Rethinking the Imperial Archive:
The Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee (COVIC) Digital Photographic Archive, Powered by Omeka and WordPress

A Degree Paper

Presented to

The Committee on Graduate Studies

Reed College

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

Jenna Berthiaume

December 2012
Approved for the Committee

(Graduate Studies)

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Acknowledgments

This degree paper acts as a culmination of my academic experiences both at Reed College and at Brown University. In this sense, it is the product of both of those institutions, and it has been influenced by the fine educational guidance of faculty from my time in Portland and in Providence. My research interests in visual literacy, digital design, and representations of the past originated during my time as an undergraduate, in a graduate seminar about archaeology, images, and text. I’d like to thank Professor Stephen Houston and Dean Sheila Bonde, both of Brown University, who designed and taught that course which had such a long-reaching impact on my academic interests.

I would like to thank the faculty and administrators at Reed College, whose guidance and expertise in art, history, and visual studies led me to this project, especially Professors Pato Hebert, Ann Delehanty, Dell Rhodes, Maureen Harkin, and Gerri Ondrizek. Barbara Amen has been instrumental in helping me focus my research interests during my time at Reed, especially in encouraging me to pursue opportunities outside of my coursework and in urging me to create a degree paper project that fully reflects my professional ambitions. I would like to thank Professor Charles Rhyne, through whose work I was introduced to Reed College, for meeting with me to discuss this project and the design of my digital archive. Angie Beiriger, Digital Assets Librarian at Reed College Library, provided me with much assistance on the technical aspects of my digital archive, and helped me maintain library science standards throughout its development, from scanning, to choosing to use Omeka, to posting and tagging materials online.

This degree paper and digital archive developed from the final paper I wrote for Professor Doris Chon’s History of Photography, 1839+ course. Much of its conceptual base also is derived from Doris’s Archive in Contemporary Art class as well—her lectures and coursework, along with the helpful comments she provided on papers were invaluable.

Many, many thanks go to Professor Laura Leibman, who agreed to advise my degree paper project after meeting with me just once. Our weekly meetings to discuss the project have been the source of much energetic discourse and academic inspiration, and I
am indebted to her for the guidance, encouragement, and brainstorming that made this project not only possible, but enjoyable as well.

I’d like to thank the members of my degree paper oral examination board, including Barbara Amen, and Professors Dana Katz, Laura Leibman, Akihiko Miyoshi, and Charles Rhyne, for reading my paper and considering my work.

Finally, I would like to thank my friends and family on both East and West Coast, who provide constant inspiration, encouragement, and support.
Preface

This degree paper takes the form of a two-part project. The primary focus of the project is the digital archive I created, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, located at http://covic-archive.net/, which includes images, PDFs, and excerpts from four lectures, published between 1909 and 1914 by the British Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee (COVIC). The three lectures series that are of primary concern for this paper and this degree project are *The Sea Road to the East* (1912), *South Africa* (1914), and *West Indies and Guiana* (1914). The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive website has two major components. It acts as a photographic archive, which allows the viewer to scroll through images from the lecture series, to search the image database using textual search terms, and to download full-text PDF versions of the volumes of the COVIC lectures. The other component that the user may access is a discussion of the lectures and the images within, along with six interactive exercises that are meant to engage and instruct the user.

The second part of this project is this degree paper, which aims to contextualize the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive website within a discussion of post-colonialism (particularly the colonial master narrative), photography (especially the photographic archive), and hypertext (in this case, of a web-based digital archive). Throughout this paper, underlined hyperlinks will appear, which link the reader to pages from the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive; a digital version of this degree paper, with active hyperlinks, is available at http://covic-archive.net/about/the-degree-paper/. All of the text in this degree paper is available on the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive website, organized in sections and navigable through the menu bar that spans across the top of the webpage. This organization facilitates reading the sections of the paper in or out of the sequence presented in this paper, as determined by the user and his or her needs and interests.
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Abstract

Between 1903 and 1914, the Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee (COVIC) published a series of lectures, paired with photographic slides, that intended to instruct British audiences about the British colonies. These lecture series, written at the height of British colonial expansion, perpetuate a colonialist master narrative that denigrates the colonial populations and presents British domestic citizens as protagonists in the illustrious expansion of the Empire. This degree paper presents the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, an online digital archive that I created to describe, problematize, and ultimately deconstruct the master narrative that the COVIC lecture series present.

This paper contextualizes the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive within a larger discussion of the history of photography and its usage in imperial contexts. It draws on post-colonial critical theory to explore the implications of the master narrative in the process of colonization and to propose ways that the colonialist master narrative may be subverted. Within the COVIC lectures, six components of the colonialist master narrative emerge: (1) the inevitable empire; (2) fear of the other; (3) paternalism; (4) imperial economic productivity; (5) race and racial suitability to labor; and (6) the illusion of Englishness in the colonial landscape. These themes are illustrated with close readings of photographs and text from the COVIC lectures. The paper details the six corresponding interactive online exercises, located in the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, which encourage the user to deconstruct the colonialist master narrative. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive is then analyzed through the lens of hypertext critical theory. I provide a detailed account of the web design choices and challenges that occurred during the process of designing and building the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive.

The format of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive as a hypertext archive that can be accessed remotely and navigated non-linearly, along with the interactive activities that encourage users to deconstruct the colonialist master narrative, helps to subvert the racist, sexist, classist master narrative that was perpetuated by the COVIC to justify British expansionism in the early twentieth century.
To my parents, Denise & Jerry Berthiaume, for their unwavering support
For G. M.
Introduction

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the British Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee (COVIC) created a series of publications about the Empire’s colonial holdings, paired with boxes of lantern slides, to be read as prepared lectures in Great Britain to British audiences. The photographs and accompanying text of the lectures present a sequenced, orderly view of the British Empire. The collection acts as a photographic archive that tells a story of colonialism that valorizes the British. In this degree paper project, I problematize this colonial master narrative by deconstructing its core components, presenting close readings of the images and text that substantiate it, and placing the publications and their images in a hypertextual digital archive, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive. The user of this archive, in contrast to the original audiences of the COVIC lectures, is able to view the images out of the pre-determined sequence. He or she can search the archive, read the full-length lecture publications, participate in interactive exercises that promote the deconstruction of the master narrative, and contribute his or her own readings to the website. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive therefore helps to decolonize the original master narrative of the COVIC lecture series, with the aid of digital tools, by enabling the user to examine the components of that narrative on his or her own terms.

Between 1903 and 1914, the COVIC began producing a series of printed, bound lectures that were to be accompanied by lantern slide presentations. First, the COVIC produced a set of lectures regarding the United Kingdom and its history for use in British colonies in East Asia, Africa, India, and the Caribbean. As part of a separate, second
project, the COVIC published six lecture series about colonial holdings to be shown in Great Britain. These lecture series covered the social, cultural, economic, and ethnographic history of the colonies it described, including India; the Sea Road to the East (Gibraltar, Malta, Aden, Ceylon, Malaysia, Hong Kong, etc.); Australasia; Canada and Newfoundland; the West Indies and Guiana (Barbados, Jamaica, Trinidad, Tobago, Grenada, St. Vincent, St. Lucia, the Grenadines, British Honduras, and British Guiana); and South Africa. The lectures were read, and the accompanying slides were shown, to audiences in the United Kingdom in order to educate the British viewers about the vast extent of their own Empire. The photographs included with the lecture series, which bound into highly distributable, slim volumes, are powerful. The images help illustrate the imperialist master narrative, an Anglocentric worldview which justifies the British Empire’s global power and significance. The pictures attempt to justify the hierarchy of the world, in which British civilization is at the very apex, while the non-British, the non-white, and the so-called un civilized, native populations of Asia, Africa, Central and South America, and Australia are the intuitive counterpoint, the nadir. Now, a hundred years later, I am removing the images from their original contexts, from their original textual descriptions, and placing them in a publically accessible digital archive in order to subvert the colonialist master narrative and encourage users to create their own readings of the publications.

The British COVIC lecture series are uniquely suited for inclusion in a digital archive that aims to examine and deconstruct master narratives because they contain a body of photographs, paired with text, that were originally intended to construct an educational narrative for audiences about distant landscapes within the British Empire.
The COVIC provides a particularly intriguing example of the extent to which photographs were used to create a narrative of British imperial history and demonstrate the Empire’s far-reaching control. These lectures, presented originally in the early 20th century as large-scale multimedia experiences for education and entertainment, juxtapose photographic images and text in rhetorically suggestive ways that feature the British Empire and its domestic subjects as protagonists in the master narrative of an illustrious and inevitable expansion of the crown. Indeed, the power of these images lay in their ability to create a view of the rest of the world in reference to the British Empire, insisting upon the centrality of the British Isles and their people and the marginalization of the non-British, colonized populations. The lectures therefore exist as a fascinating example of the utilization of photography to recreate and re-image a distant landscape, as well as promote a fictive narrative of British foreign policy in its colonial territories.

