Up Against *the* Archive

Experiments in Writing British Empire History Otherwise

ANTOINETTE BURTON, EDITOR

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EDITED BY ANTOINETTE BURTON

DUKE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Duke University Press *Durham and London* 2027

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ∞
Project Editor: Liz Smith
Designed by Courtney Leigh Richardson
Typeset in Garamond Premier Pro by Westchester Publishing Services

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Burton, Antoinette M., [date] editor
Title: Up against the archive : experiments in writing British empire history otherwise / edited by Antoinette Burton.
Other titles: Experiments in writing British empire history otherwise
Description: Durham : Duke University Press, 2027. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2026015880 (print)
LCCN 2026015881 (ebook)
ISBN 9781478039532 paperback
ISBN 9781478034636 hardcover
ISBN 9781478063179 ebook
Subjects: LCSH: Archives—Social aspects | Archives—Political aspects | History—Methodology | Archival resources—Methodology | Feminist criticism | Critical race theory | Postcolonialism | Imperialism | Great Britain—Colonies—Archival resources | Great Britain—Colonies—History | LCGFT: Primary sources
Classification: LCC CD971 .U5575 2027 (print) | LCC CD971 (ebook) | DDC 941.0072—dc23/eng/20260514
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026015880
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026015881

Cover art: Detail of 1723 map depicting domains of the Chickasaws, Choctaws, Cherokees, Creeks, and English. National Archives, Kew. Handwriting courtesy Adobe Stock/HTGanzo.

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The flow of history always exceeds the narrative frames we impose on it.
—ISABELLA HAMMAD

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Acknowledgments

My heartfelt thanks to all the contributors in the collection. I was drawn to their brilliance in the first place, but it was their dedication to and sober passion for the work that kept me going. I am especially grateful to Jenny Davis, Kennetta Hammond Perry, Jennifer Morgan, and Renisa Mawani, whose wise and loving counsel at key moments along the way have been invaluable. I owe a huge debt to my students at Illinois—Lex, Priyanka, Alex, Nathan, Lily, Bethany, and Izzy—who have taken up the challenges of anti-empire history and methods with courage and conviction. I'm so grateful for your comradeship.

Gisela Fosado and Erika Jackson at Duke University Press have been exemplars of support, kindness, and patience, which I appreciate more than I can say. Gisela stepped up at a key moment: I thank her for picking up the pieces and for believing in the project against all odds.

And as we continue to work on histories "otherwise," the inimitable grace, light, and love of Jane McCabe will not be forgotten.

To Miriam Angress, my longtime editor and cherished friend, I dedicate this book, with admiration, affection, appreciation, and love for all you have meant to me and done for me during the past quarter century. You have made so much possible for me and for all those involved in the books we have done together—more than words can say.

You are a gem without equal, and I will hold you always in my heart.

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Introduction

Form, Anticolonial Method, and Potential Histories

ANTOINETTE BURTON

I must love the questions
themselves
as Rilke said
like locked rooms
full of treasure
to which my blind
and groping key
does not yet fit.
—Alice Walker, "Reassurance"

There has been no greater target of postcolonial, anticolonial, or feminist critique in the Western academy of the past quarter century than the archive of imperialism. Vilified as the embodiment of imperial intention and depredation, and subject to some of the fiercest epistemological takedowns in the interdisciplinary humanities to date, the archive has come to represent, and arguably to stand in for, the very violences of modern Western imperialism as an ideological and material project. Even scholars for whom alternative forms of evidence hold the key to counterhistories remain in the grip of the archive: It is an ineluctable interlocutor. Indeed, whether we read against or alongside the archival grain, those of us invested in fashioning histories counter to the imperial narratives that continue to dominate the global imaginary remain dependent on the archive as the grounds of our practice. With Julietta Singh, we know that archives are an instrument of colonial mastery and that therefore they will not save us.[1] Yet we remain entangled in them and codependent on them, both wittingly and unwittingly. What does this attachment to the imperial archive distract us from? And how—by what methods—can we recalibrate our relationship to it so that

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we can activate genuinely new histories that have the potential to subvert or upend the imperial and imperializing frameworks through which we write?

The contributors to this collection ask us to acknowledge that antagonism to the archive is undoubtedly a powerful resource for imagining empire histories otherwise, but that it is ultimately insufficient to the task of challenging the norms that guide our expectations of what "real" or legitimate academic history—let alone anti-imperial history—looks like. What is required is greater attunement to the *forms* that our history writing takes. In the chapters that follow, the authors have given themselves permission to experiment with the possibilities of narrative in order to appreciate both the limits of the conventional academic essay and the potentialities that unconventional forms have for telling us more than we thought we knew about empire, its subjects, its objects, its inner workings. The result is a plurality of formats, a diverse array of styles, designed to get at both what the archive can yield and what it cannot. We offer a set of experimental pieces that suggest what is possible when historians draw on the archive to craft narratives that do not resemble formal arguments or take conventional academic style for granted. Playing with form is, we propose, both a way to write empire otherwise and a method for anticolonial history. And it's in that experimental frame that the radical capacity of the archive becomes more fully available for reimagining what empire history might look like.

