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Decolonization and In_Visibilities in Colonial Archives: The FCO 141 Series and the (Redemptive?) Power of Placement

Riley Linebaugh

linebaugh@ieg-mainz.de

Riley Linebaugh is a postdoc at the Leibniz Institute for European History in Mainz. Her current work examines how processes of African decolonization shaped European universities, with a focus on student mobilities. She recently completed her PhD, "Curating the Colonial Past: The 'Migrated Archives' and the Struggle for Kenya's History," at Justus Liebig University Giessen. She holds an MA in Archives and Records Management from University College London and is generally interested in the power and politics of archives.

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_Abstract

Taking up the theme of placement within the context of in_visibilities, this _*Perspective* shares a series of reflections on the location and availability of colonial archives. It makes specific reference to the FCO 141 series at the National Archives at Kew (England), a series of files released as the result of a 2011 reparations case against the British government for the authorized and systemic use of torture during a war (1952–1960) leading to Kenya's constitutional independence. The series is comprised of files removed from across the world as Britain's empire fell, and is located in England despite a fifty-year history of restitution demands. By looking at the ambivalent relationship between archival location and the socio-political placement of the colonial past in England and Kenya, this _Perspective considers how archival custody (re)constructs in_visibilities of the colonial past in the present.

April 2018. The National Archive's Reading Room, Kew, England (TNA). Sitting in a Bentham-perfect panopticon, where visibility avails surveillance, I silently leaf through 'FCO 141' (Foreign and Commonwealth Office). Released to *THE* National Archives in 2012, this is a stolen series. Pinched by British colonial officers and their accomplices starting in the early 1960s, FCO 141 is comprised of records which "may embarrass Her Majesty's Government" and were thus semi-covertly removed from over thirty-seven "former dependencies" as anticolonial struggle brought about constitutional independence from Britain's empire.[1] The UK government ordered these records, in the thousands, to be locked away in steel cages in cooperation with the Public Record Office (TNA's predecessor) outside the regular requirements of access laid out by the UK Public Records Act. To delay moral judgement of empire, these documents formed an archival limbo, wherein they were neither destroyed nor made available.

"It is assumed that, in order to claim specific needs, rights, and interests, subjects (or collectives) suffering from the experience of discrimination and marginalization need to 'become visible.'"[2]

I am at TNA to look at files that describe the processes of record removal in the land now known as Kenya.[3] Survivors of a brutal war, 1952–1960, took the UK government to court in a lawsuit against the use of torture in wartime.[4] Their efforts resulted in the release of FCO 141 starting in 2011, ending the fifty-year period of illegal archival concealment. Access to the removed documents corroborated individual testimonies of torture, which clarified the British design of structural violence in Kenya. FCO 141 *made visible* not only the plaintiff's suffering but the official participation of the UK Colonial Office in creating the conditions for that suffering. In other words, plaintiffs made not only themselves visible to the court and reporting media through sharing their experience of abuse, corroborated by administrative documentation held by FCO 141, but in doing so also the actions of those who had carried out and condoned it. While those who had survived, participated in, and bore witness to the brutality of Britain's war in Kenya were well aware of their own experiences, FCO 141 lent credibility to the assertion that this brutality was neither incidental nor *ad-hoc*, but the result of systematic authorization from the metropolitan government down to the colonial Governor's office. FCO 141 transformed testimony of individual experience into evidence of structural violence and in doing so demonstrated the lengths to which the British government used archival concealment to in_visibilize the latter.

In this case, the court of law is a particular site in which dynamics of in_visibility, as defined by the editors of this issue, can (re)produce impunity, acknowledgement, (re)victimization, reckoning. Because the "colonial powers had kept such meticulous records of what was happening in Kenya," the UK government could not weasel its way out of the case.[5] In 2013, the UK government agreed to pay £19.9 billion in compensation to over 5,000 claimants. The UK Foreign Secretary publicly acknowledged and expressed "regret" that "abuse took place."[6] And, without discussion on the matter, the previously concealed archives were ordered for release to *THE* National Archives at Kew.

Among the files I've ordered for the day is FCO 141/6335, "Kenya: Complaints by Detainees (other than land)," 1959–1961. It is filled with the petitions of detained people who decry the "beating, hunger and all troubles of every kind" they faced in detention camps.[7] The written appeals are supported by signatures and fingerprints, forming a protest chorus that is swallowed up by the silence of the reading room. It is the historian's work to discern when and how to interrupt these silences.