The COVIC lecture series and photographs are notable for many reasons, but they are not unprecedented in their attempt to catalogue the people and places of the world for a British audience. Photography, since its invention in 1839, had a robust tradition of use to document distant landscapes and foreign populations. As David N. Livingstone and Charles W. J. Withers note in their introduction in *Geography and Revolution*: “In anthropology and ethnography, photography helped establish pictorial conventions for the portrayal of the colonized and exotic. Photographic images and their textual accompaniments were potent means—if also ambivalent ones—to the making of imagined and real geographies.” Indeed, the pairing of image and text serves to transport

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the viewer to a distant continent, and to act as a surrogate visual experience to actual travel. It provided a view that seemed to speak for itself; but, as we will see, photographs were almost never acting alone on the viewer, instead paired with elaborate narrative passages or suggestive captions. The geographer and historian of photography James Ryan has extensively studied the COVIC lectures and the images that accompany them. In his work, Ryan argues: “photography became, in certain instances, a tool of both scientific empiricism and Western imperialism. To photograph the world could thus be a means of simultaneously comprehending it and controlling it.”

Like Ryan, I am interested in the ways in which the COVIC photographs and lectures were used to perpetuate a revisionist narrative of British colonial history. The COVIC photographs and the accompanying text, which instructs how the viewer should see the images, reveal themes of national identity, racism, and colonial impulse that continue to resonate today.

Unlike Ryan, and without access to the collection of lantern slides held by the British National Library, my work on the COVIC lectures is limited to the volumes that Interlibrary Loan will ship to Reed College. Cognizant that this too is a rare privilege, it seems imperative to make these rich historical documents (which, significantly, are now in the public domain) available to a wider audience, an audience that does not require institutional affiliation to look at these images that were, in their time of creation and dissemination, also intended for public viewership. For this reason, I have digitized and made available on a publically accessible website, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, (located at http://covic-archive.net/), materials from four of the seven COVIC

publications: (1) *Seven Lectures on the United Kingdom For Use in India*; (2) *South Africa*; (3) *West Indies and Guiana*; and (4) *The Sea Road to the East*.³ To my knowledge, the *West Indies and Guiana* lectures and *The Sea Road to the East* have not been digitized previously.

The website I created from these materials has three major objectives. First, I hope to increase access to high-resolution scans of these documents, including the photographs and figures printed within, for scholastic research and educational purposes. Second, I organize the images and texts on the website in such a way that they are searchable (using term-based tagging) and browseable, so that users might easily navigate the photographs and the lectures for their own research. This way, scholars particularly interested in specific topics—the banana industry in Jamaica, or Tembu ceremonial dress in South Africa, for example—will be able to find images and text that reference those interests by searching the website. Additionally, with the ability to view images side-by-side, users might see connections between the photographs in the three lecture series that were not previously apparent when considering the documents separately. Third and finally, I present my critical analysis on the lectures and photographs in the hypertext form at the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, which allows for the simple integration of image and text and organizes my work using the intuitive architecture of website headings and subheadings.

³ The *India* and *South Africa* lectures series volumes are fully digitized and available for viewing at the Hathi Trust Digital Library, at [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t8tb11p71](http://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t8tb11p71) and [http://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101062242266](http://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101062242266) respectively. For this reason, I include the photographs and corresponding lecture text from the *South Africa* volume, but do not include a full PDF of the work. The remaining publications that are not, to my knowledge, digitized are the *Australasia* and *Canada and Newfoundland* volumes.
As a result, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive acts as both a database and a mediated exhibit of the COVIC lectures. The database format allows users to browse through and search for photographs from the COVIC lectures, as well as download searchable PDF files of three COVIC volumes. The other components of the website, which form a mediated exhibit, present a discussion of the British imperialist master narrative, along with a close reading of six core components of that master narrative as they appear in the COVIC lectures. Users are prompted to respond to the information presented on the site directly by six interactive activities that promote the deconstruction of the British imperialist master narrative.

In some ways, my presentation of these images, albeit decontextualized from their linear, narrative-based arrangement in the original lecture series, parallels the original ethos of the documents—to transcend space and deliver geographic and historical information to the site user. Yet it is the intent of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, as well as its design, which completely differentiates the original series from its new, digital form. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, in contrast to the original COVIC lecture series, aims to subvert the colonialist master narrative, aided by its hypertextual structure as a website. Nevertheless, as Ryan explains: “To nineteenth-century enthusiasts, photography seemed eminently suited to the recording and dissemination of geographical knowledge… Like steamships, railways, and telegraphs, photography seemed to dissolve the distance separating ‘there’ from ‘here,’ bringing new audiences face to face with distant realities.”

What does the Internet do but just that—dissolving the distance separating ‘there,’ from ‘here’ for users interested in reading a

primary source document but unable to get to the library in which it is housed? Certainly, these photographs of South Africa, of East Asia, of Barbados and Trinidad and Gibraltar, will still bridge the geographic distance for most viewers, imparting visions of a distant landscape. But even more so, the COVIC photographs and the accompanying text now offer a ‘here’ from ‘there’ comparison across temporal boundaries as well, communicating (as best they are able, and as best as we can interpret them to be) a view of a not-so-distant past, in which expansionism, white supremacy, and reliance on colonial resources for the imperial economy were the foreign policies of the day. As such, we must be careful with our interpretations. As L. P. Hartley famously intones, “The past is a foreign country,” and we must be aware of the inherent subjectivity in the study of history.5 Yet while it will be impossible to avoid that subjectivity in my own interpretations of the COVIC lectures, perhaps that liability will be lessened by releasing as much of the primary source material which I analyze as possible to the general public, who may therefore agree, disagree, or propose alternative interpretations in as full possession of the data as I am.

Essential to the design of the website is an acknowledgement of who will likely use it and how it might be used. While some websites act as an archive, a collection of items that can be searched and examined individually, others create immersive, narrative exhibits. Brad Johnson, founder of the Portland-based media design firm Second Story, explains: “Some sites provide unmediated direct access to their entire collection, while others provide carefully curated presentations... Ultimately, the most successful Web

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sites are those that balance both approaches, empowering individuals to control the
degree of mediation in their own customized experience.” Attempting to model
Johnson’s approach, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive allows users to tailor their
experiences of the collection based upon their own interest and intention. Educated
generalists interested in photography and British imperialism are accommodated by titled
sections that give my researched interpretation of the COVIC documents and
photographs. Scholars familiar with the Colonial Office and its work who are particularly
interested in the sources themselves will be able to search through the database for
specific images or read the entirety of the three fully-digitized lecture volumes in PDF
form. Students doing close readings of the text, or who are interested in quantitative
analysis of the publications, such as text-mining, will find that the PDFs of the Sea Road,
West Indies and Guiana, and United Kingdom lectures are fully text-searchable. In short,
the site might be used by anyone with access to the Internet with any degree of interest in
the content of the photographs and text.

The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive was built using two web-publishing
platforms—Omeka and WordPress. I used Omeka to organize the digital archive of
photographs and text scans, while WordPress provided the higher level of design
customization that allowed me to build an aesthetically-pleasing site with intuitive,
consistent navigation. Omeka and WordPress were the intuitive choice to power this
project, because both require little prior knowledge of web design. Omeka guides the site
creator through the process of building a database that meets Dublin Core standards for

6 Brad Johnson, “Disintermediation and the Museum Web Experience: Database or
Documentary—Which Way Should We Go?” Museums and the Web 2003,
archival design, while maintaining a searchable, browseable format. WordPress enables the website’s intended purpose, to facilitate the user’s access to the materials in the archive, while also displaying a clearly organized presentation of my researched, mediated interpretation of the images and text.

