased by the United States in 1803. Records for the history of the territory can be found in Spain, Mexico, Cuba, France and the United States (Lemmon 1992).

In the early modern period and continuing into the 19th and 20th centuries the primary (if not sole) function of colonial archives, whether located in Europe or in colonized territories, was administrative. The use of colonial and other government records for historical research was an exceptional innova-

---

5 For example, Jeannette Allis Bastian describes how the records of the U.S. Virgin Islands came to be stored in the United States and Denmark in her “A Question of Custody: The Colonial Archives of the United States Virgin Islands,” *The American Archivist* 64 (2001): 96-114; Bastian, *Owning memory: how a Caribbean community lost its archives and found its history* (Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).
tion introduced only in the mid-eighteenth century (Delsalle 1998, 153). In France, the “Depôt de la Marine” was established in 1680 by Colbert as part of his consolidation of the machinery of the absolutist state, which included the establishment of similar repositories for the records of war and diplomacy (Delsalle 1998, 134). In contrast, the monumental Archivo de Indias, founded a century later in Seville, was created in part as a historical laboratory bringing together all documentation on the Spanish New World for the use of historian Juan Bautista Muños (Delsalle 1998, 130; Lemmon 1992, 149). The vast store of records created during the British colonization of India since the 17th century, first by the British East India Company and then by the India Office of the British Government, represents a third important repository in the history of the colonial archive. These records, which are now housed in the British Library, served as a source of information on the territory for colonial administrators and scholars until India’s independence in 1947 (The British Library 2008).

In addition to government records, the term “colonial archives” can encompass a wide variety of other types of documentation, both written and oral. The records of commercial companies are crucial to an understanding of the colonial experience, particularly in the Caribbean and South Asia where the various East and West India Companies took on a quasi-governmental role (Bastian 2004). As well, recent scholarship in religious history has mined the records of missionary societies to complicate our understanding of cultural encounters between colonizers and colonized (Casson 1997).

A third important body of non-governmental documentation can be found in the private papers and collections amassed by Europeans in colonial settings. Europeans in the Pacific Islands, for example, “have brought together carvings and weavings, manuscripts and documents, maps, plans, biological specimens, and other signifiers of the region’s past” which provide a vital but limited image of island society, since such collections are built on “other countries’ evolving interests in the region, whether scientific, military, economic, or political” (Wareham 2002, 191). Like Wareham, Ann Laura Stoler and Karen Strassler expand the definition of colonial archives beyond conventional bounds of form and provenance in their study of “a specific archive on the colonial domestic order” in Indonesia, in which they compare documentation of the Dutch experience of colonization, including government records, personal me-
moirs and published material, with evidence of the Indonesian experience based on ethnographic interviews of former servants to Dutch colonial families (Stoler and Strassler 2000, 5).

The status of oral records is a persistent theme in studies of post-colonial societies that seek to give voice to colonized and indigenous peoples who are given scant or biased attention in written sources. Ricardo Punzalan contrasts the recordkeeping practices of the Spanish colonizers of the Philippines with those of the indigenous inhabitants, whose “archives’ exist not as recorded two dimensional objects that may be stored or preserved in a repository, but as ‘acts’ that occur only within the realm of experience and in the memory of the members of these communities” (Punzalan 2006, 383). In a similar vein, Wareham characterizes the recordkeeping of Pacific Islands cultures as "a finely woven mat of sources . . . interwoven with stories, songs, dances, myths, and traditions passed through generations by word of mouth" (Wareham 2002, 196). Jeanette Bastian focuses on the role of community commemorations and holiday celebrations in her study of Virgin Islands collective memory, showing how the definition of “oral tradition” in post-colonial societies can be broadened beyond traditional myths and legends (Bastian 2003).

Given the vast array of material included under the rubric of “colonial archives,” it should not be surprising that a substantial proportion of the scholarly literature on these repositories has long aimed to promote access to these sources for historians of post-colonial societies. In describing the complex classification schemes of government archives containing colonial records, or detailing the difficulties of accessing records stored in multiple locations around the globe, case studies of this type hint at the broader methodological and theoretical concerns surrounding the use and custody of colonial archives, but maintain a practical focus on the “nitty-gritty” of archival research. For example, Alfred E. Lemmon recounts the complex history of the creation and custody of the colonial records of Louisiana primarily to contextualize his detailed discussion of the locations of these records in disparate modern-day repositories, and of the institutional and practical challenges of microfilming this material (Lemmon

