

A Postcolonial Archive? On the Paradox of Practice in a Northwest Alaska Project*

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RÉSUMÉ Dans ce texte, l'auteur aborde les contradictions entre le post-colonialisme et les pratiques institutionnelles dans la création d'une institution d'archives d'histoire orale dans le nord-ouest de l'Alaska. Comme projet, le post-colonialisme se sert souvent d'un décentrage interprétatif des ressources que le pouvoir a colonisées. La matérialité d'une institution archivistique locale, par contre, est créée par un centrage géographique du matériel historique. La production de ce genre d'archives rend évidente un effet particulier : la constitution de sujets historiques. Jusqu'à quel point ces deux projets – le post-colonialisme et la création d'un centre d'archives – travaillent-ils vers des buts différents? Ce texte examine les ambiguïtés du post-colonialisme d'abord comme un index de l'espace historico-géographique, et ensuite comme un projet intellectuel collectif. Afin d'illustrer les contradictions entre le post-colonialisme et la création des institutions d'archives, ce texte établit le bien-fondé de ces considérations par un exemple : la fondation contemporaine d'un centre d'archives d'histoire orale dans le nord-ouest de l'Alaska. Cet exemple s'inscrit également dans deux registres : comme un projet sis dans ce que l'on peut appeler une géographie « post-coloniale » et comme une entreprise potentiellement post-coloniale. L'auteur démontre que la première description est loin de la vérité, et que les entreprises institutionnelles pour créer des archives d'histoire orale dans le nord-ouest de l'Alaska – quoiqu'elles travaillent ostensiblement contre une histoire de colonialisme – réinscrivent toutefois divers pouvoirs de colonisation.

ABSTRACT In this paper, I explore contradictions between postcolonialism and the institutional practices in the creation of an oral history archive in northwest Alaska. As a project, postcolonialism often harnesses an interpretive *de-centring* of the resources that power has colonized. The materiality of a local institutional archive, on the other hand, is created through the geographical *centring* of historical material. The production of such an archive thereby renders one effect most visibly: the constitution of his-

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torical subjects. To what extent do these two projects – postcolonialism and the making of an archive – then work toward different purposes? The paper examines the ambiguities of postcolonialism first as an index of historical-geographical space, then as a collective intellectual project. To illustrate contradictions between postcolonialism and the making of an archive, the paper substantiates these considerations through an example: the contemporary production of an oral history archive in northwest Alaska. The example serves on both registers: as a project sited in what may be said to be a “postcolonial” geography, and as a potentially postcolonial endeavour. I argue that the first description is off the mark, and that institutional endeavours to build an oral history archive in northwest Alaska, while ostensibly working against a history of colonialism, nonetheless re-inscribe various powers of colonialism.

“Will the misgivings be submerged – and how quickly – in
a renewed celebration of progress?”

Michael Watts¹

In a recent volume titled *Refiguring the Archive*, we learn about remarkable transformations in some institutions in South Africa that we call “the archives.”² The essays collected in the book emerged from a conference by the same title, held in the year when the Truth and Reconciliation Commission issued its final report. *Refiguring the Archive* marks a lively effort to extend the conversations that took place, had taken root, in that conference venue. Accordingly, the book is more than a documentation project. It is also an engagement, part of a struggle to transform the very subject that the book is ostensibly about: the *archive*. These struggles and transformations are substantive, as they follow in the wake of apartheid and colonial rule (postcolonialism) in society, and in the wake of positivist methodologies (post-positivism) in the archival professions. The necessity and achievements of these efforts deserve far more praise and critical attention than I have seen, or that I myself can muster with just a few words.³ However, I worry that unbridled enthusiasms and commemoration for such developments – that they deserve – come by forgetting something else: misgivings, as the epigraph above suggests.

An example may illustrate the argument that follows. If this edited volume, *Refiguring the Archive*, provides material with which to extend conversations, then it “provides material” to whom? If we leave aside the high cost that came with its quality production, then the language, vocabulary, format, and distribution all suggest that this book will largely remain the property of research

1 Michael Watts, “‘A New Deal in Emotions’: Theory and Practice and the Crisis of Development,” in Jonathan Crush, ed., *Power of Development* (London, 1995), p. 61.

2 Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jame Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh, eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht, 2002).

3 This is not to suggest that *Refiguring the Archive* is the only, or first, material to push in this direction. More examples can be found in the footnotes to follow.

libraries and a professional class that helps to manage the process of democratization. Or we might look to the advertising copy on the dust-jacket: “the sphere of ‘the record’ will widen and become more complex ... as archival discourse claims new areas for attention – such as documenting the ‘marginalized’ ...”; or to the editors’ “Introduction,” where half of the essays in the volume are grouped together under a theme revolving “around the extension of the boundaries of what might fall within the compass of ‘archive’.”⁴ But what exactly colonizes these “new areas,” and who gets to decide to extend the “boundaries”? These are fraught issues about the power of institutional archivists, professional writers, and academic researchers, power that is imperious and productive at the same time, and my misgivings in this regard are not conservative condemnations (often made in the name of liberal individualism or just “letting” everyone be) of progressive moments like those in *Refiguring the Archive*, or of a professional creative class. Rather, what follows is an attempt to sketch what I see as limits to the powers that I can bring to bear to an archival project within a post-colonial framework.

Under what conditions might it be possible to create a “postcolonial archive”? In these pages, I suggest that a paradox echoes through the construction of an archive that strives toward “the postcolonial.” I hope not to suggest that this contradiction is absolute, since the archive (as I am choosing to use the term) is a *literal* re-centring of material for the construction and contestation of knowledge, whereas postcolonialism often works toward a *figurative* decentring of that same material.⁵ Instead, it is the mismatch of these registers that renders the paradox complex and illuminating. The internal contradictions make the production and maintenance of “postcolonial” archives rather fragile endeavours in need of ongoing attention. This same tension can give these projects their potential, as well as their troubling provocation for misgiving.

I explore contradictions in the phrase “postcolonial archive” using one example, an archival project about the history of “Eskimo tourism” in north-west arctic Alaska. The structure of the paper is organized around two major

4 Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*, p. 15.

5 Derrida similarly suggests that the archive consists “in consigning [or] inscribing a trace in some external location – there is no archive without some location” (“Archive Fever in South Africa” in Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*, p. 42). There is, however, a rich literature – including the large parts of the book just mentioned – that has drawn from Derrida in an attempt to look “beyond the idea of archives as physical records” and institutions (Ibid., p. 9), considering it instead as a figurative or spectral phenomenon. Were there no one responsible for assembling and maintaining *particular* archives (indefinite as the identity of each may be), just as no one is responsible for managing particular postcolonialisms, then I would be more enthusiastic about querying both of these terms – “the archive” as well as the postcolonial – in a figurative register. Nonetheless, the possibility of doing so is a thought-provoking and critical challenge to the architecture of my overall argument. I thank an anonymous reader for making this suggestion.

registers in which the term *postcolonial* is currently used: first, to denote a condition of a particular place or society; and second, in reference to a set of theoretical perspectives. In the next section, I outline a project to produce a local oral history archive. Then using the first register, I outline theorizations of place and postcoloniality, and in the third section of the paper, I examine ways in which a community in northwest arctic Alaska may or may not constitute a postcolonial geography. This sketch raises questions as to whether the community is aptly described as a *post*-colonial place. If the answer to that question is ambiguous, then to what extent can an archival project incorporate postcolonialism as an intellectual project and political formation? That question, based on the second register of the term, organizes the last section of the paper. Substantial material has emerged in postcolonial literature to suggest that the production and maintenance of state and institutional archives has been critical to the process of colonization.⁶ Particularly, the archive has been a vital technology of knowledge and rule, key to the concept of “the people” in modern liberal states. As archives are produced in northwest Alaska, they are implicated in the construction of the subject and, to some extent, in the institutional politics of subjection. In that sense, I find it hard to imagine how a postcolonial archive could be produced in an institutional setting and maintained in the context of a formal organization (chartered by the state, funded with various contracts and expectations, serving a designated “population,” and so on), unless “the postcolonial” is taken to mean *in the wake of* colonialism, rather than simply *after* colonialism.