Within the six chapters of this paper, I attempt to deconstruct the colonialist master narrative by describing the aims of the COVIC lecture series, particularly *South Africa, The Sea Road to the West, and West Indies and Guiana*, as well as the intentions of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive. In the first chapter, I present a brief introduction to the COVIC lecture series as a photographic archive. In the second chapter, I discuss the concept of the master narrative, and describe the British imperialist master narrative that was used to perpetuate British power and to subjugate colonial subjects. Drawing on texts from post-colonial studies, I present ways that people have attempted to deconstruct the imperial master narrative as a way to combat the effects of colonialism and imperialism. In the third chapter, I locate the COVIC lectures, which were published at the height of the British Empire, as one of many examples of media which substantiated and disseminated the overall imperialist master narrative. I present close readings of images and text from the three COVIC lecture series to qualify the ways that the imperial master narrative appears in the lectures. In the fourth chapter, I present examples of the interactive deconstruction activities featured in the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive which, by involving the audience, help the user to identify and problematize the imperialist master narrative that appears in the COVIC lectures. In the fifth chapter, I discuss the unique benefits of hypermedia and its applications specifically toward history scholarship, using the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive as an
example of a hypertextual online photographic archive. To situate the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive’s design in a larger tradition of digital media design, I discuss the origins and evolution of hypertext and hypermedia, along with the qualities that lend hypermedia format to archival collections. In a sixth chapter, I provide a brief overview of Omeka and WordPress, with special attention to the format, characteristics, and usability of those web publishing platforms from the perspective of the archive designer. I also discuss the ways in which the specifically digital installation of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive enriches the user experience of the content, in comparison to a traditional, textual research paper format. In the conclusion of this degree paper, I contextualize the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive within the overall practice of building digital archives and museums for the study of history by examining the meaning and implications of user interactivity. Finally, I detail further investigations and the future of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive.
Chapter 1: Photography and The COVIC Lectures

During the early 20th century, the British Colonial Office Visual Instruction Committee set out to present lectures to British citizens about the various British colonial holdings, using slides from the photographic archives to drive the narrative of British foreign policy written within the lecture series. As part of this state-sponsored project, the COVIC lantern slide lecture photographs came from the impulse to build an archive that catalogued the people and places of the far reaches of the British Empire, rendering them knowable, and therefore subordinate to the British domestic audiences to which the lectures were presented. In this chapter, I will discuss the ways that the nature of the medium of photography helped to support the colonial master narrative that is perpetuated in the COVIC lectures, which the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive helps to deconstruct.

The impulse to collect, to qualify, and to categorize by way of photographic documentation within the photographic archive far precedes the digital archive. Across the development of photographic methods, we find the common thread of the archival impulse. Even while the popularization of family portraiture created a culture of photography within domestic spaces in the mid-19th century, the new technology was used in juridical contexts to document prisoners and to catalog personal property.7 The photographic archives created during this period (a time which, notably, can be

characterized by an emphasis on empiricism and scientific objectivity) promised to make
the world knowable, accessible, and controllable. The photographic archive could
seemingly bring to order the chaos created by expanding imperial control, by
urbanization, and by the Industrial Revolution. As Allan Sekula theorizes, what might
result is:

a generalized, inclusive archive, a shadow archive that encompasses
an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that
terrain. This archive contains subordinate, territorialized archives:
archives whose semantic interdependence is normally obscured by
the ‘coherence’ and ‘mutual exclusivity’ of the social groups
registered within each. The general, all inclusive archive necessarily
contains both traces of the visible bodies of heroes, leaders, moral
exemplars, celebrities, and those of the poor, the diseased, the
insane, the criminal, the nonwhite, the female, and other
embodiments of the unworthy.8

The images contained within Sekula’s all-encompassing archive are representative of all
that is, all that exists to be photographed. In this way, inclusion in the archive is
tantamount to existence, whereas exclusion signifies representative absence. By
controlling the contents of the archive, and by controlling its presentation, the archivist or
the historian can create a photographic representation that has the visual characteristics of
mechanical documentation and therefore its objectivity, yet with the subjectivity that
curatorial selection necessarily imposes. In exactly this way, the COVIC lecture series,
which paired a large body of photographic images with description text, presented a
visualization of the Empire, from the British Isles to the far-reaches of its most distant
colonial holdings, as a complete, cohesive photographic document. The archive, and the

COVIC lectures which disseminate it, substantiates the imperialist master narrative that imbibes the British imperialist government with power.

The COVIC lectures are one of many Victorian-era projects that sought to consolidate power across the British Empire by way of documentation and representation. During the early 20th century, the British Empire under the rule of Queen Victoria continued its expansion, amassing a considerable presence in Australasia, Africa, the Middle East, India, and Canada, among many other places across the globe. Technological advances in transportation and communications facilitated the long reach of the Empire, and photography became a method by which it could know the land it held. But the photographic documentation of the far reaches of the empire functioned in multiple ways. While these photographs provided some amount of geographic data for the Empire’s administration, they served a strong symbolic function as well. As Susan Sontag famously writes in *On Photography*, “To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and therefore, like power.”\(^9\) Possessing this crucial relation to knowledge and power, photography became “a tool of both scientific empiricism and Western imperialism,” as “a means of simultaneously comprehending… and controlling” the world.\(^10\) Additionally, these images reinforced the belief that the British imperialist government had the fundamental right and the political power to subsume distant places into its ever-expanding Empire. The images accomplish this task by alternately portraying the local populations in these new colonial holdings as terrifying ‘others,’ or

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as children in need of supervision. The photographs and text argue for British economic productivity and superiority, they present colonization as a benevolent, inevitable, modernizing force, and they even cast an air of Englishness over foreign landscapes in order to present colonial land as an extension of the British homeland.

Indeed, photography was crucial to the construction of the imperial master narrative, and played a major role in sources like the COVIC lectures, which disseminated that master narrative to British domestic citizens, as well as new colonial subjects. Beginning in the 1850s, some of the first large-scale exploratory expeditions to employ travel photography for the British Empire were undertaken by John Thompson in China, Singapore, and Cambodia; Samuel Bourne in India; and David Livingstone in Africa.\(^1\) It is important to note that each of these expeditions had its own specific intentions and motivations; as James R. Ryan argues, the resulting photographs “are part of the projection of the imagined landscapes of an expansionist Britain” rather than “visual witnesses to the discovery of unknown regions.”\(^2\) In this way, the explorers for the Empire used photographs to reconstruct their travels for an English audience, meanwhile constructing largely imaginary representations of the landscapes of the distant places incorporated into the Empire.

The remarkable power of the COVIC lectures’ images lay in their ability to create a view of the rest of the world in reference to the British Empire, insisting upon the

\(^1\) For a detailed account of these expeditions, see James R. Ryan, *Picturing Empire: Photography and the Visualization of the British Empire*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
centrality of the British Isles. One photograph that expresses this concept visually can be found in *The Sea Road to the East*, entitled, *Reception by the Sultan of the Maldives*, which receives the alternate title, *The Sultan, receiving a British Official*. In this photograph, a large gathering of Maldivian people crowd around a central figure, the British Governor of Ceylon, who is obscured by the throng. In this way, the photograph literally casts the British official as the center of attention, and implies his importance by the volume of the crowd who meets him. This photograph is one of many that formally construct an image of the British domestic population (and the British Isles) as the center of importance and attention, the protagonists in the master narrative. In his landmark work, *Orientalism*, Edward Said coins the term ‘imaginary geographies’ to name this process, by which “modern and primitive societies seem… to derive their identities” through formulating arbitrary geographical distinctions “designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and an unfamiliar space beyond ‘ours’ which is ‘theirs.’” Sekula sees this delineation as implicit in the development of photography beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, during which “a fundamental tension developed between uses of photography that fulfill a bourgeois conception of the

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self and uses that seek to establish and delimit the terrain of the other.”

To some degree, this “spatial [opposition] of here/there and self/other established during the period of high empire” is a result of the conditions of the medium of photography. For inherent to photography is an uncanny tension between the apparent availability of the referent through the visual realism that photography affords and that referent’s nonetheless undeniable distance (certainly temporally and often geographically).

Calling the COVIC lectures “an elaborate exercise in imperial propaganda,” James R. Ryan explains that the project “married techniques of visual instruction through photographs with geographic education and imperial promotion.” While the images included with the published lectures about the colonies were originally supposed to be provided by the colonial governments, the images the Committee received were deemed unsuitable. As a result, artist Hugh Fisher was selected to act as an official photographer for the project, travelling through the Empire from October 1907 to August 1910 along the Royal Mail Steam Packet Company sailing routes. The official instructions given to Fisher, which guided the overall production and selection of photographs, were that the images should capture “both ‘the native characteristics of the country and its people and the super-added characteristics due to British rule.’” In this way, the photographs were not only meant to visualize the unique otherness of the colonial landscape and its

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17 Ibid, 189-190.
population, but also that it should make clear the benefits of the Empire’s control. As a result, the Colonial Office’s control of the archive, and particularly its concern with the image of the British Empire that the photographs would present, mirrors the control the British Empire sought to substantiate by perpetuating its imperialist master narrative through countless points of representation, including maps, books, albums, museum exhibitions, and newspapers.

