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InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies

Title

Silence, Accessibility, and Reading Against the Grain: Examining Voices of the Marginalized in the India Office Records

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8zq0c1n8>

Journal

InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies, 8(2)

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Publication Date

2012

DOI

10.5070/D482011848

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Introduction

As part of the official correspondence of the British East India Company, the India Office Records of the British Library provide a detailed account of the records relating to “British commercial and political relations with India, South and South-East Asia, and other countries with which the East India Company established contact from 1600-1858” (British Library, 2011b). Of particular relevance are the papers known as the *Bengal Secret and Political Consultations*, a series of records that include official correspondence between British colonial officials in India and other colonies, regarding an attempted mutiny of the British colonial authority in Java in the year 1815. A mutiny was planned, but not carried out, by a group of Bengali sepoys and Javanese aristocrats who conspired to overthrow British colonial rule.¹

The archives of the India Office Records contain the only known account of this conspiracy. True to the time, the archives reflect only the views and cultural perceptions of the colonizer, neglecting to give voice or agency to the Bengali sepoys and Javanese aristocrats who chose to take part in this attempted mutiny. This in fact presents a power dynamic in which the actions and motives of the subaltern or marginalized are obscured, if not wholly lost, in the historical record. However, by utilizing postcolonial and postmodern theory to read, or re-read, records “against the grain,” archivists are able to shed new light on this event, and bring forth the missing voice and agency of the colonized. This practice of reading archival records against the grain has a large impact on archival practice as well, as it enables archivists and users to re-think and re-interpret the documents in their care.

This paper is organized into three main sections. The first section introduces the historical context of the attempted mutiny, questions the incomplete nature of archival and colonial records, and discusses the archivist’s responsibility to present as complete a record as possible. The second section discusses the introduction and importance of postmodern theory to the archival field. Particularly significant are arguments by practicing archivists who advocate reading records against the grain to recover voices of the marginalized, how this can be incorporated into archival practice, and the ensuing difficulties that may emerge. Finally, the third section discusses problems of access to colonial records such as those held in the India Office Records, and how the practices of digitization, international cooperation, and reading against the grain are able to produce a plurality of voices, resulting in what Jeannette Allis Bastian (2003) refers to as a true “community of records” (p. 5).

What the Archives Tell Us: An Attempted Mutiny and an Incomplete History

In the latter months of 1815, during the brief British occupation of Java (1811-1816), Bengali sepoy Captain Dhaugkul Singh and his men readied themselves to murder all of the British, Dutch, and Chinese residents in central Java, and to proclaim Singh as governor of the island. Over the preceding months they had convened several secret meetings, encouraging fellow Bengali sepoys and a number of Javanese aristocrats to take part in the proposed mutiny. Notable among the list of Javanese co-conspirators was Pakubuwana IV, Emperor of Java and ruler of the central Surakarta court. But unbeknownst to the Bengali sepoys, Pakubuwana IV developed a scheme of his own. He agreed to Singh's intrigue, but planned only to utilize the military power of the sepoys in his attempt to oust the British from their colonial rule. Once the British were defeated, Pakubuwana IV planned to reclaim his hereditary authority over the central Javanese kingdoms. Concomitant with this was the hoped-for departure of the sepoys and their return to Bengal. In the end, neither Singh's plan nor that of Pakubuwana IV came to fruition. During the planning stages, word was leaked to a British officer, and the plot unraveled. The sepoy leaders of the planned overthrow were summarily executed or exiled, as were a few high-ranking Javanese nobles. Ultimately, British officials regarded this joint colonial resistance of the two different ethnic/religious groups as nothing more than a "conspiracy" and a failed attempt at rebellion.

This brief introduction to a failed mutiny on the island of Java provides the historical context for a number of letters in the collection of the British Library known as the *Bengal Secret and Political Consultations*. These letters were written by officers of the British East India Company immediately after news of the conspiracy was uncovered. The correspondence focuses most importantly on how the mutiny was first planned, i.e., what led the ostensibly loyal Bengali sepoys to join forces with the Javanese ruling princes and oppose the British; and secondly, what the British colonial officers were to do with those guilty of this crime. Numerous references are made in the records to the "disaffected spirit" of the Bengali troops, and conjecture is offered as to what brought the formerly trustworthy soldiers to this low point (India Office Records, 1816, May 4, vol. 279, no. 26). Some British officers pointed to the length of time spent in Java or severity of military discipline as possible causes (Bastin, 1960; Raffles, 1817). Others believed that there was a sense of common identity based on a shared respect of Hinduism, which brought the Javanese and Bengali sepoys into cooperation against the British (India Office Records, 1816, May 4, vol. 279, no. 26).