Of all the subfields in contemporary Western historical practice, British imperial history is arguably rendered in the most traditional narrative forms. This, despite the way that decolonial research and intersectional feminist analysis have shaped the terrain since the 1990s. Some scholars, such as Catherine Hall and Hazel Carby, have taken up autobiography as part of their commitment to rethinking the line between objectivity and experience in history writing about empire, its lives and afterlives.[2] But rarely are the findings of the field delivered in anything other than established forms of historical narrative—of the kind that many of us in this collection have also used in our work. By convening this assemblage of experimental studies, we aspire to spark an extended conversation in the field about how the choice of narrative form matters, in part because it can be the hardest, most naturalized part of history writing to discern. In fact, form is part of everyone's methodological tool kit, regardless of their politics. What might it mean for anticolonial work when form takes its place alongside the archive as the center of gravity for the kind of rigorous and vigorous critique needed to move historical knowledge out of the present and into the future?

Students of literature routinely think about form, and novelists have license to exceed the limits of the archive when writing about the past. The overwhelming popular and academic success of Amitav Ghosh's *Ibis* Trilogy, which builds

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closely on the work of imperial historians, is only one of the most spectacular examples of what it means to work both with and against the archive to build a historically grounded story—one that captures the political and cultural drama of people up and down the social scale in the context of both high-imperial events and ocean worlds. And anyone who teaches modern British history knows how the novel form itself can serve as the kind of social history unavailable anywhere else, let alone in the official archive.[3] As Gayatri Spivak demonstrated for Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Edward Said for Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), imperial histories and some of their anti-imperial potentialities are insurgent in both those texts in ways that it took academics a century or more to fully appreciate.[4] And while it's only just come onto our bookshelves, Zadie Smith's *The Fraud* (2023) follows boldly in this tradition, resurfacing the colonial pasts at the heart of English history through a novel whose very title puts the relationship between fact and fiction into play.[5]

Equally germane, colonized subjects throughout the British colonial world, including those in Britain "at home," have always had their own ways of telling. They've had access to the means of creating alternative accounts in forms that have often been illegible to imperial agents and their successors as "history" but that are storehouses of historical knowledge that may be in dialogue with the imperial archive or are comparatively indifferent to it. When the written record is not plentiful (and even when it is), there is a lot that history in its conventional Westernized narrative forms cannot do or tell. What LeAnne Howe (Choctaw) calls "tribalography" does not admit distinctions between "story, fiction, history, and play." She uses them interchangeably because they constitute an integrated way of thinking about knowing, one that does not rely on archival verification and that privileges the oral over the written tradition.[6] And, in so doing, she reminds us that there is an ethics and a politics to form as well as to the archive per se.

If alternative narrative modes are vehicles for telling and knowing history otherwise, they should be recognized as carriers of historical argumentation as well. In the first instance, the essays collected below make the case for the urgency of seeing, and teaching, what archival fragments can mean when stitched together creatively—and what responsible speculation about archival evidence that is not there can yield when it comes to nuancing or challenging existing narratives. But, equally, the authors make clear how imperative it is that we countenance the fact that form itself is not incidental to historical argument. To the contrary. An important mediator between historical evidence and historical interpretation, form is nothing less than the gridwork of historical methodology—that set of procedures whereby we communicate our research

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to readers. And that means that we need to be alive to as wide an array of experimental approaches as possible, and to make a variety of anticolonial writing practices available. The pieces gathered here manifest a willingness to test out unconventional modes of historical representation, to combine empiricism with speculation, and to explore forms like the poetic and the epistolary, the recuperative and the imaginative, both discretely and in tense or tender relationship to each other. The narrative compositions and re-compositions that ensue point to the impossibility of eluding the archive as a conceptual referent. For, as we shall see, few among us want to, or feel we can afford to, dispense with it altogether. What we suggest is that the narrative forms through which we make the archive—in all its fullness and silence—legible are worthy of attention. We seek to pull from the archive, reassemble what it offers, mix and remix it through a diverse array of narrative strategies, not just to appreciate its affordances anew but to explore what kinds of telling amplify its possibilities and erasures most effectively.[7]

This collection is emphatically not a call to dispense with established forms of historical narrative or to imply that a format like the conventional monograph is always already incapable of interrupting colonial modalities of telling and knowing. It is, rather, a provocation to resist imagining that going up against the archive is enough when it comes to fashioning anticolonial critique, method, practice. If we tackle the archive head on and get new meanings from it but continue to articulate those meanings in highly standardized formats, we run the risk of leaving untouched the very delivery systems through which people apprehend our archival (counter)witness—and through which we constitute what counts as empire history. In short, our choice of form is consequential. Despite what we know about the complex, nonlinear history of the book form, let alone the history of narrative form, that choice is rarely a matter of debate for empire historians.[8] If we are to think about how to exceed the normative narrative modes that are inheritances from a Western imperial commons of reading and writing—what Dionne Brand calls that "*monopoly of interpretation* that colonial narratives represent"—we need to engage with the difference form makes.[9]