My argument is premised upon three major assumptions. First I assume a broadly cultural materialist perspective, drawn from Williams, Foucault, and Spivak. Cultural materialists argue that concepts and values are not opposite to materiality; rather, that meaning, thought, and culture are rendered communicable through material conditions of shared practice and contestation.⁷ Williams’ elaboration of a cultural materialist approach should not be conflated with positivism. The approach draws initially from Marx, Vološinov, and Gramsci rather than Comte. It focuses on materiality as the critical fiber

6 My analysis brackets off an abundance of strategies and manoeuvres (like deconstructive readings) that can be utilized to de-centre the subject in subsequent interpretations of archival material. This elision is problematic, but I make it for the purposes of simplicity and brevity.

7 Martin Hall makes a cultural materialist argument when he suggests “the material evidence of the past is central to the ways in which identities are understood and maintained in today’s global world.” See Hall, “Blackbirds and Black Butterflies,” in Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*, p. 336. For a concise outline of cultural materialism in geography, see Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning* (London, 1989). For a theoretical elaboration in cultural studies, see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977). The problem of reducing culture to a determining material basis is addressed in Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory,” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980). In that regard, cultural materialist perspectives in cultural studies and geography are considerably different from the cultural materialism sketched out by Marvin Harris in anthropology.

through which power is constructed and used, but is driven by analyses of processes and institutions that forever reconstitute that materiality.⁸ Against the basic positivist formulations in archival discourse that Harris outlined,⁹ cultural materialists would:

- a) posit only a contingent definition of the word “archive,” and assume the meaning of the word is subject to debate and change as part of an ongoing struggle over language;
- b) argue that this struggle is important, not because language “reflects” reality but because of the constitutive effects of language and the archives;
- c) propose broader participation in the processes of memory formation;
- d) suggest that archives, like canonical literature, are embedded in the contentious formation and reformation of a selective tradition¹⁰; and
- e) supplement the triumphalism – that heralds the addition or incorporation of “voices” previously excluded from the archive – with calls to consider more deeply the context and power relations through which existing archival material has been produced.¹¹

While a cultural materialist perspective resists the core formulations of positivism, it also enables a critical analysis of materialities and institutions that most academics and archivists are expected to produce in their profession, more so than “concept-metaphors” and “discourses” that other forms of critical analysis use as their main instruments. As a post-positivist approach, cultural materialism thus offers some advantage for an analysis of archival practices.

Second, I assume that the process of archiving is always a political process. Such politics have “to do with the kind of authority the interpreter claims” when undertaking professional archival procedures “which are ostensibly the most remote from overtly political concerns.”¹² They may be subtle, but such

8 See especially Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977) and *The Sociology of Culture* (New York, 1981) on these points.

9 Verne Harris, “Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 132–41.

10 On contested definitions of words in English society, see Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (Oxford, 1976). On memory formation, see his essay, “Means of Communication as Means of Production.” For a brief discussion of “selective tradition,” see Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, pp. 115–18.

11 Although Raymond Williams’ book, *The Country and the City* (Oxford, 1973), is a rich contextualization of the written record, I have his work less in mind than Michel Foucault’s history of the “ignoble archives” of criminology in *Discipline and Punish* (New York, 1979), and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s cutting analysis of power, subjectivity, and silence in “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana, 1988), pp. 271–313.

12 This phrasing is from Hayden White, quoted on page 60 in Joan Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomats,” *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 40–74.

practices are nonetheless political, because the material chosen as “record” (from all of that which could be available) is highly selective,¹³ description is inherently subjective, and questions of access to fragile material are difficult at best.

Third, I assume the use of the term “postcolonial” needs to be sensitive to the differences encompassed by all those places (such as Alaska) that could be described as such. Indeed, the word also marks an intellectual formation whose practitioners¹⁴ often launch their analysis from a point about the plurality of people and places subsumed under problematic categories like “Oriental,” “African,” “native,” or “postcolonial.”

Building a Tourism Archive in Northwest Alaska

Kotzebue is a predominantly Iñupiaq Eskimo community on the northwest coast of Alaska. In the last census, its population stood at just over 3,000 people. There are no roads to the town, but daily commercial flights facilitate travel to the nearest cities, Anchorage or Fairbanks, some 700 kilometres (450 miles) away. Remote as it may seem, Kotzebue played a powerful role in the state’s history: beyond the Inside Passage and the sights on the road system like Denali National Park, it was one of the first destinations in rural Alaska to be successfully packaged and marketed to tourists. The first commercial tours began in 1946. In the peak years between 1975 and 1985, Kotzebue received over 12,000 tourists per year.¹⁵ Travel writers and photographers on the same tours ensured that many more thousands of Americans had indirect contact with the town, so that images recorded in Kotzebue and published elsewhere – *National Geographic*, travel magazines, tourist brochures, postcards, and the like – became iconic as that which tourists expected to see in Alaska: the midnight sun, tundra, a traditional blanket toss, and Eskimo dancing.

While Kotzebue and its tourist iconography have played important roles in the production of representative images and standardized scripts for Alaska at large, efforts to explore this history and its effects have been sparse. I know of

13 Indeed the selected record cannot be anything other than the slightest trace, given the inevitable destruction of most documents before they reach the archives as well as further limitations imposed by available space and human resources. See Harris, “Claiming Less, Delivering More.”

14 Said, Bhabha, and Spivak are probably the most renowned. Key texts include Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, 1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (London, 1993); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (London, 1990) and “Can the Subaltern Speak?”

15 Robert Giersdorf, personal communication, 21 April 2000. A conservative estimate would put the total number who visited this arctic community on a day trip or an overnight excursion over the last sixty years at well over 200,000 people. In 1985, probably about one out of every 2,500 living Americans had toured Kotzebue at some point in their lives.

four exceptions. Three are autobiographies: Paul Green's *I am Eskimo – Aknik my Name* (Juneau, 1959), which was marketed as a children's book; Chester Seveck's thin volume, *The Longest Reindeer Herder* (Seattle, 1973), published by the tour manager who had paid Seveck for twenty years to greet the tourists arriving in Kotzebue; and Charles West's *Mr. Alaska: 40 Years of Alaska Tourism, 1945-1985* (Seattle, 1985), about the entrepreneur from Los Angeles who was largely responsible for initiating the package tour to the community in 1946. Each touches upon tourism in Kotzebue, but none explore its effects and articulations in the community. The fourth exception is a chapter on "Eskimo Tourism" by anthropologist Valene Smith.¹⁶ Her essay outlines the changing structure of tour operation management in Kotzebue as it moved, in stepwise increments, from outside interests who hired college students to conduct the tours, to Native ownership and employment in all aspects of the ground operation. Smith discusses the effects of the tour operation on local subsistence practices, but her essay has spawned little continuing discussion about community representation and change in the wake of commercial tourism in Kotzebue.

Beyond these four sources, there is no substantial public record – by local residents or otherwise – about the recent history of contact, cultural representation, and transaction between local Iñupiaq people, tourists, and tourism program operators in Kotzebue, Alaska. The lack of more material is unfortunate for at least two reasons. First, the subject offers a chance to trace changes in local business and indigenous practices in the wake of extensive cultural contact, circulating images and travel stories, and globalized networks of nearly instant communication, rapid travel, and uneven capital resources. Second, the subject offers opportunities to explore methodological issues about the practices of representation. The concentration of power to represent Kotzebue to tourists may be problematic, but so too is the unequal power to represent the history of Kotzebue tourism within broader networks of circulation. In practice, how could such a history be carried out in any less problematic terms? Who gets to tell the stories? How can it be done so that questions about representation are not merely displaced and ignored in different forms of representation?

These questions and opportunities have driven the beginnings of an oral history project about Kotzebue tourism. As a historical geographer and a doctoral candidate, I had obtained funding in 1999 for dissertation research about the historical production and marketing of Kotzebue as an "Eskimo village." The support had allowed me to spend time in various archives in Alaska's three major cities – Juneau, Fairbanks, and Anchorage – where I was often surprised at the volume of written material and photos that travelers had drawn from the

16 Valene Smith, "Eskimo Tourism: Micro-Models and Marginal Men," in Valene Smith, ed., *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia, 1989), pp. 55–82.

remote village and deposited elsewhere. Yet when I arranged for an extended visit to Kotzebue and first sat down with Pete Tarruq Schaeffer, the executive director of Kotzebue's tribal government, I was gently presented with much the same issue. He too was concerned about the exploitation of Native culture and people in the history of commercial tourism in Kotzebue, but, he asked, what was to become of the results of my work? As a researcher living in Anchorage (Alaska's largest city), what benefits would my research bring to the local community? We have since begun a collaborative effort between the tribal government, Chukchi Campus (a branch of the University of Alaska in Kotzebue), and myself (currently on faculty at the University of Alaska Anchorage). The objective is to create a public archive that tries to translate these issues onto new terrain, in order to re-create, re-circulate, and re-interpret the history of tourism in Kotzebue. The project involves the collection of oral history material with a diverse set of residents in town – Native elders, former tour guides and operators, and a sampling of local residents – in order to circulate a greater diversity of “voices” through an oral history collection.