Today, these images from the COVIC projects are acknowledged to be propagandistic; they are racist, sexist, classist oversimplifications of the incredibly complex, rich landscapes and populations which they attempted to summarize and overview. Yet at less than 100 years old, the collection of images represents a trend from the not-so-distant past of using photographic archives within educational methodology to create a politically motivated narrative that promotes the overarching imperialist master narrative. These ready-made lectures represent an early form of the documentary, similar to the museum installation, in which an interpretation of other cultures, other places, or other moments in history is presented in an accessible, simplified, linear, unassailable, declarative statement. To deconstruct the text and images, to detach them from the ready-made lecture format, to present the photographs on their own and in combination with one another reveals the extent of mediation extant in the original COVIC lectures. Making these photographs available in digital format in the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive serves three purposes: (1) it promotes further scholarship by art historians and scholars interested in primary sources of imperial propaganda and state-sponsored

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educational material; (2) it frees the photographs from the work they were put to by removing them from the context of the original publications; and (3) it transparently presents my reformulation and reinterpretation of the images and lecture texts, which, while well-intended and widely researched, are subject to my own scholastic intentions and rhetorical motives—as a result, hopefully, beginning a continued dialogue regarding the interpretation of the COVIC lectures and their place in British imperial history. In the next chapter, I will discuss the way in which the colonialist master narrative was constructed to perpetuate the control of the British Empire.
Chapter 2: The Master Narrative: Its Constitution & Deconstruction

As part of my larger intention to deconstruct the colonialist master narrative that is presented in the COVIC lecture series, this chapter examines the formation and circulation of master narratives as part of the process of colonization. The colonialist master narrative perpetuated by the British actually strengthened the hold that the Empire had on its foreign subjects. The COVIC lectures, then, present one example of an interconnected system of media that carried this master narrative in order to exert control over the colonies. Within this chapter, I describe the components of the overall master narrative and present ways that postcolonial scholars have suggested that that master narrative might be deconstructed. These methods of deconstruction inform the interactive exercises in the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive which help the user to unravel the colonialist master narrative that is present in the COVIC lecture series that will be described in full in subsequent chapters.

Put simply, a master narrative is a story that is told about the past that organizes events sequentially, attempts to define patterns in causation, and situates the agents of past events (individuals, institutions, nations) in reference to one another. As scholars of colonialism and post-colonialism have long contended, far beyond its role in describing the past, the master narrative enabled European colonialists to control, to marginalize, and to disenfranchise the people of the colonies. The COVIC lecture series exist as one example of a vast multitude of ways that the imperialist British government built up and
disseminated a Eurocentric master narrative that cast the people of the colonies as ‘Other’ through education and media. Within the discipline of post-colonial studies, writers have attempted to chart the expansion of the empire as a function of the implementation of the master narrative; in turn, scholars have also offered ways that the impossibly entrenched colonial master narrative might be subverted. One of the major impetuses for the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive project is to enable users to recognize and begin to deconstruct the imperialist master narrative that is featured in the COVIC lectures series volumes. The initial step in that process, the step that the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive is designed to facilitate, is the recognition that a major source of political, economic, and sociological control that the British Empire exerted over its colonial holdings was the master narrative it promoted across the world.

The master narrative of the British Empire exerted force over its colonial subjects by writing them into a worldview that privileged Europeans and denigrated non-Europeans. In *De-Scribing Empire*, a collection of critical essays that provide close readings of colonialist texts, Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson explain that the construction of a master narrative actually facilitated the spread of colonialism:

> Imperial relations may have been established initially by guns, guile and disease, but they were maintained in their interpellative phase largely by textuality… Colonialism (like its counterpart, racism), then, is an operation of discourse, and as an operation of discourse it interpellates colonial subjects by incorporating them in a system of representation."20

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Tiffin and Lawson credit the creation of the imperial master narrative as an equally potent function in the process of empire-building. By creating an overarching story which cast the European colonialist as the protagonist and the indigenous population of any given colonial territory as the subject of the inevitable process of colonization, the Empire not only maintained control, but legitimized that control by its rhetoric. The methods of dissemination were many and varied. Howard McNaughton explains: “In education, in legislation, in books ranging from the Bible to airline timetables, the textuality of the British Empire has written itself across the globe, to be internalized by its subjects.”

In this way, the manner in which the British Empire described itself, the very language used in education, in infrastructure, and particularly in geography reinforced the notion of the inferiority of the colonial subject to the British domestic citizen.

The colonialist or imperialist master narrative that served the British Empire’s rapid spread has a series of core components. First, it locates Europe as the center of history; second, it casts the people living in colonized places in the role of the ‘other,’ the non-British and non-European, thereby obscuring any semblance of self-contained identity in exchange for what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak refers to as “identity-in-differential,” for identity constructed in reference to the dominant group. Part of making the local population the lesser ‘other,’ was achieved by way of survey, observation, and

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inquiry into the customs and landscape of the colonized place. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin explain:

The formidable ally of economic and political control had long been the business of ‘knowing’ other people because this ‘knowing’ underpinned imperial dominance and became the mode by which they were increasingly able to know themselves: that is, as subordinate to Europe.  

The master narrative, then, not only influenced the way that domestic British audiences saw non-British imperial subjects, but also impacted the way that the colonized people saw themselves. Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe continues this thought, emphasizing that demographic knowledge contributed to a sense of control for the colonizer:

To the colonialist mind it was always of the utmost importance to be able to say: “I know my natives,” a claim which implied two things at once: (a) that the native was really quite simple and (b) that understanding him and controlling him went hand in hand – understanding being a precondition for control and control constituting an adequate proof of understanding.  

Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, and Achebe each point to interconnected results of the ethnographic approach to native populations—knowledge and power combined in the imperialist master narrative to simultaneously depreciate the very personhood of the local population, even and especially from the perspective of that population, and to substantiate the claim to control that the British sought.

Third, in the cases in which the master narrative is not actively constructing a view of the native as lesser than the European, it is concealing the local population

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altogether. As Tiffin and Lawson explain, “Colonialism conceptually depopulated
countries either by acknowledging the native but relegating him or her to the category of
the subhuman, or simply by looking through the native and denying his/her existence…
Only empty spaces can be settled, so the space had to be made empty.”25 On this note, a
fourth component to the imperialist master narrative is the perception of colonial lands as
unused or uninhabited. Notably, cartographic historian Simon Ryan argues that this
aspect of the colonial master narrative was so pervasive that it even imbues the maps that
were drawn during the initial stages of colonialism. He explains that

the process of colonial inscription begins even before the arrival of
the explorers who prepare maps of the country for subsequent
settlement. For their practices, their ways of seeing – and hence
selecting – details to be recorded, are predefined, not just by
centuries-old traditions of European map-making but also by the
ideology of the expansionist colonialism which they serve.26

Here, Ryan notes that the expansionist perspective of the cartographers becomes
subsumed into the maps they draw, which are crucial to the logistical processes of
colonization. He continues: “Maps themselves have played a significant role in the visual
production of the continent as a *tabula rasa*, for cartographical emptiness is not simply a
display of geographical ignorance but a statement of economic and demographic
availability.”27 Colonists justified their occupation of the lands by this myth of empty
spaces and unused resources. The overarching master narrative that resulted from these

26 Simon Ryan, “Inscribing the Emptiness: Cartography, exploration and the construction
of Australia,” in *De-Scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and textuality*, ed. Chris Tiffin
27 Ryan, “Inscribing the Emptiness,” 126.
core components acted as a system of self-sustaining, interdependent beliefs that justified the policies and behaviors of the British imperial power.

This process of history-making that privileges a Eurocentric master narrative is so powerful that even after the Second World War, as the British Empire declined and colonial territories around the world decolonized, its effects are still felt. Scholars of post-colonial studies like Spivak question the full extent of the havoc that results from colonization. According to Spivak, the systematic denigration of the colonized population was realized by “the remotely orchestrated, far-flung and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other,” a process undertaken by the imperial British government that she calls “epistemic violence.”28 Differentiating between the disenfranchised populations of non-colonized places and those living in colonized territories, she states that people who were marginalized, including “men and women among the illiterate peasantry, the tribals, the lowest strata of the urban subproletariat,” who would otherwise be able to “*speak and know their conditions,*” are simply unable to do so under the conditions of imperialism.29 She poses the question, which subsequently becomes a widely debated inquiry in post-colonial studies, “On the other side of the international division of labor from socialized capital, inside _and_ outside the circuit of the epistemic violence of imperialist law and education supplementing an earlier economic text, _can the subaltern speak?*_”30 Spivak says no—“For the ‘true,’ subaltern group, whose identity is its difference, there is no unrepresentable subaltern subject that can know and

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29 Ibid, 25.
In this way, Spivak argues that the identities of the colonized, and of the heirs to colonization, are so completely defined in reference to their differences from the members of dominant groups, that they are functionally unable to speak and know their conditions, their lack of agency, or the true extent of the control placed upon them. For Spivak, then, the imperial master narrative is so insidious that it is at once ubiquitous and indiscernible.