Regardless of the guesswork of the British colonial officers, however, no actual records exist from the point of view of those involved in the plot. Neither the Javanese nor the Bengalis are directly quoted in any of the correspondence, and it can be safely surmised that none of them were interviewed or asked to give their own views of the matter, other than what was recorded at their court-martial hearing (Carey, 2008). This reflects Michel-Rolph Trouillot's statement about silencing and power in archival records, that "at best, history is a story about power, a story about those who won" (1995, p. 5). In this case, the voice of the Bengalis and the Javanese were essentially silenced in, or written out of, the colonial records.²

Here it is necessary to turn to the making of the colonial records, and to the question of why certain voices were retained while others were left out. The British East India Company, as one of the most powerful European trading companies between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, produced a massive amount of written material. Indeed, scholars speculate that the British Empire was more "data-intensive" than any other in history, producing a large volume of knowledge from reports, books, letters, personal recollections, and descriptions of exotic peoples and distant locales (Richards, 1993, p. 4). The power of the East India Company also extended to instituting its own military force, consisting of the conquered peoples of South Asia, to maintain order and supplement the small British fighting force in the East.³ Consequently, a large number of military documents were also created in order to serve as a record of this army. The abundance of British primary source material paradoxically illustrates a weakness in the historical record – a lack of non-European, specifically Javanese and/or Bengali, primary source material. The records, consisting almost entirely of British diplomatic correspondence, present the perceptions, motives, activities, and behaviors of the subjugated groups through a limited or skewed lens, leaving little voice or agency to the colonized.⁴

This lack of a Javanese or Bengali voice illustrates the incomplete record of history that exists in our museums, libraries, and archives, or what Verne Harris refers to as an "archival sliver," a slight window into historical events (2000, p. 27). Rodney G.S. Carter echoes this problem of incomplete historical records, aptly stating that "the records in the archives tell a very small part of a much larger and infinitely complex story" (2006, p. 221). Indeed, this selective or partial remembering of the past problematizes the historical record. Further complicating the notion of a "complete" historical record is Andrew J Lau's assertion that the archivist's goal of accumulating a totality of records privileges the macrolevel over the microlevel of archival interaction, and results in a quest for quantity rather than quality of information (2011). Other questions arise, including: How accurate should we, as archivists, consider the records in our care when they only represent one side of the story? How possible is it to maintain a

complete historical record? By what process have the voices of the “Other” become silenced and forgotten?⁵ And, perhaps most importantly, why were certain voices considered more important and more worthy of remembrance than others?

Answers to some of these questions, at least as they relate to the attempted mutiny in Java, begin with imperial notions of cultural superiority. This sense of superiority was one of the most important weapons in the imperialists’ arsenal that led to British domination in the nineteenth century. Its foundation rested on the belief in the superiority of Westerners over all non-Westerners, particularly British over all non-British, and thus British over the Javanese and Bengalis. The belief in European and British preeminence was furthered through the outcome of European contact with non-Europeans, whether through widespread disease or advanced technological/military power, in which Western imperial powers emerged as dominant. This dominance legitimized beliefs of ethnic and cultural superiority that existed between colonizer and colonized, between British and Javanese or Bengali. In essence, colonizers constructed social differences and used social engineering to maintain distinctions between themselves and the colonized.⁶

The act of Western imperial powers convincing non-Westerners of their superior nature, values, and beliefs also included history and the making of history through the maintenance of archives and records. An example of this within the *Bengal Secret and Political Consultations* is the absence of the names of the mutiny’s conspirators within the letters of correspondence between British colonial officers. For instance, of the 70 sepoys accused of, and 17 executed for, the crime of mutiny, none are actually named in the official correspondence.⁷ Rather, they are only referred to as “the conspirators,” and described as being possessed of a “mutinous spirit” (India Office Records, 1816, April 15, vol. 278, no. 29; India Office Records, 1816, May 4, vol. 279, no. 26).

A further illustration of the power relationship between colonizer and colonized includes the practice of discounting the history of the “Other.” The Javanese and the Bengali sepoys kept their own written and oral records of their histories to be sure, and certainly of the attempted mutiny as well, but because they were not of importance to the British, they were not recognized as history, and their voices were silenced.⁸ Carter sums up this neglect of the “Other” by stating that “where groups have their own record-keeping traditions that differ from the literary tradition upon which European and North American archives are based . . . the silencing is compounded” (2006, p. 218).