Each recording works around photo-elicitation.¹⁷ Following a semi-structured approach, the interviews start with a set of open-ended questions where contributors are asked to say a little about themselves, how they themselves were involved in, or affected by, tourism in Kotzebue, and what question or issue they consider most important.¹⁸ Each session then turns to an album of photographs and images, including postcards, travel brochures, early photo-essays, and photos taken by visitors and archived elsewhere. After a discussion of photo-album material, the topic turns, as time permits, to details about local institutions and people involved in Kotzebue's tourism industry. With final summary questions, the overall structure includes a lot of material to be completed within an eighty-minute time-frame allotted to a single audio-CD.

Using oral history techniques in the project raises a number of issues, but also considerable promise. It provides a more apparent venue for personality, immediacy, and positioning of the contributors than a written (or transcribed) composition, for example, that often creates the effect of greater distance and objectivity as it further separates words from their author.¹⁹

Audio recordings may also help to avoid the effect of transparent “realism” that videotapes can produce. It can facilitate arrangements where groups of people can collectively listen to that which is being said and view the postcards

17 On photo-elicitation in oral history, see Judith Modell and Charlee Brodsky, “Envisioning Homestead: Using Photographs in Interviewing,” in Eva McMahan and Kim Rogers, eds., *Interactive Oral History Interviewing* (Hilldale, NJ, 1994), pp. 141–61.

18 Each contributor sees the list of basic questions in advance, and they are given opportunities to change, eliminate, or add questions that they would like to discuss during the recording.

19 Perhaps this should not be attributed to the “technology” of literacy as much as to a context where cultural practices of writing and reading proliferated alongside a colonial epistemology of representation, as Timothy Mitchell's *Colonizing Egypt* (Berkeley, 1991) suggests.

or photographs being discussed, rather than each reading the material individually. Oral histories on the subject may also help to catalyze more discussion in verbal than written forms, thus disseminating a kind of “fluidity” in new contexts, an indeterminacy of meaning that many think is often lost in written communication.²⁰ But the oral history project is not an attempt to preserve the formal “stories” of a culture, those carefully re-situated and rehearsed along in a chain of oral transmission. Nor is it an endeavour to record or recuperate such an oral tradition. First, the memories at stake are not of a common genre, nor the narrators of a common culture. Second, the project does not rest on a dichotomy between oral and written communication, but on the complex, blurred relationships between the two, with a digital inscription of audio (sound) as people discuss historic images written into a photo album before them (to which the users should also have access). In that regard it is akin to Rosaldo’s definition of oral history – “telling stories about stories people tell about themselves”²¹ – where timing and emphasis in the construction of a subject are the more critical factors than the social technologies used to produce these moments. Third, the approach draws on a rich literature among oral historians about the context in which various stories were shared: “social situation, physical space and landmarks, items of material culture, and so on.”²²

Of course, many aspects of this oral history project deserve close scrutiny. For example, each interview is designed to last less than eighty minutes so that the recording fits onto a standard audio-CD. With the highly constrained temporality that this imposes upon each contributor, the standardization is questionable. There are further issues about who conducts the interview and how this decision is made in each instance. There are questions about remuneration: those about the commodification of knowledge implied with the payments that contributors have received, as well as those about unequal rates of pay between various people involved in the project. One can also scrutinize

20 On the fluidity of oral histories, see Carolyn Hamilton, “‘Living by Fluidity’: Oral Histories, Material Custodies, and the Politics of Archiving,” in Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*; Elsie Mather, “With a Vision Beyond Our Immediate Needs: Oral Traditions in an Age of Literacy,” in Phyllis Morrow and William Scheider, eds., *When Our Words Return: Writing, Hearing, and Remembering Oral Traditions of Alaska and the Yukon* (Logan, 1995); and Phyllis Morrow, “Symbolic Actions, Indirect Expressions: Limits to Interpretations of Yupik Society,” *Études/Inuit/Studies*, vol. 14, nos. 1–2 (1990), pp. 141–58.

21 Renato Rosaldo, “Doing Oral History,” *Social Analysis* 4 (September 1980), p. 89.

22 Verne Harris and Sello Hatang, “Archives, Identity, and Place: A Dialogue on What It (Might) Mean(s) to be an African Archivist,” *ESARBICA Journal* 19 (2000), p. 55. On the importance of context, see also Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln, 1998); William Schneider, *So They Understand: Cultural Issues in Oral History* (Logan, 2002); and Hamilton, “Living by Fluidity.” On the limits of imperatives to “contextualize” our work, see: Gillian Rose, “Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities, and Other Tactics,” *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1997), pp. 305–20; and Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York, 1992), p. 45.

the kinds of categories that the project imposes upon the contributors, and whether this is less a re-articulation than a simple re-inscription of differences.

I wish to focus particularly on the archival practices: ways through which this material – after the oral engagements have been made into something deliverable – is to be assembled, ordered, accessed, and circulated. The audio recordings will be collected as an indexed series of CDs, so that a patron can view images in the photo-album while they listen to an audio-CD in the series. The tribal government and the University of Alaska's Chukchi Campus in Kotzebue will have identical copies of the collection for safekeeping and for public use in their libraries. These two organizations have joint authority over the reproduction, dissemination, and use of the collection in situations beyond their own buildings.

If we focus on these kinds of archival practices, three points are critical. One is that the project involves a kind of return or repatriation. The amount of historical material that had found its way from this corner of the world into the metropolitan archives was impressive. Here, it has not been a matter of “the treasures of the archive” being “forcibly relocated to imperial centers,”²³ as photographs of Kotzebue were taken, not stolen. Volumes of photographs were dispersed as tourists, professional photographers, and academic professionals donated their collections to institutional archives in Los Angeles, Seattle, Anchorage, Fairbanks, and elsewhere, where they hoped institutional funds would pay for their careful preservation. This project thus constitutes a re-assembly, a re-distributing, and augmentation of this diaspora of local material memory in a slightly different way. The second point is that the oral history material is being re-centred far from any metropolitan centre like Anchorage, Alaska's largest city. The institutional archive is centred instead on the margin, in Kotzebue. This decision to hold the collection in Alaska's rural periphery was not simply resistance to those forces of cumulative causation that enrich the growth metropolises – like Anchorage – with ever more raw material and human resources from the peripheries. It was also an accommodation for those who felt more comfortable contributing to a localized archive, to a collection (returning to the issue of contextualization) whose users would not be so far removed (geographically, at least) from the context in which their comments were shared and recorded. The third point is that the archival material is not simply re-centred. When finished,²⁴ the collection will move simultaneously in two directions: one, to the tribal government, a formal institution created to represent those who

23 Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*, p. 17.

24 I write “finished” only in a provisional sense. Alterations and augmentations to each identical collection can be expected after the project is complete; indeed, its supplementation by future users could be encouraged. See Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, “Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings,” *Archival Science*, vol. 2, nos. 3–4 (September 2002), p. 279, for some insights along these lines.

were colonized; and the other, to Chukchi Campus, a branch of what may have been one of the most colonizing institutions in the state, the University of Alaska. With duplicate materials and joint authority over the future of these materials, perhaps the archive may become itself de-centred and unsettled.

But again, could such a collection constitute a “postcolonial archive”? To address this, I outline a concern about difference and place in the next section. It is organized in two stages. First I examine the difference that “place” makes in relational approaches to geography. I then touch upon the significance of difference in postcolonial theory. Such an outline of theoretical concerns helps to clarify why the analysis of the postcoloniality of a place has often produced enigmatic results. The crux of the matter – in both postcolonial scholarship and in a substantial portion of the geography literature – is how to understand and accommodate difference.