I am not the first to be moved by the contrast of history's horrors and TNA's sterility.[8] But there is something especially putrid about FCO 141. The UK government ordered a senior "independent reviewer" to monitor their release to TNA, which was "subject to the usual review to meet the legal exemptions."[9] Generally, this means that certain (British, high-standing, and usually with a privileged security clearance) individuals' names have been redacted from documents in accordance with data protection legislation. Here, invisibility is a privilege granting protection. But to whom and from what? While the names of British officials are periodically concealed by rectangular black strips where they would otherwise appear on documents within FCO 141, no such measures are taken for the individual detained people whose names and experiences in the British camps in Kenya are visible, and thus vulnerable, within the archival record.[10]

"No matter how big a stranger's eyes, they cannot see."[11]

Historian Saidiya Hartman attributes this idiom to Stella, a housekeeper at the Marcus Garvey Guest House in Accra. Hartman ascribes the phrase to the "proverbial blindness of Westerners" and their gaze towards Africa.[12] To my untrained eye, the petition signatories remain anonymous though they are named. I am blind to the ethno-cultural histories inscribed in their family names, to the political tumult in which they are situated in post-colonial memory contexts, to their experiences and legacies of violence and defiance.[13] At TNA, these documents are 10,000 kilometers away from their place of origin. They are thus more readily visible to "strangers," blind though they may be, than to their kin.

While the pandemic has forged virtual spaces in which some aspects of national borders partially collapse, I am reminded that this is superficial. Following a digital presentation, a colleague based in Kenya reminds me that she will likely never see FCO 141, begging the questions: What kind of visibility forms in this archive? Who is visible to whom? To what end? And yet, there is also the risk of over-burdening FCO 141 with expectations that the series, if reconstructed in the right way, might illuminate the colonial past in a uniquely valuable measure.[14] Meanwhile, as scholar Rose Miyonga insists, other in_visibilities and silences cast their long historical shadows on the war that preceded Kenyan independence through the "family members who never came home, land that was lost, unmarked graves, and gaps in family trees."[15]

Moreover, there are those in Kenya (and elsewhere) who opt out of "the archive," the official houses of posterity and preservation that are shaped by institutional power and hegemonic biases, in favor of autonomous history-making. There are those who instead make themselves visible "within communities, not cloistered behind the guarded gates of national museums" or archives.[16] For example, scholar and archivist Edwina Dei Ashie-Nikoi speaks of dance as an important cultural record across Africa and its diaspora, appearing in selective spaces for chosen audiences. Ephemeral, repeatable, and flexible, Ashie-Nikoi shows how such cultural praxis "counters dissonance, erasures and silence."[17] Archival in_visibility is thus not only the result of omission or withholding but of refusal. And yet.

"To be sure, only a redeemed mankind receives the fullness of its past—which is to say, only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments."[18]
Is the past made visible through redemption, as philosopher Walter Benjamin proffers? What constitutes a redeemed mankind? From this perspective, FCO 141 is partly a ledger from which to examine the faults, implications, wrongdoings, and hazards of the colonial past. The ongoing calls to reckon with the past in pursuit of 'decolonization' reverberate around the world.[19] Their echoes follow familiar asymmetries. Neoliberal Euro-American paradigms shape the ways in which diversity, equity, and inclusion projects are framed as decolonial and yet omit critical power analysis.[20]

If there is redemption for the past then it is inextricably linked to the varied and dynamic conditions of the present and the potentialities for the future. TNA has expressed no public interest in engaging with the restitution demands by Kenya or other lands and peoples claiming archival returns.[21] TNA is a UK government body and thus an instrument of a state with an unambivalent reverence for its history of empire.[22] Moreover, English archival policy, within government, has advanced the view that England is better able to provide the resources and conditions needed for long-term preservation and therefore is justified in ongoing archival custody of appropriated and seized objects and records.[23] In doing so, a powerful section of the English archival profession has made the structures of White privilege and supremacy appear obvious and consequently tightly bound together colonial archival custody with imperial authority.

However, there are others pulling towards redemption. Patrick Gathara, a Nairobi-based cartoonist and political analyst argues that the "path to colonial reckoning is through archives," and that the return of FCO 141 and other colonial archives "would make Africans curators of their own history."[24] The word curator, more often associated with museums and public exhibitions, maintains focus on the selection processes that afford and foreclose visibilities. Regarding FCO 141, the questions of what is available to whom and how, are currently addressed at the discretion of TNA. At present, TNA and the government bodies it represents are the curators of the colonial past as constructed by a significant portion of administrative sources. Under its custody, FCO 141 is visible to those granted archival access (further mediated by racist border regimes, costly travel, and the privilege of time).

