

Building better archival futures by recognizing epistemic injustice¹

Construindo melhores futuros arquivísticos através do reconhecimento da injustiça epistémica

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ABSTRACT

In 2024 University of Amsterdam's launched a new research priority area, "Decolonial Futures", which centers on transforming archives, museums, and cultural institutions to address colonial legacies. This article focuses on colonial archives managed by archival institutions. The central question is what forms of injustice are embedded within these archives and how can archival institutions build better archival futures based on the recognition of those injustices. Colonial archives are inherently problematic as knowledge resources, as they primarily reflect the perspectives of colonial authorities, often distorting and silencing the voices of colonized populations. Drawing

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on Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, two main forms of injustice can be identified: *hermeneutical injustice* and *testimonial injustice*. Testimonial injustice occurs according to Fricker when a hearer gives "a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word", often based on the speaker's gender or race. Testimonial injustice frequently results from hermeneutical injustice, which involves structural identity prejudice. Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as "the injustice of having (...) one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource". Using the lens of epistemic injustice offers valuable opportunities to better understand the problematic nature of colonial archives, while also providing archival institutions with guidance on how to avoid perpetuating injustices when creating digital archival spaces. This article shares experiences from a project initiated by the Dutch National Archives to map how representatives from affected communities, as well as those from the academic and heritage sectors, view the necessity and possibilities for archival institutions to engage with these archives in a different, decolonial way, with the aim of creating a more inclusive historical record and better serving communities marginalized by history.

KEYWORDS: Colonial archives; Epistemic injustice; Decoloniality.

RESUMO

Em 2024, a Universidade de Amsterdão lançou uma nova área prioritária de investigação, "Decolonial Futures", que se centra na transformação de arquivos, museus e instituições culturais para ter em conta os legados coloniais. Este texto foca-se nos arquivos coloniais geridos por instituições arquivísticas. A questão central é identificar quais são as formas de injustiça que estão incorporadas nesses arquivos e como podem as instituições arquivísticas construir melhores futuros arquivísticos com base no reconhecimento dessas injustiças. Os arquivos coloniais são inerentemente problemáticos enquanto recursos de conhecimento, uma vez que antes de mais refletem as perspetivas das autoridades coloniais, distorcendo e silenciando frequentemente as vozes das populações colonizadas. Com base no conceito de injustiça epistémica de Miranda Fricker, podem ser identificadas duas formas principais de injustiça: a *injustiça hermenêutica* e a *injustiça testemunhal*. A injustiça testemunhal ocorre, segundo Fricker, quando um ouvinte dá "um nível de credibilidade reduzido à palavra de um orador", muitas vezes com base no género ou na raça do orador. A injustiça testemunhal resulta frequentemente da injustiça

hermenêutica, que envolve preconceitos estruturais de identidade. Fricker define a injustiça hermenêutica como “a injustiça de ter (...) a experiência social de alguém obscurecida da compreensão coletiva devido a um preconceito estrutural de identidade no recurso hermenêutico coletivo”. A utilização da lente da injustiça epistémica oferece oportunidades valiosas para compreender melhor a natureza problemática dos arquivos coloniais, ao mesmo tempo que fornece às instituições arquivísticas orientações sobre como evitar a perpetuação de injustiças ao criar espaços de arquivo digital. Este texto partilha as experiências de um projeto iniciado pelo Arquivo Nacional dos Países Baixos para mapear a forma como os representantes das comunidades afetadas, bem como os dos sectores académico e do património, percebem a necessidade e as possibilidades de as instituições de arquivo se envolverem com estes arquivos de uma forma diferente, descolonial, com o objetivo de criar um registo histórico mais inclusivo e de servir melhor as comunidades marginalizadas pela história.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Arquivos coloniais; Injustiça epistémica; Descolonialidade.

Introduction

In the spring of 2024, the University of Amsterdam defined a new research priority area (RPA) titled “Decolonial Futures”, focusing particularly on archives, museums, and cultural practices. This RPA conceptualizes ‘coloniality’ as a form of power that emerged in the modern period to categorize people, distribute power and wealth, and enforce social exclusion. Decoloniality refers to recognizing and redressing the systemic injustices produced by colonial power and its legacies². The central question I aim to address is whether, and to what extent, archival institutions have a role and responsibility in promoting decoloniality, and how they can contribute to this process. In this essay, I will examine the critiques and dilemmas faced by traditional archival institutions in fulfilling such a societal role. My focus will be on a particularly contested genre of records: colonial archives. While concentrating on the situation in the Netherlands, I will situate these archives within the broader societal and scholarly debate commonly referred to as ‘decolonizing the archive’. I argue that applying the lens of epistemic injustice provides valuable insights into the problematic nature of colonial archives

² University of Amsterdam, 2025.

and can help archival institutions avoid perpetuating injustice as they develop new digital archival spaces.