Theorizing Place and Postcoloniality

Kotzebue is the largest community in the Northwest Arctic Borough, which encompasses some 92,000 square kilometres (36,000 square miles), an area half the size of New Brunswick. The Census last tabulated the borough’s population at 7,208 people, making it one of the most sparsely populated areas of Alaska. Most residents live in one of eleven villages in the region, and almost half of them live in Kotzebue alone. Residents claiming Native heritage comprised eighty-six percent, the vast majority of whom had Iñupiat Eskimo background. Per-capita income for the borough is very low – \$15,286, or two-thirds of the statewide average – despite the high cost of goods and services in this part of Alaska. Unemployment runs at more than twice Alaska’s average.²⁵ Cultural traditions of subsistence are still widely shared in a mixed economy, so that fish and wildlife harvests fulfill a large part of the diet of many residents. Motor and heating fuel is delivered to the villages by barge twice a year. Kotzebue is the administrative and transportation hub for the borough. Alaska Airlines provides commercial service between Kotzebue and Anchorage, a city with 280,000 people about 800 kilometres (500 miles) to the southeast. The sound of the airline’s Boeing 737s marks one of the rhythms for the town as their jets land, three times daily, on the runway at the south end of the community.

The image of daily commercial jet service to a small town in Alaska can be striking. There are, quite likely, few images as paradigmatic of modernity as the commercial jet airplane. Its remarkable speed, its overwhelming noise, its intricate technologies that harness energy and information, its “victory”

25 Per-capita income data is drawn from the US Census Bureau, 2000. For unemployment figures, see Neal Fried and Brigitta Windisch-Cole, “A Profile: Northwest Arctic Borough,” *Alaska Economic Trends*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1999), pp. 1–9.

over the laws of nature when many tons and many people are lifted off the ground, not to mention its apparent ability to make the world smaller, connecting people to one another across the planet: all of these have helped to make the commercial jet emblematic of progress and modernity. That a commercial jet (in fact, several) should be made to serve a town of three thousand people in northwest Alaska suggests that this place, like the airplane and its occupants, is on a leading edge of development. However, such a measure of progress and development does not take various dimensions of difference into account.

Fundamentally, the critical issue concerns how difference is assessed. The idea of “progress” has been a very easy answer to questions about differences between societies around the world. “The idea of progress was the dramatic resolution of two great riddles by linking them. What produced diversity? [The answer was the] different stages of development of different societies. What was social change? The necessary advance through the different social forms that existed.”²⁶ Massey takes this argument further to suggest that such ideas of progress, along with more recent arguments about the “inevitability” of globalization, dismiss the importance of geography. “Co-existing difference is reduced to place in the historical queue. Effectively this turns geography into history – space into time. The implication is that there is only one history; we are just all at different stages in it. We are not to imagine such other places as having their own trajectories.”²⁷

So if the image of the daily commercial jet in a town like Kotzebue is iconic of the village’s movement to the front of the historical queue of progress, the icon may be a little suspect. It ignores many of the reasons why the commercial jets go to Kotzebue, reasons having to do with why some people need to travel; who and how many can afford the costly plane tickets in and out of Kotzebue (and who cannot); and the desirability (or, perhaps, the sufficient lack thereof) for alternative modes of travel in this corner of the world. An assessment in terms of progress – rather than a multiplicity of differences – ignores the fact that the “local uniqueness” of a place like Kotzebue “is always already a product of wider contacts” and forces. The nature of the wider relationships (be they economic, political, cultural, technological, environmental, etc.) vary in direction and magnitude, intersecting with people and objects in a community to create and modify the “character” of a place.²⁸

26 Teodor Shanin, “The Idea of Progress,” in Majid Rahnema and Victoria Bawtree, eds., *The Post-Development Reader* (London, 1997), p. 67.

27 Doreen Massey, “Globalization: What does it Mean for Geography?,” *Geography*, vol. 87, no. 4 (2002), p. 293.

28 Doreen Massey, “Places and Their Pasts,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 39, no. 1 (1995), p. 183. Her ideas about the uniqueness of “place” are articulated in greater detail in “A Global Sense of Place,” in Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis, 1994), pp. 146–56, and more recently in Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Malden, MA, 2004).

The point of these deliberations is not that each place is more or less unique. It would be easy to argue that Kotzebue is more unique than most human settlements. The important question is how differences between one place and another are best accounted for. In geography, this question has inclined many to avoid thinking of places as bounded, empty slates, whose interiors have been filled or occupied by particular attributes: 3,082 people, or a rapidly accelerating pace of life, or pronounced rhythms of small-town life. Such thinking sees a place primarily as a container. An alternative in geography understands a place in more relational terms. This perspective thinks of difference as that which is created in relation to other places and times. It relies on a shared vocabulary of social relations, understandings, technologies, and practices, all of which are continually articulated in complex networks to create a place like Kotzebue as a notable point of inter-connection. Such a vocabulary has the ability to emphasize processes and connections at work well beyond – as well as within – the formal boundaries of a town. A relational approach helps to understand the construction of a place and its differences from the shared histories and geographies (shared, though hardly ever held in common) that extend beyond the here and now.

A re-conception of place is critical to an adequate understanding of many issues surrounding the *postcoloniality* of particular societies and places. I touch upon two issues. The first concerns the spatial approach to difference within systems of colonial rule. At a broad level, colonialism can be understood as an inability, or better, a permanent refusal to engage with social differences. This accords with Fanon's well-known description of the colonial world as "divided into compartments ... a world cut in two."²⁹ The understanding highlights the degree to which colonialism is a spatial practice. It created and re-creates segregated spaces: places within which different people might be contained and controlled. Colonialism occupies space through deliberate incursions, assuming the totality of one space to be filled with "other" people, and marking and taking over strategic places in that space. Colonialism operates by way of categorical knowledge, by categories of division and attribution much as one might be tempted to think of place as a bounded space containing particular characteristics. To re-conceptualize the notion of place, to think of a place in terms of complex intersections of dynamic social relation, is partly an effort to break with colonial strategies of dividing the world into compartments.

Geography is not the only object of compartmentalization. Time is divided into epochs, too. For example, the assumption that colonialism is past and over troubles McClintock, who writes:

29 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Harmondsworth, 1967), p. 29.

My misgivings ... are not about the theoretical substance of “post-colonial theory,” much of which I greatly admire ... Nor do I want to banish the term to some chilly, verbal Gulag: there seems no reason why it should not be used judiciously in appropriate circumstances, in the context of other terms ... Rather, I wish to question [an] orientation ... which, in its premature celebration of the pastness of colonialism, runs the risk of obscuring the continuities and discontinuities of imperial power.³⁰

It is a broader vision that McClintock hopes to foreground, one that works at seeing connections and relationships between the present and the past, one that does not assume that colonialism has been safely relegated to the past. But large parts of the world continue to be coloured by the after-effects of colonialism, variously articulated. McClintock finds the term “postcolonial” thus to be a paradox when used to describe various cultures around the world. It is contradictory in that it may recuperate the very same problematic temporal logic that it was meant to overcome:

The term “post-colonial” ... is haunted by the very same figure of linear development that it sets out to dismantle ... Metaphorically poised on the border between the old and the new, end and beginning, the term heralds the end of a world era, but within the same trope of linear progress that animated the era ... [Thus, the] “post-colonial scene” occurs in an entranced suspension of history, as if the definitive historical events have preceded us, and are not now in the making.³¹

The second issue follows from this: the gloss with which differences in “the post-colonial scene” can be neglected is debilitating at best. There is political appeal in telling many stories about “colonial domination, resistance, and national liberation,” but it is also necessary – indeed critical – to attend closely to the “differentiated geographies of colonialism and postcolonialism,” to understand the “diversity and specificity of colonial and postcolonial economic, political, and cultural formations,” as Nash suggests.³² Again, McClintock suggests that the:

singularity of the term [“the post-colonial”] effects a re-centering of global history around the single rubric of European time. Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance [as the] determining marker of history. Other cultures [are made to] share only a chronological, prepositional relation to a Euro-centered epoch that is over (post-colonialism) or not yet begun (pre-colonialism). In other words, the world’s mul-

30 Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’,” *Social Text*, nos. 31–32 (1992), p. 88.