The short answer as to why the voices of the marginalized were silenced is due to “relations of power” (Harris, 2007, p. 5). Records, and indeed all archival materials, are “written from a particular point of view, at a particular time, by a particular person, for a particular audience” (Berry & MacKeith, 2007, p. 141). In

this case, the correspondence of the British East India Company was written as letters of communication between their own officers. Presumably, thought would not be given to the future of these letters, nor their impact on whether or not the perceptions of the marginalized were included in a future historical record. According to Tony Ballantyne, “only some ‘voices’ are clearly recorded in colonial archives and those voices are frequently unreliable. Many other voices are fleetingly recorded, surviving only as fragments, faint traces, or muffled in reported speech or translation” (Ballantyne, 2004, p. 22). If Ballantyne’s assessment is true, however, and the voices of the “Other,” of the subjugated, are muffled or lost, how do we as archivists recover them? And before we answer that question, *should* we recover them? What is our responsibility to the archival record?

Over the years, the roles and responsibilities of archivists have changed. Archivists, for the most part, no longer consider themselves as objective, neutral observers, tasked with the passive guardianship of “an inherited legacy” (Cook, 2001b, p. 29). In the words of Terry Cook (1997), archivists are no longer “passive keepers,” but rather “active shapers” of the records in their care (p. 29). Many are responding to the call for activism, accountability, and the preservation of social justice through their daily work (Jimerson, 2007). Archivists do not merely preserve and make historical records accessible to the public; they also interpret these materials, collecting from all of society to represent our world’s diversity. Taking up the charge of historian and activist Howard Zinn, archivists have recognized that they have a duty not only to compile and preserve the history of the elite in society, but also to focus on “the lives, desires, [and] needs, of ordinary people” (1977, p. 25).

Like Zinn, Jeanette Allis Bastian (2005) asserts that “all layers of society are participants in the record-making process,” with the community consisting of “records creators” and “records subject” (p. 41). To strive for a compilation of historical documents that represents all of these records, all of these voices, would be for the “benefit of all members of society” (Jimerson, 2007, p. 252). This is, or should be, one of the core responsibilities of archivists – compiling as complete a record of the world’s people as possible. Accordingly, Verne Harris (2002) stresses that archivists are “bound by the principle of hospitality to ‘otherness,’” to listen for the voices of “those who are marginalised or excluded by prevailing relations of power” (pp. 85-86). Simply put, the majority of archival records as they presently exist in libraries, archives, and historical centers do not represent those “marginal” people in society, and thus do not tell the full story. This is as true in the case of the silence of Javanese and Bengali voices in the British Library as it is the silence of Native American voices in many U.S. archives, or aboriginal voices in Australian archives. The extant records are not “sufficient to explicate the whole of a society” (Bastian, 2006, p. 278). So it becomes our task

as archivists to re-envision how we perform archival practice, to re-read the documents in our care, to listen to the whispers in our repositories, and to complete the historical record, transforming the “domain of the elite into a community resource” (Harris, 2007, pp. 189-190).

Reading Records against the Grain: Recovering the Voices of the Marginalized

If archivists are tasked with the responsibility of “giving equal voice” to those groups who have been “marginalized and silenced,” how do we do so? (Jimerson, 2007, p. 254). How are archivists able to address the lacunae in the historical record? The development of postmodernism and its myriad theories, as they relate to the archival field, provide some possible solutions.

The modernist conception of the world “posited that rational, thus reliable, communication could be the basis of unlimited intellectual, material, and social progress” (Nesmith, 2002, p. 26). However, in recent decades, postmodern theory has emerged to critique these views, arguing against progressive perceptions of history, as well as their Western and Eurocentric foundations. Most notably, perhaps, are postmodern critiques of previously touted notions of objectivity, neutrality, and impartiality. For postmodernists, “nothing is neutral. Nothing is impartial. Nothing is objective. Everything is shaped, presented, represented, re-presented, symbolized, signified, signed, constructed by the speaker, photographer, writer, for a set purpose” (Cook, 2001a, p. 7). According to Cook, postmodernists seek to “de-naturalize what society unquestionably assumes is natural,” to reassess what society has accepted as “normal, natural, rational, proven” (2001b, p. 24). In effect, postmodernist theory questions “the way things are,” declaring much thought to be “socially or culturally ‘constructed’” (Cook, 2001b, p. 24).