---

1992, especially 147-155). For scholars of African colonial history, this impulse towards accessibility is embodied in numerous articles in the journal *African Research and Documentation*, produced by the Standing Committee on Library Materials on Africa, which provide detailed listings of archival holdings and practical introductions to collections of research interest.\(^5\)

Lying at an opposite extreme from this practically-minded material are several highly theoretical studies produced since the 1990s that explore the epistemological and cultural status of colonial archives within a broader interrogation of the nature and definition of archives. Underpinning these discussions is a broad conception of “the archive” influenced by the work of Foucault and Derrida, in which the term “may serve as a strong metaphor for any corpus of selective forgettings and collections – and, as importantly, for the seductions and longings that such quests for, and accumulations of, the primary, originary, and untouched entail” (Stoler 2002, 94). A concern for the narrative and imaginary elements of knowledge construction has therefore been a prominent theme of work on the figurative Archive by historians, cultural theorists and literary critics.

In the case of studies by micro-historians Natalie Zemon Davis and Carlo Ginzburg, these more theoretical musings have been accompanied by detailed critical readings of archival documents in order to tease out “how people told stories, what they thought a good story was, how they accounted for motive” (Davis in Stoler 2002, 95). Literary scholars, in contrast, might explore the figurative Archive by focusing almost exclusively on published materials lying outside of the traditional conception of the archives. This is the approach taken by Thomas Richards in his book-length study *The Imperial Archive*, a collection of essays written “to try to understand what it means to think the thought of imperial control” in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century British empire, particularly in South Asia (Richards 1993, 2). Richards analyses the control and use of knowledge in several well-known novels, including Kipling’s *Kim* and Hilton’s *Lost Horizon*, to delineate a “fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire,” which he terms the “imperial arc-

---

hivé.” (Richards 1993, 6). Although his literary emphasis means that a detailed consideration of Richards’ work lies outside the scope of this paper, it will become clear that his central theme — the interactions between knowledge, information, and power in colonial societies — is also a primary concern in the work of other scholars of colonial archives in South Asia and Oceania.

Perspectives on the Colonial Archive: Ballantyne and Stoler

Tony Ballantyne’s recent study of the literature on colonial archives in South Asia provides an accessible overview of themes in post-colonial scholarship on Indian history and introduces new approaches to the study of New Zealand archives as elements in a system of British imperial communication (2004). For Ballantyne, a historian at the University of Otago, “the relationship between the colonial state and knowledge production,” is one of two important currents emerging in contemporary studies of colonial archives on the Indian subcontinent; the other is the “gendering” of Indian archives through the study of women’s literacy and voice by scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Lata Mani (Ballantyne 2004, 22-6). Ballantyne surveys recent scholarship that characterizes the colonial archives in India as a site of colonial dominance in which certain forms and types of knowledge were accorded privilege while others were effaced (Ballantyne 2004, 23-5). Ever since Spivak made the controversial contention that "subaltern groups cannot speak" in the mid 1980s, the possibility of using archival documents to access the voices of marginalized groups such as women and indigenous peoples has been an important subject of debate in studies of the Indian colonial archive (Ballantyne 2004, 25-6). Ballantyne’s survey of this literature shows clearly why recent “scholarship has jeopardized . . . faith in the archive” as a transparent repository of knowledge about colonial India that simply needs to be extracted through the correct application of research methods.

Ballantyne also demonstrates how the post-modern shift towards a broader definition of the Archive and archives as loci of power and knowledge construction has opened the way for studies of an extremely wide range of themes and source material in the South Asian context. Ballantyne points out that this expansive approach to the form

---

6 Ballantyne 2006, 22. Ballantyne also contends here that this traditional view of archival research still forms the basis of undergraduate and graduate programmes in history; this is certainly arguable in the North American context, where a focus on narrative and the process of history-writing has “taken cultural and historical studies by storm” (Stoler 2002, 92).
of the colonial archive is often accompanied by an inclusive definition of its contents, which are understood to encompass not just government administration but all areas of human endeavour within the colonial context, and particularly those in which power relations between colonizer and colonized are played out at the epistemological level. Thus, knowledge produced in colonial contexts in the fields of medicine, surveying, literature, cartography, linguistics, economics, and many other areas is considered a key element of the “colonial archive” to be mined for evidence of European dominance, subaltern resistance, and indigenous knowledge (Ballantyne 2004, 22-5).