The Problems of the (Colonial) Archive

The colonial archive is an inherently problematic space for knowledge-making and memory. As Achille Mbembe points out, museums, and the same applies to archives, are not dumping places where history's waste is recycled, but are primarily epistemic spaces (Mbembe, 2015, p. 4). Spivak emphasized that the colonial administrative archive was a hall of mirrors reflecting European interpretations of India. The colonial empire was governed based on these fictions (Spivak, 1985, pp. 247-272). These distortions, misinterpretations and fictions are not without consequences for how these archives are used today. Miranda Fricker coined the term epistemic injustice to describe various forms of injustice in knowledge production. She identifies two types: hermeneutical injustice and testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice occurs when a hearer gives "a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word", often based on the speaker's gender or race. Testimonial injustice frequently results from hermeneutical injustice, which involves structural identity prejudice. Fricker defines hermeneutical injustice as "the injustice of having (...) one's social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource" (Fricker, 2007, pp. 154-155). Hermeneutical injustice relates to how people interpret their own lives and how others understand those lives and experiences. Some societal groups have limited or distorted resources at their disposal to interpret their experiences. Access to hermeneutical resources is crucial as they provide a frame of reference and meaning to one's experiences. However, if others shape those resources with their own logic, ontologies and categories, issues arise.

Although Fricker is not very specific about what constitutes hermeneutical resources, I argue that archives are significant yet contested hermeneutical resources. Archival institutions often present themselves as guardians of collective memory, a claim that is itself debatable. If we use the collective memory metaphor for archives, it is a flawed, selective, and often distorted memory. This is why it is crucial to view archives as objects of research rather than mere resources for research and knowledge production. In her attempt to portray the lives of enslaved women in Bridgetown, Barbados from their own perspective, Marisa Fuentes writes that

[c]onfronting sources that show only terror and violence are a danger to the researcher who sees her own ancestors in these accounts. To sit with these sources requires the capacity to hold and inhabit deep wells of pain and horror. One must persist for years in this “mortuary” of records to bring otherwise invisible lives to historical representation in a way that challenges the reproduction of invisibility and commodification. (Fuentes, 2016, pp. 146-147)

This is an example of archival power, which is a mix of unequal presences, silences, and absences in the sources. Archival power, shaped and defined by white voices with the power to name and categorize, to break and create identities, resulting in malicious archives that are nevertheless constitutive of knowledge production (Trouillot, 1995, pp. 48-49; Fuentes, 2016, p. 15). This form of archival power equals to yet also reflects archival injustice and is a clear form of hermeneutical injustice.

My focus is on what archivists and archival institutions could, or perhaps even should do to mitigate hermeneutical injustice. This question is particularly relevant as archives increasingly become digital spaces, utilizing new technologies and creating new infrastructures for interactions with users. It is notable that only a few authors, such as Melanson (2020, pp. 89-112), Wouters (2022, pp. 491-508), and Landström (2021, pp. 379-394) have explored the applicability of Fricker’s concepts to archives.

The colonial archive contains written deposits of colonial thinking, acting, and observing. In the perspective of Fricker’s concepts of hermeneutical and testimonial injustice it is important to dissect who the speaker and who the hearer is. The archive holds the testimonies of past speakers and hearers while also speaking to present hearers. Wouters, for example, describes how a testimony by Mrs. Konile for the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1996 was not valued and misunderstood by the commissioners. Her testimony was considered incoherent and therefore of little use. Mrs. Konile and the commissioners lived in different worlds, and the commissioners knew little about the region and culture she came from. This case illustrates how epistemic injustice mechanisms operate. However, because Mrs. Konile’s ‘other’ way of experiencing and reporting became part of the TRC archive, this gave opportunities for later redress (Wouters, 2022, *passim*). In many instances archives lack direct testimonies from those wronged. At best, they can be heard indirectly via the observations of those who were in power. Colonial archives often contain indirect testimonies through observations by those in power. Ann Laura Stoler provides an example by examining the