Postmodern thought has had an enormous impact on the arts, humanities, and social sciences in recent decades. Indeed, Tom Nesmith (2002) correctly asserts that “there is hardly a major field of intellectual activity that has not felt, and wrestled with, these influences” (pp. 24-25). The archival field has not been immune to this influx of postmodern thought either. Its influence has forced archivists to re-think how they interpret the records in their care. Specifically, postmodern theory has encouraged archivists to focus “on the context behind the content; on the power relationships that shape the documentary heritage” (Cook, 2001b, p. 25). By revisiting these power relationships in the archives – for instance the dominance of the British over the Javanese and Bengalis in the records of the *Bengal Secret and Political Consultations* – archivists are able to re-read the context of *who* created the records and *why*. For example, how the British chose not to name any of the “conspirators” in their letters, thus, in effect,

silencing them; or how the archival record only gives slight traces of explanation as to *why* the Javanese and Bengalis conspired to revolt, leaving much to conjecture.

Emerging out of the discourse of postmodernist thought are the fields of subaltern studies, postcolonial studies, and studies of resistance.⁹ Each of these schools of thought have made great strides in recovering the voices of the marginalized, and in deconstructing the way scholars view history and power relations in the archival record. The works in these fields on “modes of perception,” along with the construction of identity, aid in developing illustrations about how Western constructions were used to keep colonized people subservient to colonial rule (McLeod, 2000). Further, these subfields of postmodernism not only re-tell the narrative with which we are familiar, they also present “many narratives, many stories, serving many purposes for many audiences” (Cook, 2001a, p. 7); all of this in effect allows us to see other perspectives, and to create a more complete record of history.

One of the most important of these subfields in the reinterpretation of the archival record is postcolonial theory. Following the independence of many former colonial nations in the latter half of the twentieth century, scholars began to question the “dominant narratives of the colonizers’ records,” searching for “the voices of the colonized” (Bastian, 2006, p. 268). Bastian states that not only has postcolonial scholarship exposed many of the “weaknesses and problems” of recordkeeping, it also has offered “an opportunity to conceptualize and apply a wider, more generous and more inclusive archival lens to the relationship between communities and records” (2006, p. 268). Further, Michelle Caswell (2011) argues that postcolonial discourse “not only pays attention to the voices of the colonized, the marginal, and the subaltern, but contextualizes their responses to, engagement with, and resistance of colonialism within the specificities of recent history” (p. 238). In the instance of the sepoy conspiracy of 1815, postcolonial scholarship allows the archivist or the researcher to present the agency of the Javanese and Bengalis neglected by their Western contemporaries by reading the record against the grain.

Reading historical records “against the grain” is not new to the academic world. Scholars of feminist studies have utilized this methodology over the past several decades to “listen” for the voices of women who have been oppressed and marginalized in society (Perry, 2008, p. 164). In the case of colonial records, anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler utilized this method as early as 1985 to examine colonial power structures and control contained within nineteenth-century government reports in Sumatra (Stoler, 1985). She describes this “upside-down reading” as reading against the colonial conventions and records of “imperial history, empire builders, and the priorities and perceptions of those who wrote them” (Stoler, 2009, p. 46). It is a “re-reading” of the archives “between the

lines,” (Berry & MacKeith, 2007, p. 144) interrogating them “to reveal the lives, the cultures, the feelings of those appropriated within them” (Bastian, 2005, p. 28).

Bastian offers a few suggestions of how this might be done. She writes that “census records might be read for their definitions of caste, medical records, for the ways in which medicine used race and culture to address disease, or colonial architecture, for their appropriation and re-conceptualizing of traditional culture” (Bastian, 2006, p. 273). Archivists have instituted this concept of reading records “against the grain,” and have thus impacted archival practice in a number of ways. Kaisa Maliniemi (2009), for instance, searching for traces of the Sámi and Kven peoples in the records of the dominant Norwegian clergy, “found voices of marginalized groups hidden inside the pastors’ stories” (p. 23). Like Maliniemi, William T. Hagan’s (1978) efforts to locate voices of Native Americans within the dominant narrative requires reading between the lines to extract from these sources an “Indian point of view” (p. 139). One of the most important tools in recovering the voices of the marginalized is the contextualization of the archival record. Only after the historical background of the record-creator has been thoroughly studied can a proper questioning of the record begin.

