Post(-)Colonial Archives

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Determining a colony to serve a case study for the in-depth survey of colonialism and archives is extremely difficult. Choosing one colony that can somehow be representative of the histories of all colonies is impossible. The difference in the colonial management by the Spanish, French, British, and other European powers is substantial, and each left its own mark on its numerous colonies, through archives and other obvious means.

Even concentrating primarily on the British Empire—as attempted here—has its difficulty. British Honduras (Belize) has a history all its own due to its proximity to the United States and the Spanish Empire of Latin America. British Mandates of the former Ottoman Empire did not fall under crown control until after the First World War, giving them few similarities to older colonies. Australia, New Zealand, and Canada were settler colonies with large British populations and were governed unlike colonies where natives made up the majority of the population. Hong Kong, one of many British colonies in Asia, has a post-colonial history unlike most, as rather than gain independence it was returned to China after decolonization. Singapore, where this paper intends to concentrate, still does not fit the mold of model colony, as its majority demographic is neither British nor native, but a Chinese population that grew after British settlement.

While no one colony can share the attributes of any other, it is still possible to show the role of the archive in a post-colonial society as one that transcends boundaries and histories. Using Singapore as the primary example is meant solely to show the connection between colonialism and federal archives, and not
as a suggestion that Singapore somehow is representative of all colonies on non-
archival levels.

Furthermore, this paper is not meant to be a history of the independence of
Singapore from the United Kingdom. Independence of colonies has been well-
documented by historians and further research on this area is easy to find. A
review of these histories shows a uniqueness in every one. Despite this
uniqueness, postcolonial\textsuperscript{1} studies show that there are certain overarching
elements that can be found in most, if not all, former colonies. The archives is
one such element found in all colonies. A background on European expansion
will shed light on the role archives played in colonialism, and a background on
postcolonial theory will show how—though extremely relevant and important–
archives have been overlooked in the discipline. Only then can archivists and
other information professionals make the changes to their collection necessary.

Conquest and colonialism, though nearly as old as states themselves, really
began to take form as early medieval kingdoms were being formed in Europe.
Perhaps the earliest example of the merging of conquest and information
management can be found in the Domesday book created after the Norman
conquest of England.\textsuperscript{2} It also provides an early look at the effects on the national
psyche of a foreign power using information to control a people. The Domesday
Book’s vast scope, surveying hundreds of thousands of landowners, peasants,
and others, was merely one aspect of the 11th century conquest of England by
the Normans under William the Conqueror. The Norman elite wrote in Latin, and,
finding written English to be sub-standard, disregarded many pre-conquest
government documents. The invasion also led to the evolution of English from Old to Middle English. None the less, the language would persevere and would eventually become spoken around the world dispersed by conquests originating from the same shores upon which William descended. As seen from the Domesday Book, records can be a means for control. As seen from the evolution of language, conquest can lead to cultural changes that last for centuries, including in records management.

To fully comprehend the connections between outside forces and records some understanding of British imperialism must first be established. At the most basic level there were two distinct classes of colonies. Native colonies, where the British held political power but not a demographic majority, as in the cases of Singapore, Hong Kong, and India. In these colonies, “colonialism was taught as a natural historical succession of events” where the British colonizers–through the eyes of the British–were more advanced than the native population.

The other system of colonization was the white, or settler, colonies like Australia, Canada, or New Zealand where settlers came to forge a new life—whether by choice or force—and the post-colonial governments viewed themselves as merely the successors to British control, and held strong to their British cultural ties. The native colonies were "an aggregation of territories, constitutionally subordinate to Westminster, neither Christian, nor white, nor English in culture and speech," while the settler colonies were founded on "the ideals of representative government and a large measure of freedom for its component nations." Even in the United States, itself a settler colony, the New
England Federalists saw the necessity in maintaining diplomacy with Britain after the Revolutionary War due to their strong cultural connection.

For the majority of their histories, until very recently, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand—and the United States for that matter—had no reason not to promote their White and British identity or label themselves a British nation. The fact that their archives reflected this and were based on the British model was therefore no matter of concern and would have been viewed as natural. In native colonies it was much different. Here records meant power. It was an empire built by military strength, but kept together by meticulous record keeping. This was where any man could perform his British duty in the jungle somewhere and record it for posterity. Posterity, as it has turned out, was not British. The archives, however, still are.