As literary scholar Tess McNulty reminds us in the context of new kinds of popular digital content, "form *reveals*."[10] The various forms whereby empire history takes shape matter to how readers take it in, make use of it, and move from inquiry to action in the classroom and beyond. Although I have not contributed a piece to the collection, I have myself experimented, through collaboration with Renisa Mawani and others, in challenging straightforward imperial narrative by making use of the ABC format. In *Animalia: An Anti-Imperial Bestiary for Our Times*, readers are free to read in a linear fashion (from A is for Ape, to Z for

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Zebu) or to create their own links across discrepant letters in a zigzag fashion.[11] But, in any case, there is no chronology directed by that book's architecture; and the mode of delivery is the short form, with essays of less than two thousand words for each letter, paired with an evocative image. The text is designed as nonlinear; the nonhuman creatures have their own temporalities, and the work they do tells the stories—which are invariably of trouble for empire. The ABC form points to the myriad devices available for narrating the history of imperialism and its work. And it makes the case that our own choices of form are as significant as our stand against archival erasure when we aim to read otherwise. How (through what designs, voicings, story patterns, impressions on the page) we tell the story of imperialism and its work is, in other words, as significant as our stand either against archival erasure or for the possibilities of reading otherwise.[12] If archives are the ghost in the imperial machine, form is the skeleton key—its serrated edges shaved down to ensure open access—that unlocks the doors to which our blind and groping methods as yet imperfectly fit.

When it comes to pressing up against the limits of established historical accounts, Black scholars like Saidiya Hartman, Tiya Miles, and Rebecca Hall have broken new ground, each resisting in her own way what Miles calls "the default in which historical gaps feed contemporary forgetfulness."[13] Although their methods are distinctive, one shared focus is the recovery and re-presentation of Black and formerly enslaved women whose erasure from the archives of enslavement and empire is one of the ontological conditions of Black diasporic history, whatever its geographical particularities. Hartman expressly nominates "critical fabulation" as a mode of writing "a narrative of what might have been or could have been . . . a history written with and against the archive."[14] Miles calls for an "abundant" approach to history writing, reminding us to read the archive diagonally, against and along "the bias grain." She cites in turn Marisa Fuentes's invitation to stretch with and against available sources to recapture the histories of the historically disempowered.[15] And Hall invokes "the measured use of historical imagination," in part to hang on to the right to use the archive on her own terms—in order to imagine what "could have happened," in her case by blending novel, memoir, and family history to document women-led slave revolts across the Americas in graphic form.[16]

There is no denying that relationships to and uses of the archive are consequential to the work of Black feminist and queer scholars, especially those writing "otherwise"—that is, writing on disbelief that the present is all we have. Or, as Ashon Crawley puts it in "Otherwise Ferguson," that "whatever we have is not all that is possible."[17] But it is how the archive shows up in their writing—through what representational forms and via which methodological

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designs—that is most significant for our anticolonial project. In that context, critical fabulation has loomed large in our collective conversations about this volume. As we prepared for our collective conversations about the edited volume, we drew heavily on Hartman's concept and on her 2019 book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, for inspiration on how to write histories that both engage archival sources and tell stories that move inventively beyond erasures and ellipses.[18] And it was that deep engagement with Black feminist work that has ultimately helped us to clarify the stakes of our emphasis on form rather than dwelling on the limits of the archive per se. When read in stereo, Hartman and Miles and Hall appear to be calling for greater attunement to a politics of methodology—one rooted in the conviction that in addition to what we tell, the way we tell what we may not know with total certainty also matters. They model a refusal of the limits of both the official archive and of History (capital *H*) *in service of* innovative modes of telling. In that sense, the archive and its limits are not actually the storyline. Rather, the stakes lie in the forms of story we use—in those counterstories that have the capacity to reveal the limits of majoritarian histories, make unseen histories visible, imagine what cannot be verified, and reach new audiences as well.[19]