To re-read the records of the British colonial officers and recover voices of the Javanese and Bengalis who conspired to mutiny, is not a simple matter. However, an understanding of the historical context and relations of power between the records creator and records subject does reveal some of the voices previously silenced. The British archival record for instance, refers to placards that appeared in 1813 in the camps of the Bengali sepoys, inciting the soldiers to “disaffection” (India Office Records, 1816, May 4, vol. 279, no. 26). Although the official correspondence does not inform us of the exact words on the placards, contemporary sources from the early nineteenth century indicate that phrases written in both “Hindustani and Bengali” urged fellow Indian soldiers to join in the mutiny, and make common cause with the conspirators (Carey, 1977, p. 307; Carey, 1992, p. 29). Thus, by combining contextual information outside of the primary sources with a reading against the grain, the voices of the marginalized are recovered by acknowledging their act of resistance.

Another example of reading against the grain of the colonial record regards a shared sense of commonality between the Javanese and the Bengalis, and its importance in understanding how this attempted mutiny came about. An understanding of the historical context allows us to look for “layers of meanings in the words that are used and the information omitted” (Perry, 2008, p. 164). Regarding the shared subjugation among both groups, the archival record is virtually silent. However, to work together in secrecy and conspire against their colonial oppressor clearly indicates a recognized commonality as colonized peoples of the British Empire. The voices of the Javanese and Bengalis emerge

then through their act of resistance and their conspiracy to mutiny against the hated domination of the British colonial power. This practice of reading against the grain of the British colonial record empowers us to look “beneath surface meanings for subtexts and silences that can tell us more” than the record-makers intended, essentially supplementing common archival practice already in use (Perry, 2008, p. 153).

The influence of postmodernism and issues of the interpretation of archival records have caused many archivists to re-examine their responsibilities in recent years. Their role has changed from “impartial custodians of inherited records to becoming intervening agents conscious of their own historicity in the archive-creating and memory-formation process” (Cook, 1997, p. 29). Carter (2006) argues that “through their unique knowledge of the records in their collections, archivists have the opportunity to make injustices known, to read the archives against the grain, flagging silences and identifying the presence of the marginalized within the records of the state and its apparatus” (p. 231). One of the responsibilities of archivists that has emerged from this shift to postmodern practice is to “fill the archives with a polyphony of voices,” (Carter, 2006, p. 233) to recognize that “records contain several layers of stories that depend upon the viewpoint we choose to focus on” (Maliniemi, 2009, p. 23).

This emergent responsibility of archivists to incorporate reading against the grain into archival practice to uncover divergent views and voices spawns further questions as well. For instance, how are archivists able to represent all of the voices subsumed within the archival record? Perhaps more importantly, how do we interpret the archival record without imposing our own biases when reading against the grain? David Wallace (2010) argues simply that neutrality is impossible. He states that the work of archives is by nature “biased and political,” as it is shaped by the “societies in which we live and the values that animate them” (Wallace, p. 184). Richard J. Cox echoes these sentiments, arguing that, “records are not just neutral testaments of evidence waiting to be mined by a researcher,” but rather that archival documents “bring into play many issues of power, control, memory, forgery and fabrication” (Cox, 2009).

Several further problems inherently arise when we try to read records against the grain. First, it is important to note that many scholars contend that the voices of the marginalized simply cannot be recovered, that the subaltern cannot speak (Spivak, 1993). While Bastian (2006) concedes that “traditional archives cannot give a three-dimensional, fully realized voice to the voiceless,” she argues that “with sensitivity and a holistic view of the social and other elements that comprise records, the archives can at least hear the whispers and acknowledge those presences” of the marginalized (p. 284). Stoler offers another approach, reading the record “along the grain” for “its regularities, its conventions of categorization, and its logics of accumulation” to see what scholars and

researchers of colonialism may have missed (as cited in Schwartz, 2006, pp. 16-17). Stoler (2002) argues that reading *along* the grain also can reveal the record's "consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake" (Stoler, p. 100). For her, reading only against the grain of the colonial archive "bypasses the power in the production of the archive itself" (Stoler, p. 101).¹⁰

Other scholars within the archival field question the limitations of identifying what "the grain" is in the first place. Ricardo Punzalan states that "there is not one monolithic colonial domination. Colonial powers differed in their approaches and perspectives on the cultures they dominated; thus they greatly vary in their records production" (Personal communication, December 9, 2011). In the same regard, there is also not one response to colonialism, but a multiplicity of responses. In effect, we should not try to read the records as if only these two groups, the colonizer and colonized, existed. Rather, we should recognize the plurality of narratives and plurality of voices contained within the records. A pluralistic reading of the archival record therefore, helps us to not only identify how "dominant cultural paradigms" have permeated archival theory and practice, but also allows us to explore alternatives to these paradigms (Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum Group, 2011, p. 71).