The military might that created the empire that archives would record and control was based on Britain’s naval supremacy from the 16th though 20th centuries. It was, after all, the navy of Drake and Nelson. Building a worldwide empire in a time before flight relied on naval domination. Sailing both east and west, the Royal Navy expanded the British Empire the every habitable continent. Once reaching these foreign lands, the colonists initiated their system of controlling, occupying, or destroying the native populations through both intentional and unintentional, physical and intangible means.

When these colonialists brought writing to traditionally oral societies, they were, in effect, bringing archives. They were bringing the ability to keep records; bringing a control of information. The invention of writing came from a necessity
to record information—to archive. Even in societies with a written language, the colonists knew the power of record keeping. JoAnne Yates' recognition that in American businesses "flows of downward communication from all levels of management conveyed information, procedures, rules, and instructions" were used to "control and coordinate processes and individuals at lower levels" is just as apt when discussing the colonization of a country. Record creation is part of an imperialist’s strategy of claiming a territory. Like planting a flag, official record keeping is the act of a foreign power stating that they have an ownership over the land. When the Spanish burned the archives of the Aztecs they were demonstrating the importance of record keeping in controlling the populace. Cut off a people’s archives and you cut off their ability to fully grasp their history and culture, and with it, you can subjugate them to your history and culture. Simply put, "[t]he more the colonisers knew, the more effectively were they able to control and manipulate the colonised." 

By merely speaking colonists inadvertently had a profound effect on peoples around the world for centuries after their first landfall. Today in India, as in many former British colonies, English, the language of the colonial master, is spoken as a unifying language for people of different ethnicities. Similarly, French is spoken throughout Africa, and Spanish throughout Latin America. While this has positive aspects from a independence country standpoint—communication with former ruler and a connection which could lead to aid and strong diplomatic ties—the negative aspects are just as visible. Numerous languages have died as a result of imperialism when they were replaced with European languages, a
process started when the first colonialists landed. Eventually the multicultural empire had to communicate, and English dominated. When one enters a foreign land, they speak about it. And then they begin to write about it.

The merger of British bureaucracy and the English language laid the foundation for records and archives as a colonial force with a lasting impact. Information was transcribed as soon as colonists arrived. Authors wrote novels and adventurers wrote memoirs of their travels. Local governments were created and clerks took records of daily business. With knowledge recorded in writing, power was firmly in the hands of the colonizers. Once you record information, you make it your own. The British recorded their colonial business, taking psychological control with the archive. Such practices may go back to the earlier days of 17th century British expansion, when the 1660 Restoration brought about "a new attitude to statistical knowledge." As the empire spread around the globe it became important to study and arrange the records in order to prove Britain’s place as the distributor of civilization. It is no coincidence that the creation of what is today the National Archives of the United Kingdom and the height of British imperialism overlap. As Britain determined that records must be kept centralized and that knowledge management leads to the control of more than just information, their empire was able to expand in ways never known before.

Records, once created, need a repository; they need to be cataloged and put in a specific order so they can be found later. The 19th century and early 20th century was a time of great information gathering, especially among the British,
who were the "most data-intensive" imperialists. Colonial information was not always recorded by civil servants in government offices. As the empire expanded, disciplines such as geography and anthropology grew. The Royal Geographical Society, founded in 1830, hosted parties where dining club members occupied themselves discussing “exploration in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, the polar regions, and central Asia.”

Anthropologists and archaeologists scoured the empire and “uncovered” previously "lost" histories. Amateur and government-sponsored ethnographers took to the far reaches of the empire, where they "maintained diaries and logs, or wrote extensive reports providing detailed personal account of 'native' (non-European) cultures that they encountered." The work of these men "kept museums and universities in Europe and North America well-stocked with an endless stream of native artifacts." Museums were "respectable repositories of scientific knowledge about the other," as the collections of the Louvre and the British Museum continue to attest. Just recently in the past two years Yale University and Peru have been in fierce talks about artifacts that Hiram Bingam had gathered during his expedition to Machu Picchu—which was funded with support from the National Geographic Society, America’s most well-known 19th century-founded organization specializing in this field.

This era, filled with names like Lawrence of Arabia, Rudyard Kipling, Dr. Livingstone, and Howard Carter, is one of vast knowledge that also saw the beginning of the British national archives.