In that spirit, we follow Hartman's call to "*creatively disorder* the institutional fictions and the violent abstractions authorized as fact and truth" specifically in the British imperial context.[20] Contributors to *Up Against the Archive* explore ways of resetting the narrative and methodological premises—archivally tethered, consciously or unconsciously extractive, and effectively imperial*ist*—that continue to govern so much empire history writing today. In the essays that follow, they play with form to prize open conventional imperial history, to force its hinges and tear at its seams, so that it accommodates stories about subjects either unseen or recessed. In so doing, we work to meet the challenges of the contemporary moment with new anti-imperial forms of storytelling. We take up this project with a set of deliberately "small axe/acts": the short story, the choral form, the meditation, the fevered dream sequence, the epistolary exercise, the family history, the hide map—in sum, the multiform possibilities of doing empire history while speculating about the "beyond" of the archive and using that imaginative energy for decolonial ends.[21] Although new perhaps for the British empire field, our experiments participate in a long rhetorical tradition that understands form and genre as "social actions" that make up a community of practice. If playing with the form that empire history takes is a social action, it is also a methodological one, challenging the genre hierarchy implicit in History and authorizing narrative alternatives beyond its boundary lines.[22] In keeping with Black feminist scholarly practice, we recognize that like race, colonialism has always

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been entangled in form. If that is the case, genre—a category of form, style, and content—matters in the work of anticolonial empire history.[23]

To reiterate, the stakes of putting these fields into dialogue are, as above, both theoretical and methodological. Empire historians are most likely to rely on genealogies that derive from the theories of Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Spivak if and when they want to diversify the kinds of archive stories they tell. But as the work of Hartman and Miles and others shows, "critical fabulation," reading along the archival grain, and other modes of inventiveness rooted in counterstory telling are also *theoretical practices*: moves that, conceptually and methodologically, are aimed at pointing to and undoing the narrative limits of conventional history writing. *Up Against the Archive* asks readers of imperial history to think again about where theory resides and where methodological innovation has happened. As the following pieces work with, against, and through the archive by playing with narrative form in order to make it legible as part of the politics of imperial history writing, they ask us to consider narrative as well as archive when we theorize about empire and its inheritances.[24] And last but not least, the book suggests that the possibilities of anti-imperial history come into particularly sharp relief when modes of Black feminist storytelling—writing otherwise, by any other name—come to the fore.

To socialize the idea for this collection, I invited scholars across several generations to work through the limits of their archive, and perhaps their training, to experiment with whatever kind of historically grounded narrative invention they chose. The exhortation was this: Take an event, a life fragment, a movement, an era and write a creative piece of around six thousand words that passes the test of verifiability while offering new angles or insights on the questions to hand. The contributors have used letters, maps, a rosary, a report, a portrait, a grave inscription, a memo, and other traces as the basis for historically grounded, imaginative narratives that combine fact and fiction, evidence and imagination, to rethink a familiar history or to conjure possible or impossible pasts. Their work asks us to sit with and act on actual and "unwitting archives" and the stories not yet reckoned with that they yield.[25] It is work that fashions historical accounts with varying degrees of conjecture, via texts that move between creative invention and more conventional academic idioms. There are many ways of interrupting the expected narrative frame of strictly academic history. Beyond experimental formats, these include moving in and out of speculation in a narrative piece, sometimes via direct address or by speaking openly about the emotional impact of even the slimmest of archival traces. What we have produced here might well be called experiments in "mixed methods." Above all, given the potentialities for breaking out of established frames that Black feminist scholars have put at

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our disposal, we must, as academicians, both countenance and extend this work, thereby contributing to its legitimacy as a form of historical practice for those doing British empire history.

Up Against the Archive is the result of two daylong conversations in early 2023 that brought scholars of Indigeneity, the Raj, Black history, white settler colonialism, revolution, and imperial war together in the same virtual Zoom room. If empire history now is multisited, drawing on research from India, Australia and New Zealand, the Caribbean, the colonial United States, Africa, the diaspora, and the metropole itself, rarely in fact do scholars from all of these spaces and places converge in a shared experiment like this one. Because of the nature of the original call, which foregrounded critical fabulation, Hartman's work was a text in common. But contributors ended up drawing on a variety of genealogies for writing "otherwise"—and on a widely different set of archival possibilities, depending on their intended topics. For some, archives were abundantly available and yet absent on the subjects they wanted to represent, so the task was writing assiduously against. For others, some evidence was accessible but it did not offer the opportunity to tell the story except through an official lens, which involved coming at it sideways, through alternative entry points, including personal family material or maps and other sources considered to be marginalia on the main page of empire history until quite recently, historiographically speaking. For still others, the gaps between available narratives and the kinds of intimate or affective histories they desired required other innovative forms and formats, unmoored from a patchy archive but not completely untethered either.