31 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

32 Catherine Nash, “Postcolonial Geographies: Spatial Narratives of Inequality and Interconnection,” in Paul Cloke, Philip Crang, and Mark Goodwin, eds., *Envisioning Human Geographies* (London, 2004), pp. 104–27.

titudinous cultures are marked, not positively by what distinguishes them, but by a subordinate, retrospective relation to linear, European time.³³

McClintock, Nash, and many others argue that there is not a singular or monolithic “postcolonial condition,” but a multitude of postcolonialities. Many are in further accord that this nomenclature is useful, but precisely because the term’s troublesome contradictions impel a careful attention to difference and detail. As Frankenberg and Mani warn:

the concept must be carefully specified, used to describe moments, social formations, subject positions and practices which arise out of an unfolding axis of colonization/ decolonization, interwoven with the unfolding of other axes, in uneven, unequal relations with one another ... [Thus,] the “postcolonial” is best understood in the context of a rigorous politics of location.³⁴

Kotzebue, Alaska: A Postcolonial Place?

If postcoloniality is taken to be a scenario that unfolds in different ways in the aftermath of colonialism, is Kotzebue then best considered to be postcolonial in recent years? In reply to this, I raise some doubts as to whether the situation in Kotzebue takes a postcolonial form at all. These doubts are strengthened by the unsettled position of postcolonial scholarship regarding the United States. It is unsettled in part because few have yet attempted to explore this terrain. As Olund observes, “the United States has figured very little in postcolonial theory.”³⁵ Anderson attributes this to “blind spots in public culture and scholarship” in US debates about race and multiculturalism, debates that are usually framed in terms of majority/minority rights rather than in the more complex terms of nation-building among indigenous peoples, colonial settler societies, and more recent immigrant groups.³⁶ Morin suggests several other complicating factors to explain why postcolonial scholarship about the United States is sparse.³⁷ One is that “formal decolonization and nationalist indepen-

33 McClintock, “Angel of Progress,” p. 86.

34 Ruth Frankenberg and Lata Mani, “Crosscurrents, Crosstalk: Race, ‘Postcoloniality’ and the Politics of Location,” *Cultural Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2 (1993), p. 307.

35 Eric Olund, “From Savage Space to Governable Space: the Extension of United States Judicial Sovereignty over Indian Country in the Nineteenth Century,” *Cultural Geographies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (April 2002), p. 153.

36 Kay Anderson, “Thinking ‘Postnationally’: Dialogue across Multicultural, Indigenous, and Settler Spaces,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, vol. 90, no. 2 (2000), p. 381.

37 This not to imply that there are no important exceptions. In literature studies, for example, see Amy Kaplan and Donald Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham, 1993); and Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London, 1989).

dence movements of the twentieth century – which arguably initiated the identifiable field of postcolonial studies – have little relevance, at least on the surface.” Another is the popular narrative of the war of independence from Britain, that is often used in public discourse to situate the United States as essentially an anti-colonial nation. That narrative has made it difficult to focus on the colonial status leveled on indigenous populations within the boundaries of the United States.³⁸

To better specify different forms of colonialism and postcolonialism, Sidaway categorizes the United States as “a break-away settler colony,” and “probably the most striking example.” What is interesting about such colonies, he notes, is that they in turn exercised an internal colonialism, with settlers displacing and over-ruling the indigenous population in newly founded nation-states like Canada, Australia, South Africa, Chile, and Peru.³⁹ Furthermore, the prominent position of the United States as a global hegemonic power since World War Two has been persuasively framed to involve neocolonialism. The US has come to exert enormous power over foreign people and places through economic and financial controls, rather than through direct political and military control as in earlier forms of Spanish and British colonialism.⁴⁰ This unusual combination of colonial forms – a break-away settler colony that has exercised both internal colonialism and neocolonialism – has left the “postcolonial” status of the United States as a whole in question. At a different scale, we might ask whether Kotzebue has articulated a colonial geography, that is, whether the experience of Iñupiat people reflected the internal colonialism exercised by another colonial settler society. If colonialism and postcolonialism are about the different ways in which encounters were (and are) staged between societies,⁴¹ then two moments in Kotzebue’s history may be particularly illustrative. One is the initiation of commercial tourism in the village in the mid-twentieth century, and the other is the arrival of Quaker missionaries at the end of the nineteenth century. I start with the context of missionary arrival.

The village site, near what was called “Qikiqtarug” in Iñupiaq, is located at the northern tip of a narrow peninsula that extends a little over one hundred

38 Karen Morin, “Mining Empire: Journalists in the American West, ca. 1870,” in Alison Blunt and Cheryl McEwan, eds., *Postcolonial Geographies* (London, 2002), p. 154.

39 James Sidaway, “Postcolonial Geographies: An Exploratory Essay,” *Progress in Human Geography*, vol. 24, no. 4 (2000), p. 600.

40 To date, one of the most compelling accounts of the move to neo-colonialism and American-style “geo-economics” is Neil Smith, *American Empire: Roosevelt’s Geographer and the Prelude to Globalization* (Berkeley, 2003). See also Jenny Sharp, “Is the United States Postcolonial?,” in C. Richard King, ed., *Postcolonial America* (Urbana, 2000), pp. 103–21.

41 This phrasing comes from Stuart Hall, “When was ‘the Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London, 1996), p. 247.

kilometres (sixty-five miles) into Kotzebue Sound.⁴² Archeological evidence suggests that Qikiqtagrauq was occupied since the fifteenth century.⁴³ The population of the entire northwest arctic region has been estimated to be about 5,200 people at the beginning of the nineteenth century (similar to its population today), and Qikiqtagrauq's population was likely 150 to 200 people. The surrounding area was rich in fish, marine mammal, and wildlife resources, and probably supported the population in relative security all year round.⁴⁴ Indeed, through most of the nineteenth century, an annual summer trade fair took place some sixteen kilometres (ten miles) across Kotzebue Sound to the northwest. Over one thousand individuals from northwest Alaska and Siberia came to the fair, where the area's resources supported them for several weeks. But ethno-historical evidence indicates that the population of Qikiqtagrauq collapsed near the beginning of the nineteenth century in a freak ice accident. Thus the community near the site now known as Kotzebue was overlooked in early nineteenth-century travel journals. Indeed, Otto von Kotzebue, who visited the Sound in 1816, missed Qikiqtagrauq entirely.⁴⁵

Carrie and Robert Samms, missionaries for the Friends Church, arrived in Kotzebue in July of 1897 to become the first permanent White settlers in the community. The United States had purchased the territory from Russia thirty years earlier, and shortly thereafter, the US Congress had banned the making of any further treaties with indigenous people within its boundaries, thereby removing most opportunities to establish reservations in Alaska.⁴⁶ The Samms thus arrived in a space that they could consider wholly under US jurisdiction. Uyaraq, an Iñupiaq convert from Unalakleet, had preceded the Samms at the trade fair in 1896, where he convinced Sheldon Jackson, General Agent of Education, to arrange for missionaries. By 1910, most of the Iñupiaq population around Kotzebue (as it was then called in print) had converted. There are several explanations for the remarkable rate of conversion. First, the Samms encouraged an "Eskimoized" version of Christianity. Second, weak divisions of clerical expertise in the Friends Church accorded closely with Iñupiaq social structures. Third, as Uyaraq assisted the Samms in the Kotzebue area, his ability to break traditional taboos without ill effect was effective. With these explanations, there is considerable Iñupiat agency in conversion, but

42 Qikiqtakgruq is translated to mean "peninsula" in English.

43 Ernest Burch, Jr., *The Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations of Northwest Alaska* (Fairbanks, 1998); James Van Stone, "Archeological Excavations at Kotzebue, Alaska," *Anthropological Papers of the University of Alaska*, vol. 3, no. 2 (1955).

44 Burch Jr., *Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations*.

45 Valene Smith, "Kotzebue: A Modern Alaskan Eskimo Community" (Ph.D. diss., University of Utah, 1966); Burch Jr., *Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations*.

46 Arthur Roberts, *Tomorrow is Growing Old: Stories of the Quakers in Alaska* (Newberg, OR, 1976); Stephen Haycox, *Alaska: An American Colony* (Seattle, 2002). There is currently only one reservation in Alaska.

then the context and historical timing of the conversion is also important.⁴⁷ While Qikiqtagruq had recovered from its earlier calamity by 1867, the Iñupiaq population in northwest arctic Alaska was devastated by 1890, dropping from an estimated 5,000 people to a little over 1,000. During this same period, whalers and traders had begun to pass through the region. Acute famine struck in 1881-83; epidemic diseases hit the Iñupiaq population; the ecological foundations of traditional social systems in northwest Alaska were undermined; and evidence of out-migration first appears in the historical record. As one anthropologist suggests, the Iñupiat “must have been more willing to consider alternatives to their traditional belief systems than they ever had previously,”⁴⁸ for no direct military engagement was necessary for their subjugation to US political rule.