For fifty years, archivists and activists have organized across Africa and Asia to advocate the return of archival plunder.[25] In parallel, scholars and writers have resisted European colonialism as the definitive framework through which to identify and describe the past. Writer Yvonne Adhiabmo Owuor explains that if the "fairly recent encounter of Africa with the Occident […] dominates so much of our historical conversations it is because it was an existential wound-creating encounter with structures, systems, ways of thought that penetrates our lives to this moment. It is, however, not the single point upon which our entire African lives pivot."[26] What redemption lies between this domination and a past that is "citable in all its moments"? In this context, the question of FCO 141's placement takes on two meanings: 1. Where should it be physically located; and 2. What place, or significance, should it take in the full view of the past?

In posing these questions, I do not wish to suggest that fixed, single, or normative solutions exist or should be pursued.[27] Nor do I wish to center my own position in their consideration. However, not addressing them, after years of engagement with their historical construction and political functions, would implicate me in TNA's silence, a silence which has been actively constructed over decades. The ambivalence I would like to point to also helps to phrase one of the complexities of in_visibilities, namely that, if "colonialism" has been overbearing as a lens through which to view the African past, at the expense of examining "the creativity and agency of swaths of humanity" before and beyond imperial encounters, Europe's colonial past remains underacknowledged, if not in_visible.[28] The physical return of colonial archives could facilitate an enlarged focus on coloniality within England by taking seriously the demands for restoration and dealing with the history of archival extraction. Meanwhile, in Kenya, the past is oft used as a basis for political and cultural claims. The return of

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these records would not settle ongoing disputes regarding the terms and practices of liberation, distribution, and governance, but would at least dislodge TNA as their archival mediator.

"Decolonising ethics involve a consistent de-centering of the self as well as encountering Whiteness in structures, arrangements and relationships, where personal desire, intentions and underlying assumptions should be brought under sustained scrutiny. This does not equate to using reflexivity as a way of legitimising what one is involved in and how one thinks about it. Decolonising work is a form of agitation; it is dangerous and powerful. If you are not putting your intentions under scrutiny, on your own and by those deemed Other, then you are not doing the work."[29]

May 2022. *THE* National Archive's Reading Room. The name is a misnomer. A land stillborn between imperial ambitions and colonial afterlives, the repository cannot name the nation to which it refers (UK? Britain? England?). Rather, this awkward claim is rendered invisible through *the* definite article. TNA was built in the mid-1970s, shortly after British colonial governments stole away documents upon empire's fall. A curious phrase, isn't it? 'The fall of empire.' Epistemologically, it follows Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (published between 1776–1789), which argued that uncontrolled decadence brought about its demise. Published upon the "loss" of the thirteen American colonies, Gibbon offered up the past as a way to avoid the Roman Empire's mistakes, to steer Britannia's bow in the direction of imperial progress.[30] And while the phrase lingers, both historiographically and colloquially, rarely does it direct attention to empire's "derelict shards,"[31] which have densely accumulated in England and elsewhere across Europe and Anglo-America: such as the formation of FCO 141 and other deposits of imperial loot. These formations and their locations, which are co-constitutive of "neo-Eurocentrism," are crafted to look so obvious that they go unnamed (in_visible).[32] This is the stealth of Whiteness and its deadly silences. Alternatively, the protest chorus shouts, and I join: REJESHEENI KENYA KUMBU KUMBU ZA MAKAVAZI.[33] RETURN FCO 141.

_Endnotes

1 See Riley Linebaugh, "Colonial Fragility: British Embarrassment and the So-called 'Migrated Ar-

chives',” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* (2022). Doi: <10.1080/03086534.2022.2057740>.

2 Jana Tiborra and Katharina Wolf, “Call for Abstracts (Issue 13: Summer 2022): In_Visibilities,” *On_Culture: The Open Journal for the Study of Culture*, accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.on-culture.org/submission/call-for-abstracts-archive/call-for-abstracts-issue-13-summer-2022/>.

3 With funding from the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture in Giessen, I spent three weeks in March–April 2018 in London to work at TNA at the start of my PhD (2017–2022). I followed this up with a two-month period of further research in 2019 funded by the German Historical Institute, London. Between research stays, the consequences of Brexit alleviated the process of US-American passport holders entering the country. Whereas I previously had to provide a significant amount of documentation, from 2019 I could join the faster, digitalized line. Optically, this change exacerbated the racialization of a two-tier entry system. These are but a few of the many privileges that helped me to access FCO 141.