Striking patterns may be found across many of the essays: fires burning in public and private, fragments and "single mentions," love and pain; struggles against effacement, state racism and social stigma, loneliness and illegibility, death, dispossession and trauma; and of course, plenty of official imperial indifference, stupidity, cruelty, and unaccountability. It's worth noting that in the face of this theater of memory and forgetting and remembering—and, of course, erasure—we've produced few generalizable takeaways, let alone uniform writing practices. Some pieces are short; others are the length of short articles. Some take advantage of creative forms; others are more narrative but are grappling aloud with archival capacities and challenges, punctuating archival data with personal reflection or emotional insight. Still others painstakingly unpick files and trace documents and prize open apertures, be they half-open or blocked from view. Through these efforts we have the opportunity to glimpse histories of heartbreak and filial connection; partial portraits of immiseration and longing and premature death. Meanwhile, the abundance of form here has to do in part, as above, with the variable archives contributors had to (or chose to) work

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with. It may also be attributable to the discrepant geographies we work in and our dispersal across different national and academic settings (from London to Illinois to Vancouver; from Durban to Dunedin to New York City, to name a few coordinates). The plurality of vocabularies and points of scholarly reference that resulted generated a palpable intellectual and political energy in the Zoom room—as well as tentative forays into conversations about the differences that a focus on histories of slavery makes to critical fabulation or speculative biography in comparison to white settlement and South Asian diaspora, for example. As it turns out, there are some incommensurabilities to be worked through in this project (perhaps any project) of thinking ourselves into "otherwise possibilities."[26] There was, as significantly, a recurrent desire to make visible the traumatic histories of empire; to underscore the emotional labor involved in doing so; to insist on the apparently "unrepresentative" figure or case; and to worry over moving these subjects into a space like this book where their identities are public but their interior lives are still in shadow.[27] And, ultimately, there was a sober respect accorded to those subjects (people and themes) that refused to be seen on our terms or to yield, even and especially in the face of our care and repair efforts. Despite its subversive potential, not every skeleton key can unlock every chamber.

Writing empire otherwise is not, then, an inherently emancipatory practice. As anti-imperial scholars know, it is in the name of emancipation that colonial subjects, especially Black and Brown and Indigenous peoples, have experienced the imposition of visibility as a technology of colonial violence. Nor should we discount the parameters of community storytelling in the wake of colonial "endings," or overstep in our quest to redress and restore without taking those protocols fully into account. At the heart of this collection is a deceptively simple premise: We acknowledge official archives as a necessary but insufficient basis for writing the kinds of histories that we wish to imagine and that we desire to write into being—even as we continuously scrutinize that *we* and recall that not everyone runs the same risks when it comes to desire, including the desire to think empire otherwise. If to do so is to go up against and beyond the official archive, to write empire differently is an ongoing challenge to the *formal* remit of academic historical narrative.

Framing the Narrative Otherwise

It's important for readers to know that the design of the book is an outcome in part of the press readers' comments in the first round of review. Among other things, they called for more express attention to the moves each author

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was making in order to clarify what kind of storytelling was being devised and for what purposes. We responded by placing short, first-person takes at the top of each chapter, in which the author explained what they were doing in writerly terms. The press readers ended up preferring that the pieces be freestanding. But to try to elicit the kind of self-reflection that readers of the book might be seeking, I asked each contributor to answer a series of questions that I've drawn on below to set up each of the three sections into which the book has been divided.[28]

A few takeaways emerged. Each author has their own motivations for why they want to experiment with a new form of writing at this juncture in the history of empire writing, and in their own history as an empire or anti-empire scholar. And it's fair to say that though each seeks its own form of emplotment, no two pieces trend in the same narrative direction. As mentioned above, there is fabulation in some places, and something closer to re-storying erasure in others. Some contributors listen hard for traces of people and experiences that are deeply buried and reanimate them in formats that range from prayerful echoes to emotionally charged family histories. Others tear at the very seams of the archival fabric, painstakingly and with agonistic results. Above all, the emphasis here is on subjugated histories coming out of colonial worlds, from the early modern period to the age of the *Empire Windrush* and beyond. It's an emphasis that grows out of our collective recognition that archives ultimately emerge from histories of violence and extraction, and that anticolonial histories interrupt protocols that normalize those histories. Interesting to note is the extent to which the contributors have landed on women as the subjects—though, again, not exclusively—of their genre-crossing narratives. And the extent to which the desire is to represent their lives in all the possible *fullness* of their histories.[29] As well, and not least, a level of tenderness and recurrent care runs through many of the pieces here—an aspect of "felt" history that's rare enough in the discipline as a whole, let alone in its British empire precincts.[30]

Part I, "Re-Storying Erasures," convenes pieces that emphasize the space between what it means to read for erasures and to seek to restore who or what is missing on their own terms. For Jennifer Morgan, a return to the cover art of her 2021 book, *Reckoning with Slavery*, was motivated by the fact that the image has been "underconsidered": Its backstory for all intents and purposes disappeared without her investigations. Foremost in her mind is the fact that the painting "is torn from a larger canvas that we don't know anything about." That context, which could tell us "how sixteenth-century elites were thinking of black women in their cities and their households," has been erased, and with it a kind of historical "preface" for the early modern British colonial Atlantic, where enslavement