The National Archives of the United Kingdom began as the Public Record Office in 1838. The reasoning behind national archives—to "solidify and
memorialise...state power" — grows as the state does, as is evident in the British Empire, where recording information solidified colonial rule. But the fact that the PRO and the Empire were developed at the same time must not be overlooked, though it often is. As the Empire grew, so did the archival collection. As the archives grew, so did the desire for more information. For any government or empire to become so powerful it must record its proceedings and must store them centrally so that their power can be known and remembered. Prior to the Public Record Office, "England's public records lay scattered in fifty-six separate record repositories, each of which was separately administered." Consolidating these distinct repositories under one roof, at the height of the British Empire, is not unlike the growth of the Empire itself. Far-flung countries were merged into one central being. The 19th century was, in both empire and archives, a time of government consolidation.

With a background on the British Empire now established, and the connection between the Empire and records management made clear, the effects on today's post-colonial states must be addressed. The questions of what postcolonial theory is and when it began are rarely agreed upon by two theorists. Many point to Edward Said's *Orientalism* as the seminal text of postcolonialism, though Jean-Paul Sartre and others had been writing on the plight of Algerians under French rule in a manner similar to modern postcolonialism decades before Said. Noted contemporary postcolonial scholar Bill Ashcroft differentiates between the period after colonialism (post-colonialism) and postcolonialism in that postcolonialism "is colonialism's interlocutor and
antagonist from the moment of colonization" and "the discourse of the colonized."\textsuperscript{22} Of course "the discourse of the colonized" was greatly expanded in the 20\textsuperscript{th} century during the post-colonial period, so the confusion between the two is understandable. Ashcroft's definition puts aside the differences between British, Spanish, French, Dutch, American, et al. imperialism and gets down to the root of what postcolonial scholars—who include both authors of colonized and non-colonized nationality—are presenting when they write the history and contemporary effects of colonialization.

With \textit{Orientalism}, Said set out to turn the study of the Orient—what we would refer to today as the "Middle East"—on its head. This geographical region even today is still seen as someplace "different" from us, yet "classical orientalists" refer to Middle Eastern antiquity as the birth of Western civilization. Classical Orientalism was at its strongest during the European domination of the area from the end of the 18th century to the mid 20th century. This, as we have already found, was a time when European colonists were feverishly gaining knowledge on the territory they controlled, and according to Said, "knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control."\textsuperscript{22} In Said's theory, as the colonists were dehumanizing the colonized, this knowledge became not only their complete understanding of the place, but the place itself. To former Prime Minister and later Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour, "British knowledge of Egypt is Egypt."\textsuperscript{22}

Before Said wrote on the history of Middle Eastern colonial oppression, Sartre had predicted in the 1950s that the world was at the point where
colony would reach its limits and would be overthrown, in part due to colonialism's "attempts to bar the colonized people from the road of history." Of course, Sartre was right, and within a decade of his writing, tumultuous events throughout half the world created independent states on nearly every continent. But this did not create nations free of the system he was describing. Any system must record its actions for fear of losing the information which keeps the system operational. Thus, the fundamental parts of the colonial system still exist in the archive. A system is, after all, a single entity constructed of many parts. Without these parts—mainly the creation and maintaining of colonial records—colonialism would cease to function as a system. While the system has been broken down, the archive has stayed in place, allowing for colonialism's continued existence and domination over post-colonial societies. Other aspects of the system, like English law, political structure, and the English language, also still exist and continue to play roles in the former British Empire. The archive, however, as each is unique to its home nation, acts as a permanent reminder of colonialism with none of the unifying aspects of any other part of the colonial system.

Archives are often left out of stories of colonialism by authors reviewing the height of the British Empire either with cynicism or lust, when instead they should always be mentioned. What little that is written on (post-)colonial archives is too often written by postcolonial theorists who either mention the archive only in passing and fail to capitalize on its importance or who concentrate on new definitions of archives outside of the information science profession. Archivists,
not without blame, rarely discuss such cultural significances relating to their profession. The archive—far from just a static location where records go to live out the rest of their existence—was a central player in what can be seen as the most important global phenomenon of the industrial age. Its legacy is far-reaching and cannot be understated.

Even Said, while holding to the theory that "[t]o have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it," does not make the obvious jump to archives and records management as the ultimate form of gaining and retaining such knowledge. The closest Said comes to connecting colonialism—via Orientalism—to archives is in the following metaphor:

"In a sense Orientalism was a library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held. What bound the archive together was a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective."  