correspondence of assistant resident Valck with various colonial agents following the murder of the Luhmann planter family in his administrative district Deli (in Sumatra, Dutch East Indies) in 1876. In his attempts to explain what was going on, Valck took a position that went against colonial common sense, causing the credibility of his testimony to be disputed by his contemporaries. Some voices (the various letter writers) are heard directly while others (indigenous people) can only be heard indirectly and are distorted, reflecting varying degrees of testimonial injustice. Stoler seeks to uncover the mechanisms that determine the level of credibility that hearers at the time attributed to the speakers involved in this case. The hearers, who responded to the speaker, become speakers themselves in the archive. Stoler (2009, p. 233) accentuates that “[w]hat matters are the details of ethnography: who spoke to whom, who heard and repeated what or chose not to; who imagined what, when, and where”. Melanson (2020, p. 105) argues that enslaved people were victims of hermeneutical injustice as their voices were silenced, and their testimonies are missing from the archive. He contends that the injustice is “preserved in archival materials and transmitted via archivist’s complacency” (Melanson, 2020, p. 105). Melanson seeks to find answers to the question of what responsibilities this injustice entails for archivists. In his opinion, archivists should attempt to include more testimonies from marginalized groups in the archive, but he realizes that this is only possible to a limited extent for the simple reason that such first-hand testimonies often do not exist. He also criticizes the widely held principle of archival institutions to treat all archive users in the same way as this further relegates the marginalized. He argues, following Valderhaugh, that archivists “should ensure users have an equal ability to benefit from the archives” and that requires that users are sometimes treated differently. Furthermore, archivists should recognize that they are part of the domain of research and should play an active role in explaining what records can and cannot attest (Melanson, 2020, pp. 107-108). This paper endeavors to advance Melanson’s exploration of archivists’ ethical responsibilities and opportunities by critically analyzing the persistent influence of the colonial past and the colonial archive on Dutch society, considering the ways in which these legacies continue to resonate in the present. In this context, I will critically examine an initiative undertaken by the Dutch National Archives, which can be interpreted as a reflective endeavor to reassess its institutional role and social responsibility concerning the colonial collections under its stewardship, especially in an era where the colonial past is subjected to heightened scrutiny and critical evaluation. I will conclude with a call for archival institutions to act as active witnesses and

commentators on the hermeneutical issues of archival resources. The colonial archive holds inscriptions from a colonial past, and I agree with James Booth (2006, p. 90) that traces of the past exist independently from those who reveal them, meaning that “traces without witnesses remain mute and languish in the shadows of forgetting”. To bear witness involves actively illuminating, preserving, and transmitting these traces (Booth, 2006, p. 90). To effectively bear witness to a skewed and one-sidedly documented colonial past, archival institutions must serve as active commentators on historical records, thereby bridging the past with the present. Not as passive providers of sources, but in conversation and engaging with hearers, users, co-creators as equal stakeholders according to the model of the contact zone.

The transition from analog to digital archival spaces creates new interfaces, which, in line with Drucker’s view, should be seen as “a dynamic space of relations” and not as a thing (Drucker, 2011, p. 3). This shift underscores the urgency of addressing epistemic injustice and creating archival interfaces based on principles of social justice. The digital space may appear as if users interact directly with documents without archivists’ intervention, yet the archivists’ role in shaping the interface remains crucial but often invisible.

As mentioned, the colonial archive as a hermeneutical resource is a speaking entity to present hearers — the users, readers, researchers. It is a problematic hermeneutical resource. Researchers and users of the archive largely determine which stories from the archive will be told or kept in darkness, while archivists make choices in descriptions that can emphasize or obscure certain elements. Listening to the archive without knowing and understanding the anxieties, silences, prejudices, fears, misinterpretations, animosities, interests, rumors that permeate the speakers’ texts — the archives — makes them dangerous and unreliable witnesses. It is important to know and understand the cultural code, the logic of those who recorded the inscriptions at the time, but equally important of those who transmit, interpret, and illuminate the inscriptions in the present. Archival institutions are traditionally focused on preserving the traces from the past, but increasingly play a role in transmitting them through digitization. Significant portions of Dutch colonial archives have been digitized and made available online, including materials held by institutions in formerly colonized countries such as Indonesia and Suriname. Handwritten Text Recognition (HTR) techniques offer new avenues for search and are welcomed as a big promise for users of the archives. As archival institutions, functioning as agents or perhaps more aptly as brokers of the past, strive to transform into meaningful cultural institutions accessible to all citizens without barriers, it becomes