4 See David M. Anderson, “Mau Mau in the High Court and the ‘Lost' British Empire Archives: Colonial Conspiracy or Bureaucratic Bungle?,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 39, no. 5 (2011): 699–716.

5 Alex Wessely, “The Mau Mau Case—Five Years On,” *Leigh Day* (blog), October 6, 2017, <https://www.leighday.co.uk/latest-updates/blog/2017-blogs/the-mau-mau-case-five-years-on/>.

6 Wessely, “The Mau Mau Case.”

7 The National Archives (Kew), “Kenya: Complaints by Detainees (Other than Land),” FCO 141/6335, File Note, AA.57/21 A (38), Special Commissioner, December 6, 1960.

8 See Hazel V. Carby, “The National Archives,” *InVisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture* 31 (2020), <https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/the-national-archives/>.

9 Anthony Badger, “Historians, a Legacy of Suspicion and the ‘Migrated Archives',” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23, no. 4–5 (2012): 799–807, here: 801.

10 This is despite the legal framework established through the UK's data protection legislation, which affords rights for ‘data subjects,' namely the right to be informed about the collection and use of their personal data, the right to access, and the right to erasure. See “Data Protection: Rights for Data Subjects,” Gov.UK, January 21, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/data-protection-rights-for-data-subjects/data-protection-rights-for-data-subjects>.

11 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: FSG Books, 2007), 19.

12 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 19.

13 Following political independence, the Kenyan administration led by Jomo Kenyatta actively suppressed the ongoing political work of ‘Mau Mau,' the name attributed to populations demanding a radical redistribution of land and wealth against the harms of colonial dispossession. This resulted in a Mau Mau ban as well as an ambivalent memory culture regarding the placement of Mau Mau in national historiography, politics, and memory. See E. S. Atieno Odhiambo and John Lonsdale, eds., *Mau Mau & Nationhood* (Suffolk: James Currey, 2003).

14 Here I would like to draw attention to the last decades of scholarship that has debated in which direction to examine the archival ‘grain' in order to avoid re-asserting the primacy and authority of colonial documentation in reconstructing the past. See Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010) and Nathan Sowry, “Silence, Accessibility, and Reading Against the Grain: Examining

Voices of the Marginalized in the India Office Records," *InterActions* 8, no. 2 (2012). Doi: <10.5070/D482011848>. Furthermore, upon the release of FCO 141 from 2011 onwards, historians resisted the idea that the previously concealed documents revealed new information about the brutality of colonial violence, coercion, and detention but that this knowledge was already deeply known and recalled in the sites of such violence. See Philip Murphy, "It Makes a Good Story—But the Cover-up of Britain's Savage Treatment of the Mau Mau Was Exaggerated," *The Conversation,* October 17, 2016, <https://theconversation.com/it-makes-a-good-story-but-the-cover-up-of-britains-savage-treatment-of-the-mau-mau-was-exaggerated-65583>.

15 Rose Miyonga, "Imagining Kenyan Futures through Kenyan Pasts," *The Elephant,* December 3, 2021, <https://www.theelephant.info/ideas/2021/12/03/imagining-kenyan-futures-through-kenyan-pasts/>.

16 Miyonga, "Imagining Kenyan Futures through Kenyan Pasts." There are many such projects in Kenya, such as African Digital Heritage, founded by Nairobi-based digital heritage specialist Chao Tayiana Maina; Book Bunk, founded in 2017 by Wanjiru Koinange and Angela Wachuka, seeks to restore public libraries in Nairobi; and the 'until everyone is free' podcast, founded by Stoneface Bombaa and April Zhu in 2021, which is a public history project that focuses on excavating forgotten anticolonial histories.

17 Edwina Dei Ashie-Nikoi, "Countering Dissonance, Erasures and Silences: The Alternative Archives of Africa and its Diaspora," Virtual Presentation in the Oberseminar for Modern and Recent History at Justus Liebig University, Giessen, Virtual, February 9, 2022.

18 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), 254.

19 See Priyamvada Gopal, "On Decolonisation and the University," *Textual Practice* 35, no. 6 (2021): 873–899.

20 For example, TNA has a workforce development strategy which attempts to resolve issues of diversity within the profession through hiring practices without looking at its participation in the (re)structuring of White supremacy within archival praxis. See Karen S. M. Macfarlane, "How Do UK Archivists Perceive 'White Supremacy' in the UK Archives Sector?," *Archives and Records* 42, no. 3 (2021): 266–283.