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was ascendent. For Chickasaw scholar Jenny Davis, the aim is to remind us what questions we haven't asked about Indigenous histories in the context of British imperialism and how we might story them in ways that are more insouciant about than invested in the colonial archive. As she puts it, "In the current tellings of this moment in British and British Empire history, an absence in the archive is seen as parallel to absence in Chickasaw lives and history. And the absence emerges as significant (or interesting) only via highly colonial questions of war, of Indigenous peoples as only ever ally or enemy." As in the genre of the found poem, the erasures are stunning. "Colonialism," Davis notes,

> severs in order to create gaps in the archive (and because it enjoys the violence of dismemberment). Those gaps allow colonial actors (academics), knowingly or unknowingly, to fill those gaps from their own perspectives, from their own desires, and from their need to control the story. That the British did immeasurable harm to the Chickasaw and yet are consistently perceived through a framework of allyship is never questioned. Even today we can't get away from them (and their colonial children). And yet there is considerable surprise that we did not march to war for them.[31]

In reply to the invitation to think about writing "otherwise," Meleisa Ono-George was "attracted to this challenge because of the explicit instruction for us to write a piece outside the conventions of the discipline, because we were actively encouraged to experiment." "I wanted the reader to not just 'think' with me, but to feel with me, to be moved by the emotion of loss and anger, hope, and connection." And so, "in writing this piece, I wanted not just to acknowledge his life and story, but I also wanted to do something more emotional, more spiritual. In this respect, I thought a lot about the way storytelling is used in the Caribbean, as a way to connect us as individuals to our communities, by which I mean not just to those who still reside in this world but also, perhaps more importantly, to the lives, struggles, deaths, and afterlives of our ancestors." Significantly, Ono-George cautions against the apparent simplicity of "erasure": "I'm not certain the history of this child was erased. The boy's presence is still with us through the archives; we just failed to engage with what remains on its own terms, being led by the archives and the history that it allows us to narrate instead of trying or not trying to engage archives based on certain conventions of the discipline."

In "Listening to Traces," part II of this collection, it's clear how many different narrative forms and formats are available when we put the fragment or shard of evidence at the center of anticolonial writing experiments. In tracing the life of his grandmother, Hawa Essop Patel, Goolam Vahed was repeatedly struck

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by both the absence of women like her in the archive and the places where remnants and echoes of her biography could be gleaned. Although the wholeness of her life can never be recaptured, he's confident that the kind of speculative biography he offers here "allows us to attempt to provide a portrait of a complex life." If traces are like wisps, Laura Ishiguro's account of the fire that destroyed Barkerville is well positioned to help us appreciate what is "enough" evidence in archival terms. And she really leaned into the "listening" part of the heading. "I thought a lot about *hearing* as well as listening, particularly in the third section when I consider actual court proceedings. I was struck that so many women—women whom we would otherwise not know about from the colonial archives—put themselves on record and demanded a hearing, both at the time and from us now. Even, or especially, when the result wasn't conviction (legal conviction at the time and historians' conviction about the truth now), leaving these traces took work and risk, and I think we should at least try to hear them." In light of these comments, we might agree with Thavolia Glymph that, like the archive of enslavement, the imperial archive is, in certain times and places, a boisterous and noisy one, with "jostling voices" audible, even clamoring for our attention.[32] And as Marisa Fuentes's work reminds us, attuning ourselves to both these sounds and to the reverberations of damage that accompany them is the ultimate writerly challenge.[33]

Sumita Mukherjee pursues this line of thinking further by using a poetic form—the "composite choral" verse—as an act of recovery not of a single subject but of Indian girlhood in diaspora. Drawing on Hartman's essay "Venus in Two Acts," and in an echo of Ono-George's reference to the power of Caribbean ways of telling and listening, Sumita explained that "the use of the chorus in my piece is inspired by aural and oral traditions as I think through the rhythms and voices of storytelling in the South Asian context. The chorus also holds the whispers of young girls who are whispering at the walls or to themselves, and so listening for those traces is an important mode of recovery." Hartman's essay was also an inspiration for Ryan Fong, who sees the letter form he tries on as a way of "grappling with my desire to be in right relationship with both Mowhee and Ngata, as well as the Māori communities who continue to keep their memory. As I wrote my letters, I became profoundly aware that this was not merely an abstract intellectual exercise but was rooted in the beliefs that ground my own Chinese traditions and resonate with those across Te Ao Māori around honoring the dead and acknowledging ancestors as active presences in our lives." Interestingly, too, he observed that "I do not share the same level of concern and anxiety around accuracy that seems to haunt many of my historian colleagues. Instead, the disciplinary taboo that I wanted to confront was how

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literary critics are typically expected to assume a posture of critical detachment from the authors that we study. I saw the letter form as a way to both confront this fantasy—since, of course, we are invested in the authors we write about!—and to explicitly articulate those lines of more personal relation."