increasingly urgent to critically examine their role in addressing hermeneutical injustices of the archive. Equally, it is essential to ensure that these institutions foster equitable relationships with all stakeholders, particularly the descendants of marginalized, ignored, and commodified communities. Think how a responsible role in engaging with the selective and distorted witnesses from the past may look like.

Until recently, archivists often relied on the myth of impartiality and neutrality, believing their role was technical and free from political interests. In 1977, historian Howard Zinn (p. 20) already called the supposed neutrality of the archivist a fake and he argued that “the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not, as so many scholars fear, the politicizing of a neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft”. In the late 1990s archival scholar Terry Cook (1997, p. 46) echoed this sentiment, stating that “the traditional notion of the impartiality of the archivist is no longer acceptable — if it ever was”. Archivists have gradually come to realize that they are co-creators of archives as they make choices in every area of archival work, be it collecting, preserving, describing, or giving access. Influenced by Foucault and Derrida, archival scholars have examined power mechanisms in the archive: who had the power to document, to archive, to determine the narrative? What interests and intentions are behind the archive? With which eyes was reality captured by the record-makers? Which mechanisms determined which slivers of the past were allowed to end up in the archive? Postmodern scholarship has focused on understanding these power dynamics, but the current data-oriented turn risks allowing archivists to once again hide behind a ‘technical character’ of their work, promising optimal access to the data while neglecting deeper ethical issues of archival power and responsibility.

The Archival Decolonization Debate

The archival debate and archival practices in countries like Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand differ significantly from those in the countries from which colonization originated. In settler societies, activist Indigenous archive movements are vigorously pursuing existential and cultural recognition, as well as self-determination. Their efforts respond to the long history of colonization, exploitation, dispossession, cultural annihilation, and the covert removal of Indigenous children from their families (O’Neal, 2015, p. 4; Thorpe, 2016, p. 906; Bak et al., 2017, pp. 1-12) with

the intent to “kill the Indian/Aboriginal and save the child”³. First Nations communities are reclaiming their Indigenous cultural identities and undergoing processes of cultural resurgence. This cultural and archival self-awareness among First Nations peoples, combined with the increasing recognition by mainstream archival scholars and professionals of the enduring power of colonial structures, has led to initiatives and experiments aimed at developing a decolonial archival praxis. For instance, protocols have been established to help archives, libraries, and tribal communities build constructive relationships (Underhill, 2006, pp. 134-145; McCracken & Hogan-Stacey, 2023, pp. 13-29); participatory description projects have been initiated (Thorpe, 2016; Thorpe et al., 2024, pp. 1-22; Haberstock, 2020, pp. 125-138) and research projects have been launched to identify obstacles and tensions in traditional archival theory and practice (McKemmish et al., 2020, pp. 21-49). For example, the FAIR data principles, now globally embraced, have faced resistance due to their perceived fairness, which does not adequately account for Indigenous peoples’ rights and interests. This has led to the development of the “CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance” (Carroll et al., 2020, pp. 1-12). Recently, the Indigenous Archives Collective released a manifesto demanding Indigenous peoples’ right to reply regarding the “inherent biases associated with record making and collecting paradigms that silence and subjugate Indigenous peoples’ voices and knowledges” (Indigenous Archives Collective, 2021; see further in United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, 2007; ATSILIRN, 2012; International Council on Archives, 2019; Janke, 2019).

At first glance, the physical distance from the colonial crime scene may enable people in Europe to ‘forget’ the shameful episodes of colonization. In 1970, Dutch historian and archivist Meilink-Roelofs (1970, p. 4) observed that the emotional response in the Netherlands to the loss of the Dutch East Indies led to a desire to erase the colonial past from collective consciousness. This exemplifies what Aleida Assmann (2016, pp. 53-57) characterizes as defensive and complicit forgetting. Rose-Mary Allen (2020), Professor of Culture, Community, and History at the University of Curaçao, rightly noted that the Dutch have “filed away” their colonial past. Limpach (2016, p. 19) uses the term “phantom pain” to describe how the Dutch experienced losing the Dutch East Indies. Authors such as Scagliola (2002), Oostindie et al. (2022),

³ Quote attributed to Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School, which became a model for boarding schools which were focused on the cultural immersion and assimilation of Native Americans (see Churchill, 2004).