Conceding the extent of its entrenchment, and acknowledging Spivak’s provoking claim, others seek ways to deconstruct the master narrative to begin to neutralize its further effect. Dipesh Chakrabarty, for example, argues that in institutional settings like universities “‘Europe’ remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan,’ and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe.’” The only way to combat the master narrative and its deleterious effects, Chakrabarty argues (somewhat polemically), is to undergo “the project of provincializing ‘Europe,’ the ‘Europe,’ that modern imperialism and (third world) nationalism have, by their collaborative venture and violence, made universal.”

To Chakrabary, history as it is written and as it is taught valorizes the systems of capitalism and of the nation-state that result from the very systems of imperialism that post-colonial scholars now attempt to subvert. Scholarship of history, therefore, must be

31 Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak?” 27
reformulated to de-center the European perspective, if the master narrative is to be subverted.

Tiffin and Lawson point to other ways that the imperial master narrative is being combated, acknowledging Spivak’s important question, while offering a competing assessment of the situation:

Whether or not the subaltern can ever speak is obviously a profound and perplexing question which justifies the lengthy and subtle discussion it has provoked. But the curious thing about the debate is that it is being conducted by non-subalterns, people with voice, institutional power, and unlimited access to technologies of textuality. A second curious thing is that they seem largely not to have noticed that the subalterns, meanwhile, are speaking. Post-colonial writers are declaring their spaces, engaging with canonical texts, rewriting not just the tradition but the episteme which underpins it.34

To Tiffin and Lawson, Spivak’s question seems to deny the voices of marginalized people with colonial heritage who are actively writing about the master narratives that the British Empire used to perpetuate its control. Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid, for example, takes on the core components of the imperial master narrative in her work, A Small Place. She writes:

You loved knowledge, and wherever you went you made sure to build a school, a library (yes, and in both of these places you distorted or erased my history and glorified your own). But then again, perhaps as you observe the debacle in which I now exist, the utter ruin that I say is my life, perhaps you are remembering that you had always felt people like me cannot run things, people like me will never grasp the idea of Gross National Product, people like me will never be able to take command of the things the most simpleminded among you can master, people like me will never understand the notion of rule by law, people like me cannot really think in abstractions, people like me cannot be objective, we make

everything so personal. You will forget your part in the whole setup, that bureaucracy is one of your inventions, that Gross National Product is one of your inventions, and all the laws that you know mysteriously favour you…

In this passage, Kincaid’s awareness of the role of the master narrative in the process of colonization is fully apparent. She references the linkage between knowledge and power that Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin and Achebe present; she notes the inevitable erasure that ensues as part of colonial history-making; and she describes the deep racism that results from the ‘othering’ of the Antiguan population. Kincaid is one of many authors who write from the perspective of what Spivak might term “the subaltern;” her work is one example of a deconstruction of the imperial master narrative that subverts that narrative’s claims of the ineptitude or inability of colonized populations.

The deconstruction of the imperialist master narrative, evidently, can be seen as a process of many steps, some examples of which were noted above. The first step to the process, the step that the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive undertakes, is in revealing to the user the nature of a master narrative. Of this process, Tiffin and Lawson explain: “The texts of the Empire need to be described as part of the anatomy of Empire, but they also need to be de-scribed as part of the liquidation of Empire’s effects.” By presenting close readings of the photographs and accompanying text of the COVIC lectures on South Africa, The Sea Road to the East, and West Indies & Guiana, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive addresses the ways in which images and text can be combined to

tell a complex story that justifies imperial aims and marginalizes hundreds of thousands of individuals. Of this initial step in the process of deconstruction, Tiffin and Lawson explain: “Post-colonial analysis of imperial texts is thus at least a double process: it analyses imperial texts... it resituates them with other texts to neutralize the power of their privileged voice...”37 In this way, by removing the photographs from their original context as part of a highly curated, government-sponsored lecture series, and by situating excerpts from the text with the work of authors like Kincaid, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive intends to subvert the powerful imperial master narrative. In the next chapter, I will detail the six core components of the imperialist master narrative that the COVIC lectures perpetuate via image and text.

37 Tiffin and Lawson, “Conclusion: Reading difference,” 231.
Chapter 3: The Master Narrative in COVIC

The colonialist master narrative discussed in the previous chapter undoubtedly functions in the COVIC lectures discussed in this degree paper project. As the overarching goal of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive is the deconstruction of this master narrative, it is essential for the user to be able to recognize the way that the master narrative operates within the COVIC lectures. In this chapter, I present the six core components of the COVIC colonialist narrative that serve the overarching master narrative of the British Empire by offering close readings of the photographs and texts from the lecture series.

While the three COVIC lectures, *West Indies and Guiana, The Sea Road to the East,* and *South Africa* were written by two different authors, and contained photographs from a variety of sources, there is a remarkable continuity of tone and theme. The lectures are formatted as narrated travelogues, and so attempt to immerse the audience in the experience of visiting the distant landscapes described by the text and pictured by the images. Within each text, however, exists the COVIC’s predetermined master narrative, which attempts to aggrandize the benefits of British control and intervention in its imperial holdings abroad, portray colonization as an inevitable part of human history, and promote a simplified and self-congratulatory narrative of the rise of the British Empire. Within the three texts are common themes; in particular, the following six themes appear in at least two, if not all three, of the COVIC lectures examined: (1) the inevitability of colonization as a necessary, linear process; (2) a fear of or disdain for the other, the non-white body, which is presented as strange, dangerous, primitive, and puerile; (3) the
paternalistic impulse to help the misguided native population, who, if left to its own
devices, would languish; (4) an emphasis on economic or industrial productivity as a
measure of the United Kingdom’s righteousness in colonization; (5) a discussion of labor
shortages and human resources, which contends that racial identity determines suitability
for types of labor; and (6) the implicit or explicit referral to the colonial landscape as
intrinsically “English” in quality or character.

The Inevitability of Colonization

Over the course of all three COVIC lecture series examined in this paper, the
master narrative of the publications present British colonialism and imperialism as an
inevitable process, characterized by linear evolutions as barren, uncivilized, empty
territory inhabited by native populations is transformed into landscapes that are modern,
economically useful, fertile, civilized, colonial, and settled by white populations. In the
South Africa lectures, for example, the colonial cities of Stellenbosch and Capetown
embody the end-state of this process, whereas the landscapes outside of the cities
represent the primitive stages of pre-civilization. One stands for the present and future,
whereas the other is emphatically situated in the past. The narrative references this linear
development in a description of Market Street in Johannesburg, paired with a photograph:

Market Street, with its electric cars, and Commissioner Street, with
its tall offices and line of waiting motors, seem very far removed
from the ugly mine and the primitive Kaffir. We can hardly imagine
that the city, with its public buildings, University College, theatres,
clubs and newspapers, only a few years ago was a mere group of
tents and huts and sheds of galvanized iron, without water supply or drainage.\textsuperscript{38}

Here, the narrative clearly differentiates the modern from the primitive, juxtaposing the cultural center of the city from the outlying, undeveloped land and the African population (the Kaffir, in this case), who dwell there. An extremely similar passage emerges in the \textit{West Indies and Guiana} lectures, in a description of Frederick Street in Port of Spain, Trinidad:

Port of Spain, which occupies the site of an old Indian village called Conquerabia, is one of the finest towns in British West Indies. Once squalid and shabby, it is now scrupulously clean, and many of the buildings would grace a European capital. The town now enjoys the advantage of a plentiful water supply, which is stored in reservoirs in the mountains, and a drainage system that is the envy of neighboring islands. Time was when ghoulish vultures called “Johnny Crows” were protected by law in order that they might act as scavengers, and it was not uncommon to see them tearing dead dogs and cats to pieces in the streets; but the need for these has long since gone.\textsuperscript{39}

The accompanying photograph shows an aerial view of the town, with a wide, paved boulevard bisecting blocks of tall buildings. The harbor is visible in the distant horizon, dotted with sailboats.