A few final points suffice to present the criticisms and caveats of utilizing postcolonial theory in the archives. Hagan (1978) emphasizes that as archivists, even with the best of intentions, we inevitably approach the subject "from the standpoint of an outsider" (p. 138). We should be mindful that we do not have access into the minds of the record creators or record subjects, and that we unavoidably must turn to conjecture and speculation in our effort to retrieve these voices. Finally, Harris (2002) and Schwartz and Cook (2002) remind us that in reading records against the grain, we must avoid the danger of speaking for and romanticizing the marginalized. It is not our task as archivists to speak for, or speak in place of, the "Other." Rather, incorporating a method of reading against the grain into archival theory and practice merely enables us to uncover voices that have been silenced, and to present through a pluralistic approach the many varying perspectives contained within the archives.

Transnational Records: Access, Digitization, and the Future of Archives

The final section of this paper concerns accessibility to records like those in the British Library and National Archives, and how digitization, transnational cooperation, and reading records against the grain can make these materials better available to a wider public. Archivists, librarians, and learning institutions recognized years ago the huge shift "in the mechanisms for the dissemination of, and access to, information" (Green, 2009, p. 136). Among these institutions, the

British Library has found its place as both “a provider of unique content and by using its expertise to help researchers find content that is relevant to them” (Green, 2009, p. 136). It has begun programs to digitize and make accessible its voluminous records, as well as to create partnerships with other leading archival repositories in order to share information with the larger world. Through these international heritage preservation projects, a more complete record of the past becomes available, one in which a plurality of voices emerges. However, what is lacking in these digitally reunified records, and what deserves greater attention from archivists is the possibility of re-reading these records against the grain; to do so would better illustrate existing relations of power between the records creator and records subject, and to emphasize the pluralistic perspectives contained therein.

Postmodern theory and recent efforts at digital reunification of archival records combine to provide a means by which the voices of the marginalized, and the wider public, can be heard. Scott Goodine (2005) writes of how archivists have reached out, through the use of technology – specifically the availability of the Internet – to reach a wider public. He states that “the appeal of reaching a much larger audience for archival services and the ease of employing the Internet” (p. 39) emerged parallel to the burgeoning acceptance of postmodern theory in the archival field in the last decade of the twentieth century. Just as it questions positivist constructs of reality, postmodernism in archives encourages a “multiplicity of interpretations of phenomena,” and suggests that “there is always more to know, and much left out” of the archival record (Goodine, 2005, p. 40). Related to this, Cook (2001b) states that “postmodernism is an opening, not a closing, a chance to welcome a wider discussion” (p. 22). In this case, the “wider discussion” about the records subjects and marginalized individuals is able to be held through heritage preservation and digital reunification projects, which provide both access and a means for interpretation. In this manner, the wider public is able to read colonial records against the grain, questioning and interpreting the material now available for the first time online.

As noted by Randall C. Jimerson (2009), the “web has already transformed how many researchers locate and use information (p. 322). This is true of not just scholarly researchers, but also how the wider public participates in and accesses archival materials that have been digitally reunified and made available online. Referring to digitization projects undertaken by the British Library, Helen Shenton (2009) notes that these efforts “not only enable the virtual reconstruction of cultural heritage,” but also offer “vastly enhanced general access” (p. 33). She continues, stating that these digitization programs have wide “political, diplomatic, and stewardship implications” between nations and users of the records, and that it will be “fascinating to see how future researchers and users interpret, use, and enhance the new information” (Shenton, 2009, p. 44). This

interpretation, use, and re-reading of digitally reunified archival records reflects the theories of postmodernism in practice by providing access to scholars and the wider public.

In recent years, the British Library has undertaken particularly relevant digitization projects, including international partnerships with archival institutions in Qatar and India to digitize and digitally reunify records of the British East India Company and the India Office Records (British Library, 2011a). Those India Office records given priority for digitization are those commonly judged as either most in need of preservation or with the greatest user demand. British colonial correspondence dealing with the Bengali sepoy conspiracy and attempted mutiny in 1815 Java is unfortunately, yet understandably, not of the highest demand for those wishing to access archival materials online. Indeed, while performing research for the *Bengal Secret and Political Consultations*, only a skeletal list was accessible on the Access to Archives website; the indexes of these items were available solely in the British Library Reading Room, and not in electronic form (Senior Archivist of the India Office Records, personal communication, July 6, 2010).

Other examples of archival projects recently begun in the field of international heritage preservation include the Tricontinental Archive Project, the UNESCO World Digital Library, and most importantly as concerns colonial records, the UNESCO Memory of the World Programme to digitize the VOC archives.¹¹ All three of these projects work in partnership across national boundaries with the goal of making accessible digital versions of primary sources, thus allowing for wider access, use, and interpretation.