The theme of "splitting seams" (the title of part III) resonated with Renisa Mawani, who recalled that "I stumbled across this case file while I was researching my last book, *Across Oceans of Law*." That file "opened so many questions for me that were conceptual but also intimate and personal: how to imagine and write about subaltern women; how to write about family history. This essay gave me an opportunity to think about ways of stitching the archive and family biography together, even if they do not fully overlap or cohere." She saw the splitting seams rubric as "an invitation to push against the historiography of the Indian Ocean world and the caricature of the subaltern woman. I try to do this by suturing family biography with archival fragments." For Heather Salter, the chance to think about Tatyana Moiseenko through this lens was a welcome break from a very different kind of writing:

> I was in the midst of writing a book with a strong narrative arc and was looking for a way to think through how I could assimilate all of the fractured things I knew about one of my main characters. . . . I've never tried actually *writing* the world through anyone's eyes. . . . [I]f we think of splitting seams as taking fabric apart without tearing it, with the goal of either repairing it or stitching it back together in a different way, then perhaps this kind of exercise could be seen as a way of deconstructing various narrative strands (things we thought we knew from competing archives) and then putting them back together with a new kind of thread that changes the look of the finished piece.

Frances Steel had a lot to say about how the theme spoke directly to her work in the book:

> "Splitting Seams" to me gestures metaphorically to undoing established or long-accepted ways of knowing, especially that which gets "stitched up" (as in "case closed" in the context of my piece, once they "found" Latinidavetalevu and deciphered his "adventures"). I felt I could unstitch the neatness of that, press against viewing this period of his life merely as an investigation into a series of lies or transgressions. . . . [It] also echoes the ways Tiya Miles talks about her approach to the sack, particularly when she talks of "loosening the threads" of the words stitched into the sack into larger meanings, a way of opening out our archival traces to "stretch"

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them beyond what seems most immediate. Her way of thinking is in turn indebted to Fuentes's metaphor of the stretch in the archive's bias grain. Splitting seams seems productive, a way of revealing or actively creating and enabling new spaces for thought and reflection. There's a sort of "unmaking" aspect to the metaphor, with the potential for remaking. In this way, too, it speaks to the way Latinidavetalevu was engaged in splitting seams to fashion or form new, additional identities, to weave in another set of experiences and ways of being that enlarged his world and the possibilities he imagined for himself. It was a reminder to me as I worked on this piece that I didn't need to "know" the "real person" or pin him down.

In developing the storyline for "A Rusted Pin," Caroline Bressey found that the seams metaphor "brings to mind the work of mending. . . . [S]ometimes [seams] must be split to enable that mending to happen. But also perhaps the splitting from conventional historical forms—seams in time." For Bressey this was a way of linking narrative form and anticolonial method. "Black women who lived part or all their lives in colonial Britain embody many of the complexities of the anticolonial history writing. Women like Grace Stevenson were descended from the circuits of Atlantic slavery and were born into the brutal and racialized inequalities of colonial Jamaica. Some left and became part of multiethnic communities in the imperial capital; some thrived in Britain, others traveled onward. The diversity of their experiences is still a long way from being given attention or fully cared for in British empire history." Kennetta Hammond Perry echoed some of this conception in her remarks about the process of writing her piece on David Oluwale: "This section title resonates with my thinking alongside Marisa Fuentes and Tiya Miles about ways of stretching the cross hairs of an archive to find what is not held together in the seams. Miles talks about wanting to find a word that captures the thing in the gap between the seams, and I see myself trying to get at that as well by surfacing impossible but not improbable questions and making connections with the memories that David Oluwale could have brought with him from Lagos to Britain and that could have shaped what he made of the items found on his body. To split the seam for me requires forcing or moving to get at what is not held together in the archive. It means not that it's not contained in the archive but rather that it's not held together in a way that we can see what it is."

In response to the question, Why did you write this? Hammond Perry shared that it was

because I wanted to try to engage some of the methods that will be required to write with and against an archive produced to narrate David

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> Oluwale's death in order to take seriously a history of how he lived. Given how he appears in the archive, the story of his life is a looming absent presence in so much of the material. But the items found on his body when it was recovered from the river seemed to invite a way to consider his life and what mattered to him by thinking about objects that he kept close in the weeks before his death. I wanted to find a way to linger on these items and think about what they could have meant while amplifying what has been made impossible to know about him by the ways in which his life is documented in the archive. There is also something about these particular objects' capacity to hold histories about his interiority that appeals to me as I find myself constantly questioning how he ends up repeatedly in some of the predicaments that he finds himself in terms of his contact with police, and I want to try to hold a space to understand him as a contemplative, reflective, and knowing subject of modern British history.

Given the recurrent set of affective and political resources that British imperialism continues to provide to actors from Black Lives Matter protesters to Queen Elizabeth II mourners—all of whom are global, and globally apparent, audiences for this work—going up against the imperial archive in order to hold space for the potentialities of new forms and genres that function *as* British imperial histories is politically urgent. Indeed, it's the kind of social action that can create new forms of community, as well.