Common in each of these descriptions is a

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Frederick_Street_Port_of_Spain_Trinidad_1914.jpg}
\caption{Frederick Street, Port of Spain, Trinidad, Algernon A. Aspinall, \textit{West Indies and Guiana}, 1914}
\end{figure}


reminder of the modest pre-colonial past of each settlement described, substantiating the benefits of British rule. In the case of Stellenbosch, we are told that before British intervention, not long ago, was “a mere group of tents and sheds,” just as in Trinidad, the previously “squalid and shabby,” Indian village of Conquerabia is “now scrupulously clean,” and likened to “a European capital.” The message is clear: in colonizing these places abroad and subsuming them into the British Empire, the British transform primitive, poor landscapes to modern, useful, economically fruitful ones. The photographs of the well-established towns and cities exist as what John Taylor calls “the favoured depiction of the British Empire” in which “the history of settlement was never seen, and the new state appeared fully-fledged, content, and modern – the work of heroic pioneers,” with “no representations of ‘prospecting and no scenes of displacement.” The colonial states, both in South Africa and in the West Indies, are made to fit the European standard of civilization, which is described as the next, necessary step in development from primitive past to modern future. As a result, the preexisting populations are portrayed as an obstacle to the process of modernization—these people are described either as sources of fear or of pity.

**Fear of the Other**

Across all three COVIC lectures, we are presented with elaborate descriptions of the racial identities and local customs of the people encountered in the far-reaches of the British Empire. Indeed, the lectures carefully catalog and present these racial types just as

they might describe climate, vegetation, or local fauna. While the most frequent tone of these descriptions is paternalistic and self-aggrandizing, there are notable examples in which the master narrative presents the native population as a source of fear and as an undeniable threat to the white, British citizen. In the *South Africa* lectures, the master narrative simultaneously justifies the widely unpopular annexing of the Transvaal, a settlement of ethnically Dutch South Africans, the Boers, into the Empire by explaining that it was precipitated by the threat of the black native African population. The lecture explains:

> The real justification for the act of annexation lay in the fact that Britain was the only Power in South Africa competent to deal with the large native population, while the rest of South Africa was bound to suffer from the failure of the Transvaal to control the natives on its borders. Past experience had amply proved that a local dispute might develop readily into a general attack of black on white.\(^{41}\)

After this explanation, the text argues that if the British were to leave the Boers to their own devices, they would be immediately threatened by the surrounding African natives. The text’s master narrative clearly delineates the vulnerable white settler from the violent, black native. In the subsequent section of the lecture, the text describes the

\(^{41}\) Sargent, *South Africa*, 68.
Zulu population, presenting an image entitled, *Zulu War Dance*. The accompanying text is suggestive of the potential violence:

> This question of control of the natives is one of the chief difficulties facing the white people in Natal in the future, since there are at present about ten natives to one white person in the Province and the natives have not yet lost touch with their old ideas and customs. We realize this if we attend their functions of the ceremony. Here is a wedding party, with the bride and her chief supporters; and here is a group of chiefs in attendance in full war dress. Many of their weapons have probably seen fighting in the past and would again *if our control were removed*. The War Dance, which we see here, is not very far removed from reality. [Emphasis my own.]\(^{42}\)

The master narrative of the text, then, clearly supports a reading of the photograph in which the action depicted is decontextualized from its actual, benign setting, a ceremonial dance. The photograph, when paired with the suggestive text of the British colonial master narrative, is reactivated. Even though the viewer is told that the context is ceremonial, he or she is warned that the weapons are real; that the violence could be real as well. The viewer is encouraged to imagine a very different scene, one that he or she is told is inevitable, “*if our control were removed.*” As a result of the master narrative’s projected meaning, in which the African native is a threat that needs to be neutralized, the viewer of the photograph is placed in a modified relationship to the central figure; the brandished weapon is no longer part of a dance, and it is pointed directly at the viewer.

In the *Sea Road to the East* lecture series, the master narrative perpetuates a similar fear of the other that justifies British colonization abroad. We are presented with a similarly ceremonial image to the *Zulu War Dance* photograph, in this case a sporting event known as a *sumptian* shooting match. Much like an archery tournament,

\(^{42}\) Sargent, *South Africa*, 78.
participants attempt to hit targets with the long blowpipe and darts known in the region of British North Borneo as a *sumptian*. Even though the context is similarly peaceful, the master narrative takes the opportunity to remind the viewer of the potential threat of the non-European, non-white native by following the image of the *sumptian* match with two images of native people carrying *sumptians*, paired with the following description:

Even more interesting to us is the shooting match with the *sumptian*, the long blowpipe with poison darts that takes the place of bow and arrow. Here we find this formidable weapon put to harmless use… The crowds of spectators show us every type of native face and dress. Here is a group of Muruts with *sumpitans* [sic]… The Muruts seem to be the aborigines of this part of the interior; they are unlike the coast people in appearance and they are pagans, not Mohammedans; but they share with the Sea Dyaks their liking for head-hunting, and would soon revive the practice were British control removed. [Emphasis my own.]

The similarity of phrasing to the *South Africa* lecture is remarkable—if British control were removed, the native population would resort to primitive, self-destructive behavior; under British control, the process of civilizing the natives is a

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central component to colonization. In this way, the master narrative substantiates British control abroad by affirming that non-white, non-British, local populations are inherently violent, threatening, and must be neutralized and controlled for their own good.

**Paternalism**

Another important commonality in the way that the COVIC narratives deal with issues of race and identity is perpetuating not only a fear of the exocitized other, but also imparting to the viewer a deep-seated sense of British superiority that results from comparisons of Europeans and the dysfunctional or inefficient native population. This aspect of the COVIC master narrative denies any semblance of talent, ability, or skill of the native, instead projecting the image of the native as a child in need of education, guidance, and supervision. In the *South Africa* lectures, for example, the master narrative asserts that the process of colonization actually protected certain tribes of native African people:

> Sometimes, whole tribes were removed from a region and settled in another in the execution of our policy. Effective control over the Territories is now exercised by white officials, though native chiefs or headmen still have considerable influence and authority. The Kaffirs, far from beings savages, have reached a certain level of social and political organization.44

In addition to protecting the native population, the master narrative in both the *South Africa* and the *Sea Road to the East* lectures presents the potential of the land and its rich resources as worthy of British protection. In the *South Africa* lectures, the viewer is told

that

the whole future of this region must depend largely on its native inhabitants... The Kaffir is far from being unteachable, and scattered everywhere in his country we find missions of all kinds... He has already adopted the American plough, in the place of the hoe of his fathers, and he is gradually learning other improved methods of agriculture, by the example and in the employment of English and Dutch farmers.45

Quite similar to this description of the practical education of the native population under the direction of the English is a passage in *The Sea Road to the East* lectures, which emphasizes the need for British intervention in Cyprus. The narrative charges: “The future of Cyprus depends on its agriculture... the real trouble arises from the recurrence of drought and from the backward condition of the native peasantry. Only a smart part of the land is under cultivation, and the methods of the native are such as might be expected after centuries of misgovernment.”46 The photograph that accompanies this explanation of the local inhabitants of Cyprus is of a Turkish villager and a young boy at a well: “There are

also many Turks settled in the island, but as the native Cypriotes are rather more industrious as well as more numerous, they are gradually regaining possession of the land, and Turkish influence is growing weaker.”47 It continues by asserting that the “Turks and Cypriotes are alike in their backward methods and reckless waste of the resources of the country. They will cut down a whole tree for the sake of a single plank and destroy an ancient building to make a stable.”48 The master narrative constructed in these lectures makes clear that the local populations, in this case both the Turks and the Cypriotes, are inferior to the British; they require assistance and supervision. Moreover, they are unable to develop their economies without colonial intervention. Indeed, the locals are presented as a distinct hindrance to the process of civilization and the economic stability and productivity that results. To this point, the lecture’s text states:

> The Government is undertaking the work, but the people and the goats are most destructive, so forest guards have to be employed… Time and money, especially money, are needed to repair centuries of neglect, and the native will do nothing without European control.49

In these instances, the native populations of the British colonies are presented as incapable, underdeveloped, and childlike. The superiority of the British citizen is implied in every description, which serves to substantiate the British master narrative of imperialism as a constructive, rather than inherently racist and destructive, process.

47 Sargent, *The Sea Road to the East*, 27.
48 Ibid, 27.
**Economic Productivity and the Absent Worker**

In addition to the COVIC master narrative’s argument that the colonization of British holdings abroad were for the benefit of the native population, all three of the lecture series discussed in this paper also make a case for the economic benefits of imperialism to the domestic British viewer. In this way, colonialism is presented as a particularly fruitful economic policy. Furthermore, the narrative implies that the British colonists are taking advantage of natural resources that the native populations would otherwise squander or neglect. For example, in *The Sea Road to the East* lectures, the text describes the tea industry in Ceylon (modern day Sri Lanka), explaining: “The whole industry has developed independently of the native Sinhalese, by means of foreign capital, foreign direction and foreign labour; even the very food for the coolies must be brought in by the sea, since the Sinhalese agriculturalists produce little more than they need for themselves.”