Zweers (2013) and Limpach (2016) have highlighted the gaps in Dutch knowledge of its colonial past, noting that information conflicting with a positive self-image was systematically suppressed. Sociologist De Swaan (2017) refers to this as postcolonial absence, meaning the mechanism of not wanting to know what we know. This results in a Dutch East Indies past that has become a national secret, “a secret that is revealed time and again and then hidden again. Again, and again the nation falls into absence, failing to reflect on the past”. This is reflected in the double standards applied, for instance, in assessing war violence. The Dutch government has consistently separated injustices related to the Second World War from those of the colonial period. For example, after 1971, war crimes from the Second World War were exempt from statutes of limitations; however, this exemption did not extend to crimes committed by Dutch soldiers in Indonesia between 1945 and 1949 (Veraart, 2012, pp. 255, 259). The framing of violence also differs; for instance, the decolonization war between Indonesia and the Netherlands (1945-1949) was euphemistically termed *politieele acties* (police actions) in the Netherlands, and atrocities committed by Dutch soldiers were systematically considered as excesses and deviations from both the normative standards and customary practices. Despite institutionalized silencing and downplaying intended to activate mechanisms of forgetting, the colonial past continued and continues to haunt the present. As Verne Harris (2021, pp. 35-36) argues, “[w]hen oppressive pasts are allowed to live on, when ideas like transformation and decolonization are treated only as metaphors, then societies are necessarily and unavoidable filled with (...) living ghosts”. Similarly, historian Eelco Runia (2007, p. 317) writes that the Netherlands “kept being haunted by the ‘police actions’ in the Dutch East Indies as long as it maintained that the cruelties committed were just ‘incidents’ perpetrated by some unrepresentative ‘rotten apples’” and argues that coming to terms with historical trauma requires self-exploration and answering the commemorative question “who are we that this could have happened?”

Gradually, the discourse is shifting from suppressing the problematic colonial past to adopting a more investigative and reflective attitude. In 2012, the Dutch government refused to fund an in-depth study into the nature, scope, causes, and impact of the violence used by the Netherlands in the decolonization war. Following the publication of Limpach’s dissertation, which detailed the extent of structural violence committed by Dutch troops, the government relented at the end of 2016 and funded a large-scale investigation. The results of this extensive investigation, conducted by 25 scholars over five years, were published in 2022. The investigation concluded that

extreme violence by Dutch military forces was widespread and that those responsible, including politicians and judges, could have been aware of the systematic use of extreme violence. They were willing to tolerate, justify, disguise, and leave the violence unpunished (Oostindie et al., 2022, p. 4). Nevertheless, the researchers hesitated to classify the extreme violence of Dutch soldiers as war crimes, fearing it would equate the Netherlands with Nazi Germany or Japan during the Second World War (Oostindie et al., 2022, p. 476). Changes are also occurring in other areas. Cities such as Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Utrecht, and The Hague, as well as banking corporations like De Nederlandsche Bank and ABN-AMRO, which built their wealth on colonial exploitation, are investigating their roles in the slave trade and slavery during the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. During the Ketikoti commemoration⁴ on July 1, 2021, Amsterdam's city council expressed deep regret over the city's active involvement in the commercial system of colonial slavery, followed by similar expressions from Rotterdam, The Hague, Utrecht, and finally the Dutch government in 2022 and the King in 2023.