The other illustrative cultural encounter is the initiation of commercial tourism in Kotzebue in the twentieth century. Its population in 1940 was listed as 372 people, but three factors that re-positioned its importance in the northwest arctic region soon after World War Two. One was the relocation of the regional hospital to Kotzebue around 1938. Another was the start of a tug and barge company by a merchant and a mining operator in 1949 that solidified the town’s place as a regional hub for cargo shipments.⁴⁹ Third were improvements to the airfield, as Wien Air (a ten-year-old regional carrier) and the Army both invested in upgrading the landing strip facilities. Military duties had taken one pilot in particular through Kotzebue on a frequent basis during the war as planes were ferried to the Soviets. Immediately after the war, that pilot took a job flying for Wien Air, based in Fairbanks. By 1946, this pilot – Chuck West – had set course to become an entrepreneur in Alaska tourism. Business opportunities were ripe: Anchorage, Alaska’s new colonial port city, had mushroomed from 3,000 to 30,000 people with military construction, and Fairbanks had grown from a pre-war population of 5,000 to 18,000. In June 1946, West flew a dozen passengers from Fairbanks on a triangle route to Nome and Kotzebue.⁵⁰ Nome was larger, a gold-rush town of 1,600 people with a very large portion of White residents. Kotzebue, on the other hand, had still only 400 people, most of whom were recorded as Native by the Census.⁵¹

The tours that Chuck West initiated have continued every summer since then. Changes in air technology had made remote villages accessible to American settler colonials in Alaska’s south-central rail-belt. Educators like myself, along with soldiers, recently transferred bureaucrats, urban entrepreneurs, and

47 Ernest Burch, Jr., “The Iñupiat and the Christianization of Arctic Alaska,” *Études/Inuit/Studies*, vol. 18, nos. 1-2 (1994), pp. 81-108.

48 Burch Jr., *Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations*; Burch Jr., “Iñupiat and the Christianization,” p. 93.

49 Smith, “Kotzebue: A Modern Alaskan Eskimo Community.”

50 West, *Mr. Alaska*; US Census, *Census of the Population: 1950* (Washington, DC, 1952).

51 Smith, “Kotzebue: A Modern Alaskan Eskimo Community.”

less adventuresome homesteaders could visit an “Eskimo village” for a weekend. Kotzebue made a secure destination, with a hotel that kept tourists a “comfortable” distance from the resident population. It was “above the Arctic Circle” (travel agencies made much of this small cartographic fact) and the people on display were Eskimos, those most closely associated with Alaska through films, adventure books, and magazines. As the Kotzebue tour gained popularity in the 1950s, images of its residents began to appear nationwide in travel magazines and *National Geographic*.⁵² But in the village, few residents played any role in tourism. Some elders were recruited to greet visitors and to perform Eskimo dances, other local residents to work around the hotel. But the ground operations were owned and operated by companies based in Fairbanks and Seattle, and the tour guides were often hired from outside the community. At the same time however, a generation of young Iñupiaq men began to re-organize themselves into a political movement, and by 1971, a number of Native people from Kotzebue had been instrumental in bringing about the *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act*.⁵³ This in turn established Alaska’s Native Regional Corporations, one of the most successful of which, NANA, is based in Kotzebue. Since 1971, the management of the ground tour has moved from the hands of outside interests located in Fairbanks or Seattle, to NANA ownership and Native employment within all aspects of the ground operation, including a forty-nine room hotel and a sizeable museum built in the 1970s in Kotzebue.

By this reading, there would seem to be little to recommend the conclusion that the Iñupiat people in Kotzebue were the subjects of colonialism. With no reservations, classic colonial strategies of compartmentalized space and widely separated populations had not been used in Alaska. There were no records of large-scale military violence in the area. Furthermore as Burch Jr. persuasively argues, the Iñupiat in northwest Alaska were not (or not entirely) victims in the conversion to White religious institutions. And while the tourism operations were owned and operated by urban residents to the south, this may be seen as no more colonial than chain retail stores in small towns across the United States. In short, this reading of Kotzebue’s history fails to uncover any of the usual markers of colonial practice. If the community was not marked by colonialism, then Kotzebue may not be well served by calling it a “postcolonial” place today.

However, a compelling argument can be made that the northwest arctic region was, from the beginning of US engagement, a space of *neocolonial*

52 Kotzebue has a three-page spread at the end of Elsie Grosvenor, “Alaska’s Warmer Side,” *National Geographic*, vol. 59, no. 6 (June 1956), pp. 737–75.

53 Robert Arnold, *Alaska Native Land Claims* (Anchorage, 1976); Alex Ervin, “Civic Capacity and Transculturation: The Rise and Role of the Alaska Federation of Natives” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1974).

practice. First, while neither military intervention nor large-scale violence played a direct role in Iñupiat conversion, the US gunship *Saginaw* had in fact leveled the Tlingit village of Kake in southeast Alaska in 1869.⁵⁴ No lives were lost in the incident, but I find it unlikely that Iñupiat people in Qikiq-tagruq did not hear about this incidence of US terrorism. Second, the expropriation of profits from one community, based on a display of its “traditional culture” to business corporations in metropolitan America is a classic example of neocolonialism, and this largely describes the relational structure of tourism in Kotzebue before 1988. Third, like Olund I would contend that by the 1880s, a geopolitical strategy of displacement and segregation had only been replaced by a geo-economic strategy of producing governable, individuated, and acquisitive subjects. While an Indian reform movement was struggling to dissolve reservations in the contiguous United States, spatial strategies marked Alaska without exception (or reservations) as within the jurisdiction of the United States, and the emerging discourse of assimilation, equality, and liberal governance in the latter part of the nineteenth-century enabled an earlier discourse of conquest and colonialism to be quietly submerged.⁵⁵

By this reading, the Quaker missionaries in Kotzebue were the advance guard for liberal governance, enrolling them at once in an assimilationist project as “American citizens” that later legitimated their dispossession from the land, containerizing it as “property” under American law. This re-territorialization of land as property is again a mark of neocolonial practice, through which colonialism’s territorial expansion was replaced by what would be considered the “economic expansion” of the American nation-state.⁵⁶ And lastly, the 1971 settlement – that capitalized northwest arctic Iñupiat people as shareholders of a Native corporation – can be understood as the most recent wave of neocolonial assimilation, incorporating tribal lands into the seemingly never-ending “economic growth” of America.⁵⁷ In this way, Kotzebue can be understood as thoroughly woven through neocolonial practices and connections.

If the argument is credible, it disturbs the suggestion that an archive is “postcolonial” because it was made and situated in a largely indigenous community in the twenty-first century. But to describe a situation as “postcoloniality” is distinct from using the word *postcolonialism* to name a political perspective or an intellectual project. Of the two registers of the term *postcolonial*, postcoloniality is the older sense of the term. It emerged in the 1970s in

54 Donald Mitchell, *Sold American: The Story of Alaska Natives and Their Land, 1867–1959* (Hanover, NH, 1997).

55 Olund, “From Savage Space to Governable Space.”

56 Smith, *American Empire*.

57 The *Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act* was also an early wave of neoliberal privatization, wherein “the entrepreneurial firm” would soon be used as the model upon which to organize ever more aspects of social, political, and economic life.

debates about Africa, South Asia, the Pacific Islands, and those parts of the world that had recently gone through the process of formal decolonization as they obtained political independence. Sidaway suggests that this was the most frequent use of the term *postcolonial* until the late 1980s, when it began to be used in another register to designate certain kinds of analysis, a particular cultural politics.⁵⁸ This history may provide a better understanding as to why the vocabulary of postcolonialism leaves an unusual degree of ambiguity when it is applied to northwest arctic Alaska. The Iñupiat do not have a history of direct military oppression or forced removal to reservations, and the application of terminology like “internal colonialism” or “postcoloniality” can seem a little off. The analytical tools of postcolonialism were not forged in order to be imported from one place to another without modification, but the distinctive context in Alaska makes its analysis even more challenging. This is part of the difference that difference makes: the abilities of a shared academic language to colonize a peculiar situation are stretched, so that the place reveals limits in postcolonialism’s vocabulary.