In applying these debates about knowledge production and gender in South Asian colonial archives to the context of New Zealand history, Ballantyne is particularly influenced by the work of historians such as C.A. Bayly and Nicolas Dirks, who have used archival documents to reveal and explore the crucial role played by indigenous Indian informants in providing historical, military, and political “intelligence” to the British colonial administration on the subcontinent (Bayly 1996; Dirks, 1993). He therefore advocates further study of the processes of information-gathering by British colonial functionaries in New Zealand, who drew on interactions with Maori informants to develop a “coherent body of knowledge” about Maori custom, spirituality, language, and territory (Ballantyne 2004, 27-8).

While these suggestions build on prior scholarship in New Zealand history, Ballantyne’s distinctive contribution to the study of the New Zealand colonial archive grows out of his larger research interest in the history of trans-national communication networks linking British territories in South Asia and Oceania. Ballantyne argues that archives in New Zealand, as in other British colonies, should be understood as “nodes within a larger system of imperial knowledge production” that play a dual role as repositories for the evidence of “various webs of correspondence, institutional exchanges and publication networks” and as “centers from which knowledge was distributed, whether through the act of reading, correspondence, the intertextual nature of print culture, or the exchange of manuscript or printed material” (Ballantyne 2004, 33). He has tested these ideas in a case study of Samuel Peal, a nineteenth-century New Zealand ethnographer, whose personal papers held in the Polynesian Society Collection at the National Library of New Zealand reveal multiple strands of connection and
communication between colonial intellectual communities in India and Oceania. Through his “letters, postcards, telegrams, the purchase and lending of books and periodicals, and the exchange of field notes, word lists, sketches, and of-prints,” Ballantyne argues, Peal belonged to a network of knowledge production that crossed institutional, class and cultural boundaries and connected him with “a veritable who’s who of anthropology in Asia-Pacific [in his period]” (Ballantyne 2006, 90-6).

Ballantyne and American anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler share an interest in critical analysis of the form of colonial archives as an indispensable accompaniment to any study of the documents they contain. He maintains that “New Zealand historians need to turn to their archives more critically, making the archives themselves the objects of critical historical study. . . [In order] to appreciate how our colonial archives were constructed, we must catalogue what is absent in these collections as well as what is present, and we need to reconstruct the ideological work that they have done (Ballantyne 2006, 29).

In a 2002 article in Archival Science, Stoler, a professor of anthropology and historical studies at the New School for Social Research, presents a preliminary framework for asking, “what insights about the colonial might be gained from attending not only to colonialism’s archival content, but to its particular and sometimes peculiar form.” In this article, Stoler also provides an overview of recent scholarship on colonial archives in the fields of anthropology and history. In addition to a survey of many of the themes and authors also discussed by Ballantyne, she situates changing attitudes to archival research within the “historic turn” in anthropology during the 1990s. Like Ballantyne, Stoler shows how the questioning of the foundations of colonial knowledge has transformed the way scholars use archival sources including travel accounts, government reports, and photographs to understand human culture and cultural encounters. “We are no longer studying things,” she says of anthropologists, “but the making of them (Stoler 2002, 89). However, Stoler suggests that anthropologists have been slow to adopt the “epistemological skepticism,” towards archival documents that characterizes post-modern historical practice, instead continuing to favour an “extractive” metaphor of archival research in which the ability to recover classified or confidential information from archival documents “measures scholarly worth (2002, 90-2).

Stoler’s article can be read as a challenge to scholars to participate in a “more sus-
tained engagement with [colonial] archives as cultural artifacts of fact production, of taxonomies in the making, and of disparate notions of what made up colonial authority” (Stoler 2002, 91). Several of her more specific strategies for achieving this kind of engagement cover ground familiar to both archivists and historical researchers; although her initial article on these themes appeared in a journal of archival science, her work is highly interdisciplinary in approach. Citing the work of historian Carlo Ginzburg on evidentiary paradigms, she suggests that users of colonial archives should enquire not “whether documents are trustworthy, authentic and reliable” but also explore “the social and political conditions that produced those documents” (Stoler 2002, 91). The great strength of Stoler’s article lies not in novelty but in comprehensiveness, as she brings together a vast array of secondary material from disparate fields to support her claims. Within the archival community, similar ideas about re-thinking the concept of provenance have been advocated by Terry Cook, Tom Nesmith and others (Bastian 2008, 81-5). More recently, Jeanette Bastian has introduced the notion of the “community of records” as a means of redefining provenance in post-colonial settings, particularly in cases where the records describe a historically voiceless population such as slaves (Bastian 2006). In her emphasis on the role of narrative in shaping the meaning of the colonial archive and colonial experience, Stoler repeatedly echoes historical theorist Hayden White and the tenets of microhistory as she tells us, for example, that “[i]t was in factual stories that the colonial state affirmed its fictions to itself, in moralizing stories that it mapped the scope of its philanthropic missions, and in multiple and contested versions that cultural accounts were discredited or restored.”