The narrative is careful to explain that the native Sri Lankans (here termed Sinhalese) are merely subsistence farmers, and presumably had no interest in the lands and resulting industries built on the island by the British government. *The Sea Road to the East* lectures’ description of economic productivity in Malaya (the Malay peninsula and Singapore) and Borneo retains this theme of British economic control:

Malaya and Borneo are tropical estates and can only be developed by special methods. In dealing with these estates we have given considerable space to the subject of administration, since without order and security it is impossible to utilize those natural resources with which our geography is concerned. These resources include the minerals and the whole range of tropical products, together with the available human material, the Chinese or Indian labourer and the

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50 Sargent, *The Sea Road to the East*, 70.
native Malay. Foreign capital, British or Chinese, under British direction provides the driving force of progress.51

This passage reveals the nature of British interest in its colonial holdings in Southeast Asia. The region is undeniably laden with material wealth and agricultural potential. The rest of the British Empire can provide labor, termed “available human material,” and the native Malay is only concerned insofar as he is put to work on a British plantation or in a British mine.

A fascinating aspect of the presentation of economic productivity in all three of the COVIC lectures series discussed here is the recurrent theme of the absent worker. With examples extant in both image- and text-form, the lectures nearly always present the machines of industry or agriculture in absence of the actual presence of the worker, despite the lectures’ continual discussion of labor resources. An example of this absence of the labor force exists in the West Indies and Guiana lectures in the photographic slide, A Cacao Estate, Grenada. This photograph presents an image of a cacao

Figure 6, *A Cacao Estate, Grenada* from Algernon A. Aspinall, *West Indies and Guiana*, 1914

plantation in the British colony of Grenada, but, like most of the representations of
industrial spaces in the COVIC lectures, presents a view that is absent of workforce. The
viewer is presented with a panned out image of the Grenadian countryside. In the right-
center of the image, a road curves toward a large white building. Across the road on the
near right, we see a small building with a steep roof, surrounded by palm trees. The
photograph is notable for what is absent in it: any depiction or sign of human labor. The
labor conditions, the labor-intensive process of cacao production, and any representation
of the identities of the workers are denied to the viewer. Instead, the narrative explains:
“The soil of Grenada, which is wonderfully fertile, is well adapted for the cultivation of
all kinds of tropical produce. Cacao in particular yields large crops in the island, and
forms the most important industry.”\(^{52}\) The narrative goes on to detail the methods of
cacao production, but resists any description of the lives of the workers. By concealing
the workers from photographs illustrating the economic productivity of the colonies, the
COVIC lectures are able to present the colonial industries as wholly British operations,
thereby taking sole credit for their fiscal success, along with, undoubtedly, the vast
majority of profits from export.

Similarly, photographs from the *South Africa* lecture present sites of industrial
production, yet without the visible signature of the laboring bodies that are responsible
for that production. This trend of the absent worker is evident in the *South Africa*
photograph, *Surface Workings of a Gold Mine*, and the accompanying description of the
mining operations given in the Transvaal lecture. Like *A Cacao Estate, Grenada*, this
photograph presents a macro-scale view of the complex workings of the industrial site, in

\(^{52}\) Aspinall, *West Indies and Guiana*, 73.
this case of the mining process. The scale of the image, visualized by the size of the stairs in the right foreground and the ladder in the immediate middle foreground, emphasizes the extensive industry established in the country. The accompanying description catalogues the “elaborate machinery” used in the process and is careful to differentiate the scene from visions of “swarms of miners, with pick and shovel, digging holes,” instead underscoring the modernity of the operations, calling the process “prosaic, …matters for the geologist [and] the engineer.”53 By excluding images of the laborers working within the dark, dirty mines or processing cacao pods by hand, the lectures are able to present the economic benefits of colonization without engaging the viewer in a discussion of labor conditions or fair compensation. The paternalistic representations of native populations in the master narrative of the COVIC lectures helps to further this disregard for the human rights aspect of industrial progress by literally obscuring all evidence of the human body in the images used to illustrate economic productivity.

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Strangely, even when native workers of all ages are displayed in a portrait on a plantation, such as in the case of the photograph from *The Sea Road to the East*, called *Malays on Plantation*, the master narrative reverses the formula, and writes any reference to labor or work outside of the textual accompaniment to the image. The narrative describes the photograph as a racial type and focuses on the fashions of the natives, rather than an illustration of work in progress: “Here, on the other hand, we see the typical Malay, in his national costume, the bright coloured *sarong* or petticoat which is worn both by men and women, with a light jacket of some kind to complete the dress.”\(^{54}\) A few images later in the slideshow, the text explains: “Though the Malay is largely occupied in agriculture, yet he has taken only a small share in the most important of recent movements, the artificial cultivation of rubber.”\(^{55}\) The narrative therefore justifies the British control of industrial works in that region by obscuring images of the people of Malay working and explaining that the native population has no interest in industry or economic productivity. When taken out of the context of the suggestive textual accompaniment, the viewer must wonder about the labor

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\(^{54}\) Sargent, *The Sea Road to the East*, 85.  
\(^{55}\) Ibid, 85.
conditions of plantations, especially considering the presence of young children in the photograph. The COVIC lectures use unpeopled, macroscale images of industry to suggest the economic benefits of colonization, while deflecting any concern about slavery or indenture, child labor, labor conditions, or human rights of the native populations in general.

**Labor Shortages and Racial Suitability for Labor**

Despite the lecture series’ resistance to images of the worker while in the process of working, there is frequent mention of human resource concerns in the colonies. Additionally, as part of the COVIC master narrative’s larger convention of describing the race and resulting features of native and immigrant populations abroad, the texts often mention racial identity as a determining factor of suitability for certain types of labor. Within the *West Indies and Guiana* lectures, this theme of the COVIC master narrative is particularly recurrent. It begins first as part of a discussion of slavery in the West Indies, a topic which the master narrative treats ambivalently. In the first of four instances in which the *West Indies and Guiana* lectures discuss suitability for work as a function of racial identity, the narrative explains:

> The mild and peaceful Arawaks… were soon stamped out of existence by the Spaniards, who compelled them to labour in the mines of Hispaniola, work for which they were quite unsuited. To meet the consequent need for labour, negro slaves were introduced from West Africa.\(^{56}\)

\(^{56}\) Aspinall, *West Indies and Guiana*, 47.
Obviously perpetuating the belief that West Africans were suited to hard labor in the mines, the text presents slavery and the subsequent problem of abolition from an economic perspective. The master narrative repeatedly describes abolition as an economic hardship to the plantation owners and a setback in the inevitable industrial and economic progress of the successful colonies. An example of this ambivalence to slavery within the narrative exists in the Jamaica lecture, which describes the cultivation of sugar and the manufacture of rum as the principal industry in that colony for centuries:

but in the nineteenth century, in consequence of the abolition of slavery... the exports of sugar steadily declined... Jamaica perhaps suffered more than any other of the West Indian islands from the vicissitudes to which the sugar industry was subject, and the immense fortunes which had been made were wiped out by the loss of slave labor. 57

This description of the industrial history of sugar in Jamaica emphasizes the economic conditions of slavery rather than the human rights issue that it represented. The narrative mentions racial suitability for labor again when describing the post-abolition labor resources available in the colonies, particularly in Jamaica. It explains: “Attempts have from time to time been made to establish settlements of Europeans as labourers, but they have invariably failed. As in British Guiana and Trinidad, East Indian labour is employed on many of the sugar estates, the coolies being introduced into the island from Calcutta under a system of indenture.” 58 The viewer is presented with two important points in this passage; one, that Europeans are unsuitable for hard labor; and two, that in Jamaica, as in many of the West Indian colonies, indentured servitude served as a replacement for slavery, as long as the indentured immigrants were suitable for the industrial or

57 Aspinall, West Indies and Guiana, 43.
58 Ibid, 48.
agriculture work at hand. The issue of racial suitability is clearly an economic concern to
the colonial government as we see in a description of British Honduras (now present day
Belize) the viewer is told:

The creole wood cutters, who form the bulk of the population, are a
sturdy race of negroes of fine physique, and earn what would be
considered in a West Indian island exceedingly high wages. They are
not, however, suited to agricultural pursuits, and if subsidiary
industries are to be developed successfully, the labour problem will
have to be faced and steps taken to introduce suitable immigrants.59

In this passage, the viewer is again made aware that certain races are suited for certain
types of labor; the narrative additionally casts this concern for obtaining the right labor
resources (racially determined, that is) as a major economic concern in the process of
colonization.