This disregard for the importance and role of real archives—both those of the colonial government and post-independence national archives—and a concentration on theoretical archives is postcolonialism’s greatest oversight. In his book—with a most ironic title to any archivist—*The Imperial Archive*, Thomas Richards takes an in depth look at fictional literature produced in England during the Victorian era—Rudyard Kipling, Bram Stoker, Jules Verne, H.G. Wells—which he considers the "archive" of the British Empire. At times Richards does seem to move in an archival science direction, claiming that "[k]nowledge itself had become a weapon in the Empire’s arsenal." But despite all these allusions
to the idea of records management and storage, it is obvious Richards uses the
word archive to his own definition of "not a building, nor even a collection of texts,
but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable, a
fantastic representation of an epistemological master patten, a virtual focal point
for the heterogeneous local knowledge of metropolis and empire." Passages
such as "the double of the imperial archive: a library of comprehensive
knowledge imagined outside the boundaries of state and empire, knowledge
presumed to be the property of an enemy" contain words familiar to an
information professional but on a level completely foreign to them.

Richards refrains from any mention of—what I would call—the "actual"
 imperial archive; that is, the collection and storage of information and records by
colonial bureaucrats that helped gain all this knowledge of the colonized to which
he refers. His arguments, therefore, offer little substance for archivists and non-
archivists alike. Archivists once again see their profession neglected and
redefined, and non-archivists fail to discover the real role archival practice plays
in society. Praising the accession of the archive to something with a “new
theoretical status, with enough cachet to warrant distinct billing, worthy of
scrutiny on its own,” Ann Stoler recognizes the positive aspects of the trend of
works like Richards’, but overlooks the fact that archives now being outside the
realm of "flat-footed archivists” may not necessarily be in the best interest of
archival science.

It is these theoretical archives that non-archivist authors most often refer to if
they use the word archive at all. Said comes to a conclusion that "[t]he Orient
that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire, and it should seem only reasonable that the quest for knowledge—and hand-in-hand, power—was part of this set of forces. Said is constantly making reference to knowledge, yet never to where that knowledge was stored for later use—the archive.

This is not a call to action against such writing. It is wonderful that theorists and scholars of many disciplines have turned the archive into a place they can feel comfortable researching. The fact that world-renowned philosophers like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida have written on archives has meant in the past few decades the archive has become more than a stuffy, dusty collection of records that only historians can peruse. But at the same time, theory has moved the idea of the archive away from the standard information science definition.

Historian Tony Ballantyne comes close to defining the effects of colonialism on archives (and of archives on colonialism) but falls short of determining how this relates to the colonized. Archivists and historians have long disagreed on the significance and role of archives in research, and Ballantyne acknowledges this when he says that "[e]ven those historians sensitive to the occlusions of the imperial archive typically view archives as enclosed, static, and discreet, rather than the product of the constant circulation of information and the heavy intertextuality of many forms of knowledge." It is even his belief that "the archive has become deeply problematic; the manuscript collections, parliamentary papers, court records, periodicals, and newspapers used by
historians of South Asia are not simply documents that allow us to access the colonial past, but rather themselves were constitutive of the multiple inequalities of that past. What is interesting about Ballantyne's article is that he is not talking about theoretical archives or archives in a broad sense; in many ways he is writing about the state archives being discussed here. However, his paper is heavily based on the imperial archive, and not archives since independence. Though he fails to look at the contemporary state of archives and their relationship to the colonial structure—the fact they were formed by colonists, the fact their organizational history is based on a colonial blueprint—Ballantyne is still a historian who at least recognizes the importance of archives not only as where research is done, but as entities on which to do research.

This relationship of archives to the colonial structure should cause archivists to question how national archives can truly be a country's collective memory when the records are created by a ruling class, maintained by highly-trained specialists, and viewed by not a majority of the population, but by passionate researchers—who are not necessarily citizens of that nation. While archives "mirror the society that creates them," to say without reservation that the archive is the collective memory, as so many archivists do, is incredibly dangerous and overlooks a number of facts. Paul Ricoeur was discussing archives when he called the rejection of collective memory "the suicide of history," and though the quote alone is arguably true, we must look deeper at collective memory and archives to see whether the two are linked, and what it means if they are.
The idea of collective memory is much greater than what is in an archive alone. It is the spoken and unspoken ideals and histories that make a society or group. A corporation can have its own collective memory amongst its longtime staff as easily as a country can have a collective memory amongst its citizens. Collective memories are also able to evolve over time. John F. Kennedy is remembered fondly today, no matter what people thought of him in 1963, because his life was cut short and due to the turbulence that followed for the next two decades after his death. A similar effect occurred with Lincoln's assassination a century before. These presidential assassinations completely changed the course of American history and have since been fully ingrained in our collective memory. One came about at a time when the nation was nearly destroyed, and the other happened within the lifetime of people today—people who can still talk about it with others. Not surprisingly, events that result in "virtually no major institutional alterations are much less likely to become part of a society's collective memory." Lincoln and Kennedy were not the only presidents to be murdered, yet there can be no argument that no other presidential assassination has entered our collective memory in ways similar to those two.