Like Ballantyne’s, Stoler’s discussion is most insightful when she turns to the topic of her own research in colonial archives which focuses on the Dutch administration of territories in what is now Indonesia in the 19th and 20th centuries. Stoler’s deep familiarity with these sources allows her to paint a verbal picture of these records that shows how their form shapes the reading of their contents:

Issues were rendered important by how they were classed and discursively framed … Organized in folio forms, title pages provided long lists of cross-referenced dossiers and decisions that were abbreviated genealogies of what constituted relevance, precedent and “reasons of state” … such folios contained and confirmed what counted as proof and who cribbed

7 Stoler 2002, 97. Pages 91-2 reference additional discussion of narrative. Stoler’s primary focus on the interplay between form and content in colonial archives also shows the influence of White.
from whom in the chain of command (Stoler 2002, 98).

She argues that the discourses used in Dutch colonial documentation were shaped not only by the demands of statecraft but by a tacit system of social hierarchy among colonial officials that was based in ideas about civility and sentiment. By writing reports to their superiors in the Netherlands, colonial officials were able to increase their status within this hierarchy through “studied ignorance of local knowledge, … their skill at configuring events into familiar plots, and . . . their cultivation of the fine arts of deference, dissemblance and persuasion (Stoler 2002,101).

Stoler argues further that the Dutch colonial archives should be considered not simply “products of state machines” but also as “technologies that bolstered the production of those states themselves (Stoler 2002, 98). As such, she argues that archival institutions represented one element in an elaborate apparatus of administration and communication established by the Dutch in the East Indies, which included courier systems, telegraphs, colonial printing houses, and government office buildings (Stoler 2002, 98). Stoler draws out one element of this infrastructure often ignored in official documentation: the indigenous Indonesian clerks who were “commonly referred to as ‘copy machines’” by their Dutch bosses (Stoler 2002, 98).

She also underlines the importance within this information system of reports of colonial commissions of enquiry established by colonial governments between 1870 and 1920 to investigate the status of “poor whites” in the Indies and South Africa. Echoing Hayden White, she argues that these documents “[can] and should be read for their extraordinary ethnographic content, but also for the content evident in their form.” By defining and calibrating the relationships between racial populations in these societies, the texts of these reports “organized knowledge, rearranged its categories, and prescribed what state officials were charged to know” (Stoler 2002, 104). The classified status of each commission report as a whole is also telling, as Stoler has found that many “secret” Dutch colonial documents appear to have been kept hidden primarily because they contained material that was the subject of disagreement between colonial officials. Based on these examples from the Dutch colonial setting, Stoler makes a strong argument that readers of materials in colonial archives need to read “along

---

8 See White’s *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), which is not cited here by Stoler.
the archival grain” by identifying the archive’s “regularities … its logic of recall, … its densities and distributions, … its consistencies of misinformation, omissions and mistake” before the scholar can attempt to read “against the grain” and recover hidden voices in these records (Stoler 2002, 100).

Conclusion

In surveying recent scholarship by historians and anthropologists of colonial societies, as well as work by literary and cultural theorists, Stoler and Ballantyne provide a comprehensive, interdisciplinary, and transnational view of theory and method on this topic, providing a useful contrast to the national or local case studies and practical guides that dominate the professional literature on colonial archives. This expansive approach reveals how post-modern conceptions of the Archive as a figurative space of power and knowledge production have influenced the discussion of colonial archives and the documents they contain; scholars studying post-colonial societies have adopted a skeptical view towards the truth-value of archival sources and are increasingly interested in the reciprocal interactions between the form and content of archival documents.

The work of both authors suggests that a consideration of the place of colonial archives within colonial systems of communication and information would be a fruitful topic for further research. Whether colonial archives are understood as nodes in communication networks, as property transferred between sovereign nations, as storehouses for the memories and voices of the past, or as catalysts for the ideological and political controversies of the present, it is clear that they are not dusty, forgotten collections of papers, but dynamic and relevant institutions that will continue to be discussed and re-evaluated far into the future.

References


Islands. *The American Archivist* 64 (Spring-Summer): 96-114.