Postcolonialism and the Archive

If a notion of postcoloniality is not wholly applicable to the place in which a collection is located, then what about the production of an institutional archive? As an index of political perspectives or intellectual projects, can postcolonialism inform the production of an archive? This is a rhetorical question, but it opens a gap where I can register some doubts, qualifications, and misgivings. My thoughts come in three stages. First I review postcolonial studies that have examined state archives and institutional collections as technologies of rule and cultural artifacts of “fact” production. Second I sketch three principles at play in the making of archives: the everydayness of the material, notions of order and place, and the construction of a “public” that archives are designed to serve. These principles were key to the production of “the people” and the constitution of the modern liberal state with the creation of modern archives. Third, I make a distinction between marginalized voices and the subaltern, in order to explore limits within an archive’s power to “give voice to the voiceless.” Drawing from Spivak, I question the possibility of incorporating the subaltern into institutional records – of “extending the boundaries” of this material – without some degree of appropriation or subjection.

A number of scholars have drawn connections between archival collection and colonialism,⁵⁹ but Stoler has been the most explicit. While studies of colo-

58 Sidaway, “Postcolonial Geographies.”

59 For example, Evelyn Wareham, “From Explorers to Evangelists: Archivists, Recordkeeping, and Remembering in the Pacific Islands,” *Archival Science*, vol. 2, nos. 3–4 (September 2002), pp. 187–207.

nialism have long used archives as sites for mining information and knowledge retrieval about the past, she has highlighted recent work where institutional archives and record collections are themselves considered as peculiar cultural artifacts and instruments of knowledge production. For some scholars, this turn “signals a new grappling with history, what accounts get authorized, what procedures were required, and what about the past it is possible to know.”⁶⁰ A common aspect is the examination of marginalization, asking whose voices were never recorded or were gradually removed from the written record. Where Trouillot has written about the former process, Dirks has a paradigmatic account of the latter process.⁶¹ Stoler takes this further. Her aim is not simply to read the process of colonial archivization “against the grain” for its silences, marginalizations, and resistances. She suggests that ethnographers of the archive look “along the archival grain” for its regularities, its conventions of categorization, and its logics of accumulation. Her imperative is to look for those forces, at once productive and oppressive, that made institutional archives “the supreme technology of the late nineteenth-century imperial state.”⁶²

Three principles help explain the effectiveness that Stoler locates in institutional archives: ordinariness, publicity, and order. The principle of ordinariness reflects what archives are now made to do. They are built on assumptions that “the true field of explanation lies with the realm of the mundane, with everyday life.” As Osborne suggests, archival collections “produce a certain kind of information: the ongoing mundane facts” in overwhelming detail.⁶³ This, in turn, has enabled a “reversal in the political axis of individuation,” from “ascending individualization” where only the most powerful in society are marked and remembered as individuals, to a process of “descending individualization” in which the institutional archive marks the criminal or patient with a set of observations, measures, and coded behaviours.⁶⁴ They did so largely on the basis of inscription technologies: writing, diagrams, photography. Nor is it just any mundane material that gets constituted as an everyday

60 Ann Laura Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” in Hamilton et al., *Refiguring the Archive*, p. 89. Several other essays in the same volume concern the connections between state power and archival practices.

61 Nicholas Dirks, “Colonial Histories and Native Informants: Biography of an Archive,” in Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer, eds., *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Philadelphia, 1993), pp. 279–313. See also Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston, 1995), a book which examines accounts of the slave revolt and revolution in nineteenth-century Haiti.

62 Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” p. 83.

63 Thomas Osborne, “The Ordinariness of the Archive,” *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1999), pp. 59–60.

64 See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York, 1979), especially pp. 192–93.

fact. The institutional archive came to record those mundane facts that authorized others as “worthy” scribes and experts, excluding most of that authored by the subjects themselves: the student, the employee, etc. The mundane material in institutional archives liberalized the population of modern states by marking them as individuals – e.g., a great student; an exceptionally bad employee – through culturally specific technologies of inscription.

The construction of liberal subjects was also predicated on the principle of publicity. Osborne notes that “the existence of an archive always presumes the existence of a public.”⁶⁵ Joyce carries this suggestion further. In his reading, archives are a political technology that constructs a “public,” a community of shared users. His own examples are the public or “free” libraries created in nineteenth-century France and Great Britain that were instrumental in creating widely shared notions of the nation or *people* among their readers. “Knowing the people also involved knowing about the ‘condition’ of the people ... knowing its habits and its mores,”⁶⁶ and this was taken as the aim of modern democratic archives: to provide mundane facts about everybody to everybody, so that people could teach themselves about “the people” – that “public” to whom readers belonged.

A third principle behind the effectiveness of institutional archives is order. Mitchell lays out a complex argument about order and colonial practice. Colonialism was an imposition of a pre-conceived order, creating the containerized geography of space noted by Fanon,⁶⁷ but the significance of Mitchell’s argument lies in his use of a distinction between two meanings of the word, *order*: a verb meaning “to command,” and a noun meaning “a pattern or structure.” He argues that colonization actively ordered the world in two: a world of order (the spaces of the West) and a world of disorder (the spaces of the rest). What distinguished colonialism was a refusal to accommodate constructed differences, those that occurred when this very division was accepted as always already given. After ordering the world into two parts, colonials forgot their constituting role (“to order”), and understood their reality as one represented by a plan (“an order”): a pattern, a logic, a “mere” representation of reality that was, somehow, also separate from reality. When colonials understood “order” in its taxonomic rather than imperative register, colonial practice could effectively refuse its own duplicity in the creation of a world split in two: an ordered West, and the “disordered” rest. For Mitchell, nineteenth-century colonialism was blind to the ramifications of its own sense of order.

In institutional (institutionalizing) archives, the order inscribed upon the material enabled the first two principles, ordinariness and the public, to be

65 Osborne, “The Ordinariness of the Archive,” p. 54.

66 Patrick Joyce, “The Politics of the Liberal Archive,” *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1999), p. 40.

67 Mitchell, *Colonizing Egypt*; Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*.

wedded together. The everyday-ness and detail of the material in an institutional archive was partly a function of volume: many boxes of material whose significance was made to lie in the mundane obscurity of each item in a box. This volume then required some kind of order (by provenance, for example) so that the archive's users – be it a community of professional experts or a constituent public – were not lost in disordered boxes of daily details that would then seem to be about nothing at all. As Brothman suggests, this “order means that things are in their proper place.” Archivists created an “order of values” by inventing appraisal and destruction strategies, discarding that deemed to be rubbish and therefore “out of place” in the archive. On the other side, archivists created value “by putting things in their proper place [and] making place(s) for them.”⁶⁸ But the danger of this procedure was like that of colonialism: that we create containerized spaces and categories of the subject.

What are the implications of this conclusion for giving voice in the archives to those who are voiceless? This is a topic about which Spivak has spoken and written at considerable length.⁶⁹ Her argument is complicated and difficult (appropriately enough, given the issues at stake) and I do immense violence to her work in abbreviating it. Nonetheless, initial dialogue about this question might start with a distinction between the marginalized subject and subaltern. The first has a referent (a person or group) who, in turn, bears an identity. From the foregoing paragraphs, I hope it is clear that scholars have begun to explore the extent to which such identity-markers are an effect. The marginalized subject is not only subject to processes of exclusion (or marginalization) from networks, resources, conversations and to activations of their own. He or she is also subject to labels, groupings, namings – categorizations that were solidified in records, over space, and on the body as a basis and a means of social exclusion. Institutional archives played a potent part in the construction and cementation of clearly defined (though contested) subject categories – e.g., “the poor,” “women,” “natives” – and under oppressive state regimes, their instruments and agents were hardly innocent in marginalizing such people. For social historians like E.P. Thompson and the Subaltern Studies group in which Spivak was involved, the aim of progressive historical narrative was to re-inscribe the agency of such marginalized subjects – to retrieve the authorial voice of such subjects.

68 Brien Brothman, “Orders of Value: Probing Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice,” *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78–100. The quoted material is from page 80. Brothman's analysis of place, value, and rubbish reminded me very much of Tim Cresswell's work in geography, especially *In Place/Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (Minneapolis, 1996).

69 Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and *The Post-Colonial Critic*. See also Beverly Best, “Postcolonialism and the Deconstructive Scenario: Representing Gayatri Spivak,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 17, no. 4 (August 1999), pp. 475–94.