Rather then exist as a nation’s collective memory, archives preserve "documents of enduring value that represent the collective memory of society." However, archives and collective memory do not always overlap, as not everything in an archive joins our collective memory, nor is everything in a culture's collective memory in its archive. Archives equally record events with
and without institutional alterations. Pension and Bounty Land Warrant application files for the Revolutionary War as well as the War of 1812 can be found in the American National Archives, despite the fact that the War of 1812 is significantly less ingrained in our collective memory. Words and names like Lexington and Concord, Paul Revere, George Washington, Benedict Arnold, Valley Forge, Yorktown are all deeply set in our memory, while the War of 1812 is largely forgotten.

In America we can walk into the National Archives and see the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution and we seemingly understand their role in our national collective memory. There is little doubt that all Americans have their own ideas as to what those two documents are and how they fit in our cultural landscape. They form a major part of our collective memory, but we must separate the records and the archive from the idea of collective memory. As archivists know, archives run much deeper than priceless historic documents, and contain an innumerable amount of records that would not excite your average tourist if on display. Often times these records have little or no bearing in our collective memory, yet they constitute the bulk of an archive’s collection. Archives may hold valuable artifacts that are physical representations of our collective memory, but we must be careful when using that phrase, and take into consideration what it would mean if archives were a nation's collective memory.

The ramifications of viewing archives as the collective memory for post-colonial states rest on one simple fact: archives were created to "sustain cultural traditions and values." In the case of colonial archives, these traditions and
values were not those of the people now retaining those records. Cultural traditions and values are the ideas that wars are fought over, and when colonies become involved, populations around the world put their lives on the line for the traditions and values of a foreign culture.

This past decade the National Archives of Singapore opened two World War II interpretive centers, located at important sites of the Battle of Singapore. These centers were part of a trend in Singapore to move the scope of the war away from one "between imperialists...to that of local participation."\footnote{4} It was becoming clear that Singaporeans wanted to honor the sacrifices made by their people, and not whether Japan or Britain would be their colonial master. Even so, they were still revering local participation in a war between imperialists, and there is no way around that. Singapore has a right then to remember the brave men who fought against Japan, but it should be remembered that imperialism brought the war to its doorstep. Furthermore, due to the precision of British record keeping, "[i]n spite of the intended local focus of this centre the Malay Regiment is clearly represented through the colonial viewpoint, as evidenced by the fact that information is sourced predominantly from British official documents."\footnote{4}

Even in the case of Ireland, where one would expect the archive to show the fiercely independent spirit of those of the closet part of the empire geographically to Britain, the website of the National Archives of Ireland acknowledges the debt the recorded history of Ireland has to its colonial past. "The National Archives...took over the functions previously performed by the State Paper Office
(1702) and the Public Record Office of Ireland (1867). The former office was established in 1702 as a repository for records relating to the administrations of the various Lords Lieutenant...who until that date, had taken all of their records with them on leaving office." While the British may have laid the groundwork for the National Archives, there is no mention of the recorded history in Ireland before this date, even if it was not from the central government. Perhaps unknowingly, or unintentionally, the National Archives of Ireland loses its grip on its history with this type of language. The National Archives owes itself to the record keeping of monarch-chosen leaders. Empire stripped colonies of their old history, and replaced it with the new, British model of records as history. If one were to subscribe to the belief that archives represent collective memory, then Ireland would be admitting its collective memory is essentially borne of their occupation by the British.

When a former colony becomes independent it is faced with an importance decision regarding its colonial past. Too often this decision is overlooked, and none is made, leaving the people with little understanding of their history aside from being a footnote in the history of Europe's scramble for land. Too often the decisions that are made run the risk of a reactionary backlash against anything remotely reminiscent of the colonial age. Post-colonial nations have tried to remove the past and regain a sense of their pure culture that existed prior to colonialism.

Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, led by Pol Pot, sought to reclaim the glory of ancient Angkor and remove French and American influence.
Ironically, it was French colonialists, archaeologists, and historians who pieced together much of Angkor's history, while Pot himself was educated in France. Nonetheless, France, like many other colonial powers, had united previously warring ethnic groups into one colony, which led to further disdain between parties. When Cambodia gained its independence, the Khmer Rouge used ruthless tactics to "purify" their culture of any outsiders and undesirables. People were killed and books were burned. At first it was Western books, but over time the revolution had become so anti-intellectual that a majority of all texts in the country would eventually be destroyed.\(^4\)

The effects are clear at the National Archives of Cambodia, which states:

"[t]his collection is far from being complete because of Cambodia's tragic history during the 1960s and 70s. The majority of ministerial documents from the Sangkum Reastr Niyum period (1954-1970) had not been transferred to the National Archives when, in 1975, the Pol Pot regime seized control of Cambodia and embarked on a 4-year period of destruction that included documents held in the ministries."\(^4\)

It is incredible that the NAC has any records available today for viewing, but they do, from all periods of Cambodian history since French occupation. Included in their collection are the records of the Khmer Rouge, a group which, despite their rhetoric and actions, "were meticulous record keepers."\(^4\) We look back in horror at Pot's regime, and we are afforded that ability through the use of records. While it is a deeply troubling period of history, it is one we cannot remove or hide, as the Khmer Rouge tried to do to what they regarded as wrong history. Thus, post-colonial societies are left in an awkward situation—they cannot deny their
colonial history, yet they also do not wish to revere it too much for fear of living in a continuous state of neo-colonialism.

While it may be true that all former colonies will always have the colonial period as a major aspect of their history, there is a real danger assuming that colonization brought "primitive" societies to civilization. It can be easy to lose sight of this and link the birth of the archive to the birth of history. Empire certainly brought archival practices to nations around the world, and thus documentation of history. It is this reason that many history books only begin to discuss a country with its colonial "founding." This line of thinking is what lead 19th century Spanish intellectual W.E. Retana to proclaim, "the History of the Philippines is nothing more than a chapter in the History of Spain." But rather than give savage people a history, colonization forced non-Europeans "to exist as part of a world essentially constructed by Eurocentrism." The danger is especially apparent when we believe that what was archived was an unwavering culture existing for centuries. It has been theorized that rather than document truthful representations of cultures, archives—or the over-documentation prevalent in the 19th century—held societies in an exotic, pre-historic state where "[t]he identity which it [the archive] contains is a distorted identity, hence its preservation can only distort the identity" of the colonized.

When Foucault says "[f]or the word to be able to say what it says, it must belong to a grammatical totality which, in relation to the word, is primary, fundamental, and determining" he may very well be defining the word and language as a whole as the way "the things of the world could be known."
When language was written and recorded, its chances of not just knowing, but remembering knowledge, were increased exponentially, as was the case of British bureaucratic colonialists. The idea that a word must belong to a totality can then move beyond spoken language to the written record. For a record to be able to say what it says, the viewer must look at it in a terms of something larger. Let us take the following record from the National Archives of Singapore as an example:

Description: Records Supreme Court of Judicature: Patent Rolls, C66/4313 - Letters Patent for the Court of Judicature for Prince of Wales Island, Singapore and Malacca, Chancery and Supreme Court of Judicature. Patent Rolls. 9 Geo IV Part 11, 27 November 1826
Microfilm No: NAB 1293
PCD/PDF No: D2006100085
Source: The National Archives, United Kingdom
Custodial History: Purchased from The National Archives, United Kingdom as part of NAS' acquisition programme
Scope and Content: Letters Patent granting royal approval for the new Court of Judicature (new charter)
Language: English
Access: 02-Open with restriction = Reading and note taking only. No reproduction

While archives must have active acquisition programs to obtain new records, the idea that the national archive of an independent country must purchase its own history from a former colonial master brings up many questions. This situation calls to mind Jeannette Allis Bastian's survey of the U.S. Virgin Islands recovering its archives in Owning Memory. Bastian's book studies the effects of colonialism on the archives of the islands, including the difficulty historians have in accessing primary sources. An inability to view sources in turn creates an inability to write a complete history of your culture.

We have already credited archives as existing to "solidify and memorialise...state power" and sustaining "cultural traditions and values,"
but now we will look deeper at what both quotes mean in terms of postcolonialism. In the case of Singapore and other former British colonies, archives were created to solidify British power and sustain British traditions and values. The effects of these ideas are obviously disastrous to a society’s sense of self. The goal then, for a national archives of a post-colonial state, would be the restructuring of the archive from memorializing British power and British traditions to one memorializing the Singaporean, or Cypriot, or Indian people and their quest for independence. This is no easy task, as a number of the records are the same from both governments, and must simply be viewed differently. We see the description of the record above, one that was created by the British government and one that the National Archives of Singapore had to purchase in order to tell that chapter of its own history. For this and similar records—those that were cataloged to solidify British control over Singapore—to now reflect the history and memory of the independent Singapore people and government would seem nearly impossible, but it need not be so.