Heritage institutions are also experiencing changes in how they are questioned about the stories they tell and the objects they have in custody and exhibit. In 2020, the Dutch Council for Culture, which advises the Minister of Culture, issued a report on handling cultural objects from former colonies that came into Dutch possession against the will of their original owners, through theft or military operations. The scale of what are termed colonial collections is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands of items. The Council for Culture made several recommendations, including acknowledging the wrongs inflicted upon the original populations — described as “‘historical injustice’ that until today is still experienced as a ‘living injustice’”. — and demonstrating a willingness to rectify this by unconditionally returning cultural objects when it can be reasonably shown that they were lost involuntarily (Adviescommissie Nationaal Beleidskader Koloniale Collecties, 2020, p. 72). Additionally, objects of special significance to the country of origin should be returnable even if involuntary loss cannot be proven (Adviescommissie..., 2020, p. 72) In January 2021, the Minister of Culture informed Parliament of her willingness to adopt these recommendations. However, archives were excluded from this advisory report and policy proposal, as “archives concern

⁴ In Sranantongo Ketikoti means ‘broken chains’ and commemorates the 1st of July 1863 when slavery was formally abolished, however with the stipulation that the freed people had to continue to work on the plantations on a contract basis for another 10 years. Therefore, not 1863, but 1873 is the year in which slavery came to an end.

not only the documents themselves but also the information they contain and (the right to) access to them. Therefore, archives require a specifically tailored approach which is beyond the scope of this advisory report” (Adviescommissie..., 2020, p. 15). For this reason, at the minister’s request, the Council for Culture has prepared a similar advisory report on the policy that should be adopted regarding looted archives and documentary heritage in Dutch institutions originating from former colonies, which was presented in 2024. The report broadly followed the earlier advice on colonial objects. Requests for the restitution of colonial archives should certainly be made possible, including the option of returning documents to individual persons. However, the Council also noted that unconditional return of colonial archives and documentary collections is problematic due to the shared cultural ownership of the materials. Therefore, minimal conditions must be established, such as retaining access to and making copies of the items available, as well as including metadata in access tools, to safeguard the interests of all parties involved. Interestingly, the Council also stated that

[i]njustice related to colonial archives involves much more than just the question of whether their physical location is legitimate or appropriate. Rectifying this injustice requires not only (the willingness to engage in) restitution, but also, and more importantly, ensuring good, accessible, and equitable (digital) availability and usability of colonial archives and documentary collections, with space for multiple perspectives. (Raad voor Cultuur, 2024, p. 11)

Round Table Initiative at the Dutch National Archives

Under the pressure of shifting societal dynamics, some traditional mainstream archival institutions feel an urgent need to reassess their roles and positions in the ongoing debate. Concepts such as inclusiveness, diversity, and multivocality are readily embraced, partly because these institutions see opportunities to engage audiences they have previously overlooked. However, it is crucial to approach these terms with a degree of skepticism, especially when used by institutions historically focused on preserving the documentary legacy of those in power. Sara Ahmed critically examines why the term “diversity” is often more palatable and less threatening within institutions compared to terms like “equity work” or “social justice”. Diversity is associated with positivity, a feel-good factor, and cooperation rather than confrontation. It is not

tied to the need for changing institutional values and is often considered inclusive in itself. However, there are risks: diversity can be used as a smoke-screen to avoid addressing what is necessary for creating equal opportunities. It may obscure underlying problems, and the 'buzz of diversity' might even drown out the realities of racism (Ahmed, 2012, pp. 61-72). Fatima Elatik, a Dutch politician and leading expert on diversity programs, emphasizes the difficulty of becoming truly diverse: "[b]ecoming more diverse is not pleasant. It's about healing. About repairing what went wrong. That means you first must acknowledge what went wrong, and that hurts because it requires self-examination and creating space for change" (Papaikonomou, 2020).

This need to confront and acknowledge mechanisms of pain as a prerequisite for becoming relevant to people who view the archive as an unsafe, colonial space was a recurring theme in the discussions at the roundtables organized by the Dutch National Archives. Inspired by the international debate on decolonial praxis, societal calls for justice for marginalized and silenced archival subjects, and growing awareness of bias in archival work, the Dutch National Archives initiated a project in 2019-2020 to reconsider its approach to colonial archives and develop principles for future practice. Instead of immediately changing archival practices, the National Archives chose to first engage in dialogue with communities to avoid making decisions based solely on internal beliefs. In 2020, the National Archives began hosting "decolonization tables", involving five to six participants at each session, totaling 45 participants. The initiative aimed to gather diverse perspectives from stakeholders with various backgrounds and interests. Participants included individuals from formerly colonized communities (Indonesia, Suriname, the Caribbean), scholars, and archivists from the Netherlands and former Dutch colonies. Key questions for reflection included the participants' understanding of "decolonization" and "decolonization of archives", the relevance of these concepts, and recommendations for addressing the colonial archives held by the Dutch National Archives. The goal was to determine how a state institution like the National Archives could or should evolve to better address the interests of different communities.