The Tricontinental Archive Project, for instance, is working to become a major reference resource for those working with the “cultural and political histories of Africa, Asia, Latin America, Australasia, and Oceania,” essentially serving as a digital “archive of the global South” (Announcing the tricontinental archive project, 2011, pp. 169-170).

Similarly, UNESCO’s World Digital Library works internationally with “developing nations to adequately digitize and preserve their cultural history” (Knight, 2010, p. 6). A large number of national and international institutions are working together toward this end, including the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the National Library of Brazil, the National Library and Archives of Egypt, the National Library of Russia, the Russian State Library, the Library of Congress, and UNESCO” (Knight, 2010, p. 6). Since 2009 the combined digital archives of these various libraries and archives have been freely accessible, and include access to primary sources such as “manuscripts, maps, rare books, musical scores, recordings, films, prints, photographs, and architectural drawings” (Knight, 2010, p. 6).

Finally, like the many projects listed here, the VOC archives Memory of the World Programme provides a further example of transnational work that aims to preserve and maintain a more complete archival record. Further, this project serves as a model of international cooperation, heritage preservation, and digital accessibility within the archives world. The Dutch East India Company, or VOC (*Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie*), was one of the most powerful trading companies during the “Global Age” of empire (1600-1830), controlling territories and trading posts in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia (Getz & Streets-Salter, 2011, p. 84). Similar to the British East India Company, the VOC produced massive amounts of reports concerning not only financial information, but also about the cultures with which it interacted, and the lands it occupied.

When the VOC was dissolved in the final decade of the eighteenth century, its vast archives passed into the hands of the Dutch States-General, and now reside in the National Archives of the Netherlands in The Hague (Holmes, 2006, p. 288). However, a large number of records, with estimates as high as 25 million pages, reportedly survived in former colonies as well. This includes holdings in the National Archives of Indonesia-Jakarta, National Archives of Sri Lanka-Colombo, Tamil Nadu Archives-Chennai, India, and Cape Town Archives Repository-South Africa (TANAP, 2011a). These archives formed the TANAP (Toward A New Age of Partnership) program, and with the aid of UNESCO, aim to preserve, digitize, and make accessible the resources of the VOC archives around the world (TANAP, 2011a). Further, a second goal of TANAP and the VOC archives project is to “foster international cooperation aimed at the exchange of knowledge required for improved management of the common heritage” (TANAP, 2011b).

While all of the work of the VOC archives project is laudable, it is the second goal that many archivists should strive for – international cooperation. This objective is not only relevant to the VOC archives, but also to the India Office Records and the archives of the British East India Company housed in the British Library. If this type of large-scale, multinational digitization and preservation project is possible with Dutch East India Company archives, why not those of the British? Could not a similar project be undertaken to recover the records of the British East India Company that still exist overseas, as well as to provide valuable resource and knowledge sharing internationally?

Even further, massive digitization projects on this type of scale could also lead to digital reunification, thus enabling archivists to read against the grain by matching colonial sources with Bengali and Javanese ones. As Stoler (2002) notes, of course, colonial archives will still remain “as both documents of exclusions and as monuments to particular configurations of power” (p. 96). But through these efforts at cultural diplomacy among differing nations and providing wider access to scholars and the public, a plurality of voices, including those of

the marginalized and the colonized, could be recovered. Thus, a more complete record of the past would exist, and be available for re-reading and re-examining by the public. A project of this kind is certainly worthy of future consideration, as the benefits to the world's knowledge of cultural and colonial history greatly outweigh the costs.

However, as with any collaborative undertaking, concerns over issues of power also arise in these multinational digitization and preservation projects. Lorraine Dong (2011) states that while industrialized nations and international preservation organizations often aid postcolonial nations in heritage preservation by providing monetary support and technological expertise, these provisions are usually "laden with social, political, and economic entanglements that can affect preservation outcomes and modern cultural development" (p. 2). Indeed, the issue over who controls access to, and digitization of, the records leads to further concerns over preservation, power, and colonialism; it also may result in a form of neocolonialism in which unequal power dynamics are replicated between industrialized and developing nations. Power relations are also usually exacerbated by concerns over who pays for digitization (Caswell, 2011, p. 235).

Further, Dong (2011) reminds us that underlying many multinational projects of this sort is a sense of "unease over shared claims of control, selection, and narration of cultural artifacts and information" (p. 16). Greater questions and concerns also emerge once the archival records have been digitized. For instance, to whom do these digital records now belong? Do they allow for a participatory dimension in which scholars and the wider public can re-interpret and read these records against the grain? And, once digitally reunified, do these records better represent a plurality of voices, a community of records, or do they simply mimic the paternalistic colonial power struggles of centuries past?