While the Khmer Rouge example sits at one extreme, and passively sitting back and allowing former colonial masters to continue to dictate a nation’s policies would be the other, post-colonial states have to create the balance of recognizing that though you can never erase colonialism, the past does not necessarily control the future. Acknowledging this fact and putting it in to practice has obviously been far easier for settler colonies—for who the sting of colonialism was not nearly as strong—than for native population colonies. Aside from independence, the most historically significant event in twentieth century
Singapore and other colonies was its role in World War II. While the work of the citizens and soldiers was nothing short of remarkable, the colonies were nothing short of pieces in a game between two imperial giants, and the outcome of the war was further colonialism no matter what. Putting such historical significance behind the resistance to occupation merely reinforces the image of post-colonial Singapore or Hong Kong as existing solely as “former colonies” and not as countries and societies with worthy histories of their own. The National Archives of Singapore’s World War II interpretive centers are a noble act, but fall short of reverting British control in archives. It is difficult not to view the Battle of Singapore as two colonial powers fighting for the prize of the strategically located port city, but Singapore tries, in the interpretive centers and online.

The most ambitious online exhibition created by the National Archives of Singapore is centered on the Battle of Singapore, referring to it as "Singapore's Period of Darkness." Two of the other six online exhibitions are also focused on World War II, one in particular on the drawings created by a British soldier while in a POW camp—not exactly what you would expect in a post-colonial society. The other details the history of the Indian National Army, created in Singapore and “formed to liberate India from British rule.” These exhibitions may be a result of Singapore’s non-traditional ethnic make-up, but to have an online exhibition related to India's independence, but not Singapore’s own, is surprising and shocking. This is but one example of how, as Ashcroft puts it, "European history is manifest in any history of a post-colonial people."
The question archivists—and all information professionals—are left with is still based around what can a single archivist do to reverse the effects of colonialism in a nation's archives. While this is a major task and not one that an archivist at a company or university could change, the link between colonialism and archives is the same as any archive's link to its records' past. Records, once cataloged and stored, are not frozen in time; they are still relevant and still have an effect on the present. The records themselves are not only representative of the repositories in which they reside, but so is the history of the record. We can see this in some of the records in the National Archives of Singapore. Yes, they show the history of Singapore, but given the provenance as purchased records from the United Kingdom, the record behind the record shows the continuing legacy of colonialism. All archivists must acknowledge what their records say about their archive, and also must come to a strong conclusion on the power of archives. Archivists understand that their records are important for organizational memory, but when we look back at archives and colonialism it becomes clear that records are far more than pieces of paper in acid-free boxes in a climate-controlled basement with no sunlight.

The lessons taken from this survey of colonialism and archives can be turned in to action in any information setting. Librarians can look at their collection and determine what holes must be filled. Public libraries should have general books on postcolonialism, including both theory and histories of countries since independence. Books on the geography, culture, and history of countries written prior to independence do not necessarily need to be weeded, but it is
important to not only have books written from a colonizer’s perspective. And should budgetary or space restrictions demand it, current books should take precedence unless the colonial period book is rare or of historical value. Atlases and map collections must be up to date as well. The majority of cartographic changes in the past half century can be viewed through a postcolonial light—whether blatant, like collapse of an empire, or less obvious, such as the renaming of a country or a boundary change.

Furthermore, just as the objects in an archival collection share information on the history of the collection itself, so do the books in a library’s collection. All libraries must remember who they exist for—the patrons—and decide whether or not their collection meets the needs of those users. Public libraries in neighborhoods and towns with large ethnic communities must strive to represent the community. Books exulting the history of those groups should stock the shelves—and in many cases those books will be postcolonial in scope.

It is vital that information professionals understand the importance of their collection and their profession. Postcolonial theory is an area where this is most pronounced yet it is sadly not recognized. Archives—physical, actual repositories of information attended to by archivists—are one of the most crucial and yet most undervalued and under-represented aspects of postcolonial theory and the contemporary state of post-colonial nations. The repercussions of this have the ability to be seen in actions implemented by archivists and other information professionals who understand, value, and promote the fact.
To give a sense of consistency in this paper, the time period after a country has gained its independence from a colonial power will be written as "post-colonial." For instance, "Singapore in the post-colonial period." The school of thought based on studying colonialism as it relates to the colonized will be written as "postcolonial." Of course, if this research could be expanded, it would. Given the opportunity to travel to post-colonial national archives and research there, to give this paper the amount of research it deserves, could happen with the proper time and funding. Possible paths to take would be a comparative study of multiple British colonies from different eras and regions. Another comparative study could be between British and other European empires. Much has been written on the difference between the Spanish American Empire and the British Empire, but the difference in their archival tendencies has not been studied.