Participants evaluated the National Archives from two perspectives: the organization itself and its handling of its collections. While most participants responded positively to the round table initiative, some were skeptical about the feasibility of decolonizing colonial archives or European archival institutions, which are deeply entrenched in colonial legacies. The "de" in decolonizing implies undoing something. It is essential to clarify from which perspective decolonization is being considered and what exact-

ly institutions claiming to decolonize mean by that. What needs to be undone, and what can and will be undone, and by whom? Without answers to these questions, decolonizing risks becoming an empty concept, some respondents argued. The difference between actions taken by a European/Dutch institution versus a postcolonial institution in a formerly colonized country is significant.

The roundtable participants offered various reflections and suggestions. Generally, they criticized the lack of diversity among the staff, noting that people of color were mostly confined to low-paid positions such as security guards and depot staff. Some commentators were blunt: if an institution's staff remains predominantly white, it cannot fundamentally change how it organizes and pluralizes its collections. Hiring people of color in positions of power is seen as essential for such change. The National Archives was criticized for its mission statement, which claims to "serve everyone's right to information and provide insight into our country's past". Some participants argued that the scope of "everyone" and "our country's past" is not truly realized. Both "everyone" and "our" are selectively defined. Certain groups are privileged, have left behind their own documentation, and have had the power to document the other from their privileged perspective, while other groups have left few traces and often cannot see or recover their own history. State archives should be more modest about their claims of being the nation's memory. They are, after all, government archives representing the hierarchical structures of the oppressive colonial power. Archives, participants noted, are perceived as intimidating and unsafe by those marginalized by history, and often in the present (Pattikawa et al., 2021). This is a key reason why Caswell and Cifor advocate for an archival approach grounded in radical empathy and an ethics of care that prioritizes those who have suffered the most. They propose transforming the reading room space from a cold, elitist environment into an affective, user-oriented, community-centered service space (Caswell & Cifor, 2016, p. 24).

One of the participants shared her personal experience with the archive:

Imagine being a visitor already distrustful of government institutions, confronted daily with prejudice and stereotypes. For them, it is a significant barrier to first pass through security checks before even starting your research into a painful past described through language of race, power, and colonialism. Despite the difficulty and discomfort, you must read through racist colonial language to glimpse

snippets of your history as recorded by Dutch colonials. This can be physically nauseating, forcing you to take breaks to gather the strength to continue. But why must I engage with the same colonial frame and racist language to be able to identify documents and search through archives using tools provided by the National Archives? (Statement of one of the participants of the decolonization tables, in Dutch National Archives, 2021)

This poignant feedback should remind archival institutions that inventories, indexes, and catalogues are more than mere neutral finding aids. As Brent Hayes Edwards points out

we often take finding aids for granted — it's just a tool; it's the listing that tells you where to find materials stored in a given collection — but a finding aid is a textual subgenre in its own right, with its own protocols, even its own poetics. (Mazza, n.d.)

Participants reflected on how archival institutions could present their collections in “a more ethical way”. Suggestions included: demonstrating that colonial archives are products of power dynamics; incorporating this awareness into the language and perspectives of finding aids, which are constructs of archivists; making transparent the missing data and information due to colonial biases; involving and compensating people from communities in reparative work; and acknowledging the indispensable role of non-textual sources not managed by archival institutions.

There was also criticism of the mass digitization of (colonial) archives, which European institutions promote as a solution for accessibility issues. Digitization may increase the availability of materials but does not equate to accessibility. Digitization must be approached carefully to avoid reproducing or amplifying epistemic violence in digital form. The large-scale, often international digitization projects were critiqued for being primarily driven by European/Dutch interests, determining what is digitized based on their resources and criteria. This positions archival institutions in former colonies as mere suppliers of raw materials refined in Europe/the Netherlands. The main concern is ensuring that archivists' tools do not perpetuate the epistemic violence of the archives. As archives transition to digital spaces, machine-generated transcriptions, while offering technical search capabilities, can reinforce the problematic colonial frameworks within which users interact with the archives.