Spivak worries that this gesture obscures the contradiction, complexity, and heterogeneity of being human. In doing so, the gesture replays an essentialist fiction of the marginal subject so as to create a recognizable identity in writing, while the people identified in this way – like Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, a young woman who (Spivak tells us) committed suicide in 1926 in North Calcutta – may be “intermittently conscious of the defining processes of others that might absorb them.”⁷⁰ Cutting Spivak’s argument, the subaltern may be considered a heuristic device, a signifier that has no *categorically* identifiable referent. The representation of a “subaltern” subject is accordingly a disfigurement, an effacement that Spivak takes pains to elucidate in her paradoxical account of Sati, the self-immolation of widows. By this argument, the “subaltern cannot speak” because, in order to communicate in familiar terms, a voice must be constructed wherein a subject represents and re-presents a person by subjugating the subaltern, the person who is “other” than any readily available identity or subject category. In Spivak’s writing, the subaltern invokes one who has been given voice and rendered a self-speaking subject through some measure of epistemic violence. Subaltern subjects are therefore “almost in an allegorical predicament.” For Spivak, the subaltern problematic “is not so much about silencing as such, but about the narrative containment by hegemonic discursive formations of disruptive utterances.”⁷¹

As one of Spivak’s interpreters, Barnett threads the issue of effacement through a useful discussion of silence. He notes that speech and “voice” are normally privileged as signifiers of self-expression and empowerment, and silence is often represented as passivity, as a direct effect of oppression and exclusion. However, Barnett argues that:

“silence,” as an act of withholding, might be a mark of agency ... In a twist which upsets much contemporary theoretical wisdom, Spivak raises the possibility that to presume to represent silence as if it were potential “speech” [that was never offered] might, in principle, be to misrepresent what is already a mark of agency.

Here the subaltern figure becomes one who may be trying *not* to be represented among the subject categories from which they have to choose. Accordingly, he suggests that:

[g]estures of recuperating native “voices,” which obscure the paradox that any such voice is found only in texts written from within specific institutions, harbour a “profes-

70 Edwin Ardener, *The Voice of Prophecy and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1989), p. 223. For Spivak’s readings of Buavaneswari’s suicide, see “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” pp. 307-308.

71 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives,” *History and Theory*, vol. 24, no. 3 (1985), p. 267; and Clive Barnett, “‘Sing Along with the Common People’: Politics, Postcolonialism, and Other Figures,” *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, vol. 15, no. 2 (April 1997), p. 147.

sional conceit” whereby the strategy of recovery actually serves not only “to turn the silence of the subaltern into speech, but to make their words address our own concerns ...”⁷²

Again, it may be best to consider Spivak’s “subaltern” as a heuristic device, not as a group or category of people. The device does not oppose the dangers of appropriating “others” with calls to liberate the subaltern from the archive, nor with suggestions to leave well enough alone. Still less does Spivak imagine the subaltern as some pristine Other, unaffected by hegemonic and colonial discourse. Indeed, the term speaks for her insistence on the “totalizing embrace of colonial discourse.”⁷³ But like Jacobs, I “do not want to suggest a grim entrapment in colonial formations, past and present, [only to] point to the anxious tenacity of colonialist tendencies.”⁷⁴ The device is basically a warning signal that the narrative containments within an oral history project are potentially dangerous: “One is left with the useful yet semi-mournful position of the unavoidable usefulness of something that is dangerous.”⁷⁵ This utility and its dangers generate Spivak’s commitment “not to efface the institutional locations out of which all representations emerge.”⁷⁶ Similarly, as part of a postcolonial project (i.e., one undertaken in the continuing aftermath of colonialism), those in an institution producing such an archive might try to render the economies, mechanisms, and contexts of its representations more visible, and to better acknowledge our own “limits of historical understanding” as professional interpreters.⁷⁷

It would be difficult to argue that appropriations of archival practice in northwest Alaska carry no residue of colonialism. The subject for the oral history archive – the varied experience of commercialized cultural tourism in a host community – is premised upon localization, on containing people as part of a bounded community. It is also premised on a linear narrative of progress that delineates an origin and a sequence of historical steps that led to greater self-determination in Kotzebue. These clarify the topic and the likely relevance of the collection’s material – “tourism in Kotzebue” – yet it also constructs the subject, the basic terms through which (against which, around which) users will likely relate to the material and to one another through the

72 Barnett, “Sing Along with the Common People,” pp. 148 and 146. The quotation is from Rosalind O’Hanlon, “Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia,” *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 22, no. 1 (1988), p. 211.

73 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Critical Fanonism,” *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 3 (Spring 1991), p. 466.

74 Jane M. Jacobs, *Edge of Empire: Postcolonialism and the City* (London, 1996), p. 14.

75 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (London, 1993), p. 5.

76 Barnett, “Sing Along with the Common People,” p. 149.

77 Gyan Prakash, “Can the ‘Subaltern’ Ride? A Reply to O’Hanlon and Washbrook,” *Comparative Studies of Society and History*, vol. 34, no. 1 (1992), p. 175.

material. Indeed, the categories through which the contributors are organized – Native elders, current residents, past tourism functionaries – can reproduce the effects of colonialism no less than these categories are the ongoing effects of neocolonialism’s earlier encounters. Another residue may be the public for whom the archive will be readily available: patrons of the free library at the university campus building in Kotzebue; members of the tribal government. Such “publics” encapsulate problems of subject formation, as it obscures heterogeneous forms of community and connection that are co-equal and integrally constitutive.

Yet another residue lies with the institutional archives, those instruments that served for the production of knowledge and power in colonialism’s cultures, as Stoler suggests. Elsie Mather, a Yupik oral historian, has coined a phrase that may be apropos for such material: “necessary monsters.”⁷⁸ She was describing the use of books and libraries in southwest Alaska and the distance these tools create between people and their sources of information, but perhaps an institutional archive is also a necessary monster. It is necessary because an opportunity to share stories, to catalyze discussion, and to change the terms of representation (even if ever so slightly) seems to be at hand; and it is a monster because it is nonetheless part of a bureaucratic machine for fact production, subject formation, and state construction. Lastly, lest oral history itself is taken as an affirmation of the voice and agency of many marginalized subjects or individuals, they also bear the trace of that affirmation as one granted by professional authority, as Spivak suggests. There is, overall, an anxious tenacity of colonialism’s tendencies in many aspects of the project. So in postcolonialism’s register as a political perspective and intellectual formation that strives for de-centring, the making of an institutional archive about Kotzebue tourism seems to be troubled. It may look little like “the post-colonial” at all.

Toward a Postcolonial Archive?

I have argued that postcoloniality is off the mark in describing conditions in Kotzebue. I also suggested that the institutional practices of building an oral history archive in northwest arctic Alaska re-inscribes many practices and aspects of colonialism. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that the archival project on Kotzebue tourism carries few elements of postcolonialism. Gregory writes that, as an intellectual approach, postcolonialism attempts “to grasp the fractured and complicated histories through which colonialism passes from the past into the present” and how metropolitan and colonial communities are “drawn together in webs affinity, influence, and dependence.” With its focus

78 Mather, “With a Vision Beyond Our Immediate Needs,” p. 20.

on arctic tourism, the oral history project in Kotzebue may help to draw such distant communities, variously connected through time, into one analytic field. Gregory also notes that postcolonial work is, in principle, “sensitive to the political implications of its construction.”⁷⁹ Again with the topic of cultural tourism, the project offers an opportunity to explore methodological issues about the practices of representation, in institutional archives as well as in tourism. Paired moments of representation, past and present, further encourage a commitment again “not to efface the institutional locations out of which [these] representations emerge.”⁸⁰ Indeed, this paper was one such attempt to contextualize the production of the collection, to bring the past and present into relationship, one that can be augmented and changed in the future. Furthermore, the continual process of making the position of the archivists visible in the production of archival material may facilitate future efforts to de-centre the communicative resources that power has colonized, contributing to an ongoing formulation of “postcolonial archives” in new and unforeseen ways. But then, I contend that they should only be identified as “postcolonial archives” with trepidation and with continued attention to the politics of location, because as Loomba suggests, *postcolonial* “is a word that is useful only if we use it with caution and qualifications.”⁸¹

79 Derek Gregory, “Post-colonialism,” in Ron Johnston, Derek Gregory, Geraldine Pratt, and Michael Watts, eds., *The Dictionary of Human Geography*, 4th ed. (London, 2000), pp. 612–15.

80 Barnett, “Sing Along with the Common People,” p. 149.

81 Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (London, 1998), p. 18.