Norman England may not be a colony, as feuding Medieval monarchs fighting for more land was much different than modern armies and navies conquering poorer and unevenly matched people in the 19th century, but the comparisons can still be drawn. Hugh Thomas argues that the Normans "did not have the institutional structures and technological and economic base to make the kinds of changes European colonialists so often did in the early modern and modern periods" (Thomas, 143), despite the fact that earlier in his book he claims "the Noman Conquest brought a deep rupture in the history of writing in English (Thomas 134)." I would argue that intentional or not—and it cannot be said that cultural ruptures caused by the British in the 19th century were any more or less intentional—changing the course of written English does appear to be exactly the kinds of changes made on a cultural and national level by the British in the modern period. Thinking in terms of structures, technology, and economics overlooks far greater impacts that all conquests have.


Others place the number of colony types higher, but in the simplest of terms, for this paper it can come down to Settler or non-Settler.


Andrew S. Thompson, *Imperial Britain: The Empire in British Politics, c. 1880-1932* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 32

George Orwell equates Britain's naval power to the Englishman's "dislike of standing armies," stating that "[m]ilitary dictatorships exist everywhere, but there is no such thing as a naval dictatorship." The hypocrisy is further multiplied when read in the context of a paragraph where Orwell himself waxes on the hypocrisy of English anti-militarism when the country controls the world's largest empire. Orwell himself was once part of the British imperial bureaucracy, but his later socialist writings were anti-imperialist. Even so, his belief that there has never existed a naval dictatorship seems to belittle the experiences of those colonized by British naval power. George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1957), 69


George Orwell’s *Burmese Days* is a wonderful example of a jungle outpost of the Empire governed by Britons longing to create British society elsewhere.


Thomas Richards, *Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verson, 1993), 4


Ibid., 165


Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: the Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 69


Sartre, Jean-Paul, “Colonialism is a System,” *Interventions* 3:1 (2001), 136


Thomas Richards, *Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verson, 1993), 111-112

Thomas Richards, *Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London: Verson, 1993), 11
On page 4 he also calls the imperial archive "a fantasy of knowledge collected and united in the service of state and Empire," again disregarding the importance of archival and information science and concentrating solely on his own definition of the imperial archive.

1. Ibid., 111
3. Ibid., 203
4. Tony Ballantyne, "Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation-State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia (And Beyond)," in ed. Antoinette Burton, After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 113
5. Tony Ballantyne, "Rereading the Archive and Opening up the Nation-State: Colonial Knowledge in South Asia (And Beyond)," in ed. Antoinette Burton, After the Imperial Turn: Thinking with and through the Nation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 106
11. Also on view, of course, are the Articles of Confederation—the national constitution in use from 1781 to 1787. However, like the War of 1812, the Articles of Confederation have almost no place in our collective memory, yet the National Archives houses both constitutions.

Rebecca Knuth, Burning Books and Leveling Libraries (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006), 128


For instance, the chronology of many African countries jumps from "pre-history" to colonialism. If there was no written word, there was no archive, and therefore, the assumption goes, no history.


Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Random House, 1994), 281

Michel Foucault, The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Random House, 1994), 296

While certain British colonies had written language prior to colonization (such as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, India, Burma, and others) elsewhere in the British Empire cultures relied solely on oral traditions. Furthermore, even in colonies with writing systems, English was often used as the lingua franca to do business in areas with multiple ethnic groups and languages, as in South Asian and African colonies.


Jeannette Allis Bastian, Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community lost its archives and found its History (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003), 39

Carolyn Steedman, Dust: the Archive and Cultural History (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 69


No one would deny the darkness of that period, and the description of the massacre of the Chinese population at the hands of the Japanese is heartbreaking, but one cannot help but wonder the difference in history had Singapore never existed as a British colony. Of course, it was a British colony, and while discussing the "what ifs" is a moot point, one must expect that a battle over a colony would be much different if it were not a colony.


Bill Ashcroft, Post-colonial Transformation (London: Routledge, 2001), 98