Concluding Remarks & Reflections

Dutch archival institutions are gradually recognizing their role as co-creators of the archives they manage, yet they remain uncertain about the responsibilities this entails regarding their collections and the users they serve. They are still in the early stages of addressing these challenges. Before concluding, it is important to further explore whether it is possible to reduce hermeneutical injustice in the colonial archive.

Let us revisit Fricker's concepts of hermeneutical and testimonial injustice. Initially, I emphasized the importance of clarifying the roles of both the speaker and the hearer. Viewing the colonial archive through a narrow (and traditional Rankean) lens, which treats it as merely a repository of past testimonies of the speakers to the hearers of the past, overlooks the fact that these records communicate with today's hearers through the intervention of archival institutions. Authors like Melanson, Cifor, and Caswell, as well as participants in the roundtables, stress the need to acknowledge and address the hermeneutical injustice embedded in the colonial archive and offer suggestions for action. While these contributions are valuable, more action is required.

Archivists and archival institutions must recognize their role as agents of mediation, continually re-mediating archival testimonies from the past. A recent form of mediation involves digitizing historical testimonies and making them available online through technologies like HTR-software (Handwritten Text Recognition). However, there are fundamental issues with this approach: documents are digitized and made available with the same minimal metadata that originating from a time when archivists still believed they were acting as agents of neutrality. Although there are some efforts to address problematic language in descriptions, the archive generally remains a monolithic entity that is difficult to engage with from diverse perspectives.

Governments are increasingly acknowledging that those recorded in archives also have rights (Johnson, 2017, p. 152), but these rights are generally limited to living individuals. For example, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) recognizes rights such as rectification and erasure for personal data in temporary records. For records that have been transferred to an archival service for permanent preservation, this is not an option. However, according to the Dutch Implementation Act of the GDPR, it is possible for someone who is confronted with incorrect personal data in an archival document to add their own viewpoint, which then becomes part of

the file⁵. Nonetheless, nothing can be added or corrected on behalf of the deceased, which means that archives will continue to dictate “what can be said about the past and the kinds of stories that can be told about the persons cataloged, embalmed, and sealed away in box files and folios” (Hartman, 2007, p. 17).

Thus, I argue for a fundamental rethinking of the roles, responsibilities, and opportunities for both speakers and hearers in the archival domain. Archival institutions should not merely act as mediators of the colonial archive; they should also facilitate “talking back” to the colonial archive and the mediating archivists. bell hooks explains that

[m]oving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side, a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life, and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back’ that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of moving from object to subject, that is the liberated voice. (Hooks, 1986, pp. 8, 128)

This “talking back” could be easily organized and facilitated in the digital realm. It should become part of the metadata, perhaps we should call it “afterdata” of the colonial archive. Although archival institutions are accustomed to communicating with users through metadata, this tool is not currently used to enable the archive to fulfill its role as a mediator. Users of the archives lack direct means to respond to what they encounter through these remediated archives.

Temi Odumosu, a scholar and curator at the Information School at the University of Washington, proposes transforming the metadata of the colonial archive into a counter-record of colonial. In her article “The Crying Child: On Colonial Archives, Digitization, and Ethics of Care in the Cultural Commons”, she focuses on the digital reproduction of enslaved and colonized subjects in archival, particularly visual, collections. Precisely because the ghosts of the past manifest when witnessed injustices are not sufficiently recognized and named, it is necessary to take action to prevent the mechanisms of injustice from remaining intact and unchallenged. She suggests transforming metadata into a repository of necessary tension, allowing users to “return” to

⁵ Uitvoeringswet Algemene Verordening Gegevensbescherming [Implementation Act General Data Protection Regulation], article 45 paragraph 3 says: “Concerned parties have the right, in the case of incorrect personal data, to add their own account to the relevant archival documents”.

colonial moments and create “a counter-record of that history”. Odumosu envisions a digital object that could do all the speaking that the original could not do? What if the digital object could say on behalf of persons represented: “Look, here is my story. I’ve experienced pain, and now you are part of it; tell me what you intend to do with me?” (Odumosu, 2020, p. 299).

Such an approach would foster a completely new relationship between speaker and hearer. These “afterdata” could serve as powerful annotations to expose the hermeneutic resources embedded in colonial archives, and to amplify the voices of those who suffered the most under colonialism and slavery, and whose perspectives have always been suppressed and ignored. It could be a first step in enabling marginalized communities to gain control over how these archives will be integrated into the cultural memory of society.

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