As Brand reminds us, in the context of empire, we are never far from confronting "the imposition of form, of symmetry with the ruling relations."[34] Or far from the temptations of imagining that any form is exempt from the possibility of carrying narratives of violence. Yet, at a moment when academic History has shifted from being at the perilous edge of its social and political legitimacy to fighting for its very existence, we need to exploit all the possibilities of the archivally driven anti-imperial imagination in historically minded ways with narrative forms and formats that are up to the challenges of the present, and of the future. If in the process these extraordinary empire histories remake, recompose, and redistribute what we take to be the archive itself, so much the better.

NOTES

1. J. Singh, *Unthinking Mastery*.

2. Hall's work includes *White, Male and Middle Class* and *Lucky Valley*. For Carby, see *Imperial Intimacies*. For empire historians speaking about their own experiences, see Burton and Kennedy, *How Empire Shaped Us*.

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3. For Jamaica Kincaid, "literature . . . does not offer the comfort of an already digested plot. It seeks out the truth of history, which turns out to be most powerfully and effectively conveyed through fiction." But she also refuses to fetishize the novel per se, any more than History capital *H*. See her introduction to Simone Schwarz-Bart, *The Bridge of Beyond*, vii and xii.

4. Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism"; Said, *Culture and Imperialism*.

5. Even as Sylvia Wynter warns us against romanticizing the novel as history. See Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation."

6. Howe, "Tribalography," 118. See also Jenny Davis's citation of Howe in chapter 2.

7. Here we are in sync with a work like Sara Johnson's *Encyclopédie Noire* (see esp. p. 9).

8. See Burton and Hofmeyr, *Ten Books That Shaped the British Empire*. This is to say nothing of the forms, especially the extratextual ones, that archival traces themselves take. For an excellent discussion of this challenge, see Procter, *Scripting Empire*, 1–21.

9. Brand, *Salvage*, 14. The emphasis, which she attributes to Fredric Jameson, is in the original. Thanks to Renisa Mawani for reading with me.

10. McNulty, "Content's Forms," 795–851 (emphasis added).

11. Burton and Mawani, *Animalia*. See also Burton et al., *An ABC of Queen Victoria's Empire*.

12. Thanks to Catherine Hall for challenging me to specify the stakes of form for British empire history.

13. Miles, *All That She Carried*, 89.

14. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12. See Renisa Mawani's close reading of the essay in chapter 8.

15. Miles, *All That She Carried*, 17; Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*.

16. Hall, with Martinez, *Wake*, 36ff.

17. Crawley, "Otherwise, Ferguson." See also Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*. For an account of possible uses of the concept, see Meek and Fontanilla, "Otherwise." Thanks to Jenny Davis for sending me in this direction.

18. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.

19. Solórzano and Yosso, "Critical Race Methodology." Thanks to Eddie O'Byrn for this citation. See also Martinez, *Counterstory*.

20. Hartman, "Intimate History, Radical Narrative."

21. I refer here to the academic journal *Small Axe*, which "focuses on publishing critical work that examines the ideas that guided the formation of Caribbean modernities." "About the Journal," *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, Duke University Press, accessed March 5, 2026, https://read.dukeupress.edu/small-axe.

22. I draw here on Miller's classic essay "Genre as Social Action," and Bawarshi and Reiff, *Genre*. Thanks to Jordan Woodward and Charlesia McKinney for these references.

23. The argument that race is always entangled in form is Goyal's. See her *Runaway Genres*, 31.

24. For a discussion of the relationship between "artefact and theory," see Marshall, *Ain't I an Anthropologist*, 85–93.

25. "Unwitting archives" is from Hall, *Lucky Valley*, 89.

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26. See Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath*.

27. I draw here on Crawley, "Resonance"; Palmer, "Otherwise Than Blackness"; and Bynum's reflections on the possibilities of Black interiority in her *Reading Pleasures*.

28. The questions posed to each author were: Why did you write this? What attracted you to this challenge? How does it contour with your earlier or current work? How should we read it in this volume? What does the section you appear under mean to you or for your piece? What does this piece of writing do for anticolonial method in the context of British empire history, and why?

29. I borrow here from Williamson, *Scandalize My Name*, 139.

30. See R. Ray, *Felt Community*. For a notable exception in terms of its research design and anticolonial methodological commitments, see Datta, *Waiting on Empire*.

31. The correlation between the failure to ask this kind of question and the comparatively small numbers of Indigenous scholars who have "produced most of the sources that exist within archives" is high (Bauer, "Reflections on *Bad Indians* and Archives," 25). Thanks to Jenny Davis for this reference.

32. I draw here from Glymph's presidential address at the American Historical Association meeting in New York City, January 4, 2025, "Paper Tracings in the Spectacularly Boisterous Archive of Slavery" (uploaded to YouTube by American Historical Association, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMYHnw41Zf4).

33. Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*.

34. Brand, *Salvage*, 187–88.

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