21 See Riley Linebaugh and James Lowry, "The Archival Colour Line: Race, Records and Post-colonial Custody," *Archives and Records* 42, no. 3 (2021): 284–303.

22 While England has been and remains a site of active anti-imperial discourse and insurrection, its ruling government and the mode of historical thought it perpetuates explicitly maintain empire as a positive point in history. See Abelardo Rodriguez, "Imperial Nostalgia and Bitter Reality: The United Kingdom, the United States and Brexit, Implications for Regional Integration," *Journal of Strategic Security* 13, no. 2 (2020): 19–47.

23 As public discourse surrounding the restitution of cultural objects from Europe to Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Australasia grew in the 1970s, Euro-heritage institutions developed a preservation-based defense of retention. By arguing that England/European-based institutions were better equipped to offer optimal preservation conditions for the long-term storage and care for objects and records, the supremacy of European custodianship became normative. There have, however, been many substantial critiques of this. See Pauno Soirila, "Indeterminacy in the cultural property restitution debate," *Journal of Cultural Policy* 28, no. 1 (2022): 1–16.

24 Patrick Gathara, "The Path to Colonial Reckoning Is through Archives, Not Museums," *Al-Jazeera,* March 14, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/3/14/the-path-to-colonial-reckoning-is-through-archives-not-museums>.

25 See Riley Linebaugh, "'Joint Heritage': Provincializing an Archival Ideal," in *Disputed Archival Heritage*, ed. James Lowry (Oxford: Routledge, forthcoming).

26 Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor, "Derelict Shards & the Roaming of Colonial Phantoms," *The Elephant,* November 6, 2020, <https://www.theelephant.info/long-reads/2020/11/06/derelict-shards-the-roaming-of-colonial-phantoms/>. To this end, archivist and scholar Francis Garaba has recently argued that rather than pursue the return of colonial-era records, which already "overload" Africa-based archives, these institutions should prioritize the preservation of documents that "reflect the history of Africans as told by Africans." Francis Garaba, "Migrated Archives," *Journal of the South African Society of Archivists* 54 (2021): 1–11, here: 8.

27 In fact, this text has taken advantage of the opportunities afforded by the "*_Perspectives*" format of *On_Culture* in that such contributions can be shorter and more creative. I hope for this contribution to be read as mixed personal and scholarly reflections contributing to the ever-urgent debates on decolonization within and between Europe and the world.

28 Nanjala Nyabola uses this phrase in her appeal to journalists to better cover COVID-19 across the African continent through their reporting, lest such swaths "be lost to history." Nanjala Nyabola, "Africa Is Not Waiting to Be Saved from the Coronavirus," *The Nation,* May 11, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/world/coronavirus-colonialism-africa/>.

29 Sista Resista, "Is Decolonizing the New Black?" *sisters of resistance,* July 12, 2018, <https://sistersofresistance.wordpress.com/2018/07/12/is-decolonizing-the-new-black/>.

30 For further discussion of how certain modes of historical thought shaped the minds and missions of British colonists, see Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020).

31 Owuor, "Derelict Shards."

32 Scholars Guy Burak, E. Natalie Rothman, and Heather Ferguson use the term 'Neo-Eurocentrism' in order to critique "an emergent disciplinary consensus about the particularity of European archival formations," that tends to embrace "a civilizational-culturalist mode of analysis" and treats 'European' archives "as clearly demarcated phenomena" with 'non-European' archives as a clear counterpoint. Instead, the case of FCO 141 shows an archive co-formed by British extraction and concealment and international advocacy demanding anti-colonial reparations. Guy Burak, E. Natalie Rothman and Heather Ferguson, "Toward Early Modern Archivality: The Perils of History in the Age of Neo-Eurocentrism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64, no. 3 (2022): 1–35. Doi: <10.1017/S0010417522000196>.

33 This slogan appears on a poster held by Juliet Erima in the digital exhibition *Lost Unities: An Exhibition for Archival Repatriation* (curated by Forget Chaterera-Zambuko and James Lowry, hosted by the Museum of British Colonialism). Written in Kiswahili, it translates in English to "Return back Kenya's Archival Memories," accessed May 23, 2022, <https://www.museumofbritishcolonialism.org/lost-unities>.