Given the serious limitations and concerns noted here, one might assume that such collaborative endeavors are doomed to failure. However, Ballantyne (2004) argues that to understand imperialism's significance in world history, historians and archivists of colonialism "must bring local and national perspectives into dialogue with the broader inter-regional, trans-national, and even global perspectives that are entailed" (p. 23). By working towards the digitization of the records of the British East India Company, by re-reading digitally reunified records against the grain and with a postcolonial approach, so too can we work toward a better understanding of colonial history, and a recovery of the voice of the Bengalis and Javanese – those oppressed, marginalized, and subjugated under colonial rule (Caswell, 2011).

Conclusion

While changing theoretical perspectives and the course of time have worked together to alter how we view the once widely held assertions of English archivist Hilary Jenkinson (1948), some of his words still ring true today. He believed that the “archivist’s career . . . is one of service,” and that the archivist “exists in order to make other people’s work possible” (Jenkinson, 1948, p. 30). By extension, it is the goal of the archivist to preserve and make public the most complete historical record available to us today.

It is the task of archivists of this generation to go further than just making public the records that present the voices of the powerful. We must use whatever means accessible to us for uncovering the other voices, those of the marginalized and the subjugated. Whether through postcolonial thought or recourse to any number of other theories and methodologies, we must interpret and re-read our current records with the goal of uncovering the true plurality of voices that we know exists in the world. Further, archivists need to continue their massive undertaking of digitizing the records in their care, and making these materials accessible online. In our digital age, more and more members of the public turns first to the Internet for research and information, and it should be our goal to make the resources they want available to them (Green, 2009). Finally, as in the case of the VOC archives Memory of the World Programme, archivists should work cooperatively with other archival repositories, museums, and libraries to pool their resources and find commonalities in their records. In addition, Lau (2010) urges archivists not only to cooperate with other archival institutions, but also to engage with other disciplines for theoretical insights and to focus on cultural differences. By reading records against the grain to highlight the plurality of voices involved in records creation, both creator and subject can be better represented in archival collections and digital reunification efforts. At present the insularity of local, state, and national archives does a disservice to the collective knowledge of our world. Through the transnational and global exchange of information, we can begin building a truly complete historical record of our shared past, one that encompasses all of the voices within it.

Notes

¹ Sepoy is a Hindi word equating to soldier, a term the British East India Company chose to maintain into the nineteenth century; see (Ram, 1970, xxii).

² “Silences” within the colonial records are not always reflections of absolute power, but can also be seen as illustrating the anxieties and uncertainties of the colonizing forces; see Stoler, A.L. (2009). *Along the archival grain: Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

³ The Bengali sepoys who conspired to mutiny against their British colonial officers were part of this larger East India Company military force.

⁴ This echoes Dipesh Chakrabarty’s contention that as a result of colonialism, all “other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe’”; see (2000, p. 27).

⁵ On the concept of the “Other,” I borrow from the theoretical work of Homi K. Bhabha in his work *The Location of Culture*, where he argues that “the colonised are considered the ‘other’ of the Westerner . . . and essentially *outside* Western culture and civilization”; see (Bhabha, 1994, p. 101).

⁶ The notion of physical and mental dominance over others was characteristic of all of the European imperial powers in the eighteenth century, and would become even more pronounced during the mid-nineteenth century with the advent of Social Darwinism and scientific racism. Comparing other cultures against their own, many Europeans utilized these constructions and modes of perception to justify their place of dominance in the hierarchy of civilizations; see (McLeod, 2000, p. 17).

⁷ The names of two of the executed “ringleaders” of the conspiracy, Bengali sepoy Captain Dhaugkul Singh and Corporal Matta Deen, are recorded in the private journal of one of the colonial officers; see (Bastin, 1960, pp. 78-79).

⁸ While Javanese and Bengali archival records detailing this event may exist in either Indonesia or India, travel and language barriers prove too great for a paper of this scope; thus focus is given to those records maintained in the British Library.

⁹ Theoretical models in these fields include the works of Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, Richard King, Edward W. Said, James C. Scott, and Gayatri Spivak, among others.

¹⁰ For an example of reading along the grain in British colonial correspondence, see (Herzog, 2012).

¹¹ For another UNESCO Memory of the World Programme – the Timbuktu Manuscript Initiative, see (Dong, 2011).

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