While somewhat less prevalent of a theme in the master narrative of The Sea
Road to the East lectures than in the West Indies and Guiana series, examples of racial
suitability to certain types of labor exist in the former text as well. For example, the
viewer is given the following description of Singapore’s demographic composition:

The population is a strange mixture of Chinese, Malays and Indians,
with a handful of Europeans controlling the whole mass. The
Chinese, in numbers, industry and wealth, have been the most
important factor in the growth of the whole region, and their
influence increases every year. The Malays approach them in
numbers but lag far behind in intelligence and capacity for work;
while the Indian element, mainly Tamil coolies as in Ceylon, is
much smaller.60

59 Aspinall, West Indies and Guiana, 117.
60 Sargent, The Sea Road to the East, 79.
This passage reveals the colonial perspective on racial identity, which relies heavily on racial stereotyping to organize the COVIC master narrative’s presentation of a diverse population. Another example of this sort of racial stereotyping as related to the capacity for work is presented as the textual accompaniment to the photograph *A Hakka Woman*, which presents a portrait of a woman working on pottery in the village of Wun-yin. The description reads:

> Let us pay a short visit to Wun-yin, or “Pottery” village, for a glimpse of a native industry. We see a potter at work, painting the little bowls, but he does not look quite the same as the ordinary Chinese of the south. He is a *Hakka*, as is this native woman, who does not seem in the least nervous in front of the camera. Neither is handsome, but they are very useful in Hongkong, since they do much of the hard manual work which is necessary in a great port.\(^6^1\)

The description derides the physical appearance of the woman, and seems to take issue with her frank, comfortable pose, and her expression, which squarely meets the eyes of the viewer. It follows by tempering the criticism with a confirmation of the usefulness of the potters, who are racially qualified as hard manual laborers. In this way, the master narrative rejects the native industry in which this woman is employed as a skilled potter, instead presenting her suitability to manual labor; what results is an undeniably racist

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\(^6^1\) Sargent, *The Sea Road to the East*, 105.
Throughout the COVIC lectures, the master narrative that emerges presents the local populations as either hindrances to the process of the colonization that need to be relocated, or as sources of manual labor to exploit. Insofar as local people are unsuitable to the work offered by the colonial government, the lectures promote sourcing immigrants from around the British Empire to take over the work, with no discussion of labor conditions and little explanation of compensation.

**Englishness of the Landscape**

A final component to the master narrative presented by the COVIC lectures, which substantiated British involvement in foreign places, regards the way in which the distant colonial landscape, illustrated through photographs, can be made to seem intrinsically English in quality or character. For example, the viewer of the *South Africa* lectures is shown photographs like *Grahamstown*, an idyllic view of a small town in the countryside, dotted with trees. In the skyline, the steeple of the Cathedral is evident; in the foreground, an orderly white fence lines...
a curving road, and shrubs are planted along the grass. Peter Osborne describes this strategy as the creation of, (to quote Salman Rushdie), “a mirage of Englishness,” through “the celebration of ‘English’ qualities” in reference to photographs of colonial India;\textsuperscript{62} he continues:

\begin{quote}
The images reassure. The restful, benevolent qualities associated with this landscape symbolise a desire for a displacement of the turbulence and actual or implicit violence of colonial rule. They also permit the English to look as if they belong.\textsuperscript{63}
\end{quote}

This process also legitimates the colonial landscape’s membership to the Empire by conflating the colonial space with the domestic space; Grahamstown, for example, gains entrance into the Empire by seeming familiar and ‘knowable,’ and by appearing as an extension, albeit a distant one, of the English countryside. Another example of this translation of the landscape from foreign to domestic by way of verbal or visual description exists in the Barbados lecture of the \textit{West Indies and Guiana} publication. In a description of what is called “the Scotland District,” of the island, the viewer is told: “the scenery is extremely picturesque, the chief points of vantage being Chimborazo, Cherry Tree Hill and Hackleton’s Cliff. He would be hard to please indeed who failed to be impressed by the superb views from these eminences.”\textsuperscript{64} The text continues, asserting that Barbados “is the most English and the most home-like of the West Indian colonies, and this fact, coupled with its superb climate, make it an ideal resort for those in search of health or pleasure.”\textsuperscript{65} The description, paired, presumably, with a picturesque view of the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{63} Osborne, \textit{Traveling Light}, 49.
\textsuperscript{64} Aspinall, \textit{West Indies and Guiana}, 26-27.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid, 27.
\end{flushright}
district,\textsuperscript{66} emphasizes the Englishness, and therefore, wholesomeness or goodness, of the land. Indeed, this transition that the foreign landscape might undergo, from a non-European, underdeveloped place to one with roads, bridges, colonial offices, European architecture, industry and agriculture is always presented as the end-goal of any colony, as evidenced by the COVIC’s master narrative in the lecture series examined in this paper.

\textsuperscript{66} Unfortunately, this image not reproduced in the \textit{West Indies and Guiana} volume.
Chapter 4: Deconstructing the Master Narrative in the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive

If imperialism is accomplished by the careful control of information, by the skillful curation and presentation of that information, then we may begin to deconstruct imperialism and imperial master narratives by moving in the opposite direction: we may contribute to the dismantlement of the master narrative of the Empire by the democratization and free dissemination of information—in this case, the text and images contained within the COVIC lecture series. This is accomplished in two ways; one, the interpretive critical analysis offered in the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive website may help the non-specialist reader to recognize a master narrative; and two, it allows scholars and researchers without institutional access a point of entry to these rich and fascinating documents by way of digital scans. They may develop their own interpretations by close reading, by examination of the photographic records, or by quantitative text analysis.

The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive has two major components. It first introduces the context of the digital archive to the user, and indicates that the primary source materials from the COVIC lecture series are made available publicly for viewing and downloading. Secondly, it offers an analysis of the six major components of the imperialist master narrative that exist in the COVIC lectures that were discussed in the previous chapter, characterized as: (1) the inevitable Empire; (2) fear of the other; (3) paternalism; (4) economic productivity; (5) labor and race; and (6) the illusion of
Englishness. In addition to presenting analysis of the components of the imperialist master narrative, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive asks the reader to actively participate in the deconstruction of the master narrative by participating in activities that are linked to each of the six categories of imperial narrative.

In this chapter, I will describe the six interactive activities which encourage users of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive to actively deconstruct the master narrative. I will then describe three of the six activities in detail, explaining the specific functions of each activity, along with the user action that it prompts, and the way that the process fits into the methods of deconstruction described in Chapter 2. Each of the six interactive exercises corresponds to the six core components (listed above) that contribute to the master narrative presented in the COVIC lectures. In the first activity, entitled “Deconstruct the Inevitable Empire,” the user is prompted to compare descriptions of the West Indies colonies from the COVIC lectures with Antiguan writer Jamaica Kincaid’s description of Antigua from *A Small Place*. The second activity, entitled “Deconstruct Fear of the Other,” reveals the way that the photographer’s framing and cropping of a photograph impacts the story that the photograph tells. The third activity, entitled “Deconstruct Paternalism,” asks the user to provide a new caption for a photograph of villagers at a well. The fourth activity, entitled “Deconstruct Economics,” contextualizes a photograph of a pasture as one example of many that depict the photographed colonial landscape as a *locus amoenus*, a place of abundance and fertility; the user is prompted to describe how the photograph perpetuates this view of the economically fruitful colonial land. In the fifth activity, entitled “Deconstruct Labor & Race,” the user is presented with a photograph of banana pickers and two related excerpts from the text; he or she is asked
how the photograph and text present the characteristics and the work ethic of the people presented in the picture. The sixth activity, entitled “Deconstruct Englishness,” contains an excerpt from Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, which describes the way that Englishness was constructed by the colonizers, along with photographs of the colonies that project Englishness. I will discuss three of the six interactive exercises now.

In the “**Deconstruct the Inevitable Empire**” activity, the viewer is asked to help deconstruct the master narrative which presents the spread of imperialism as a benevolent, necessary, and inevitable force. The viewer is first presented with an excerpt from Jamaica Kincaid’s work, *A Small Place*, which presents Kincaid’s description of colonial Antigua. The description begins: “We lived on a street named after an English maritime criminal, Horatio Nelson, and all the other streets around us were named after some other English maritime criminals…”

Kincaid continues:

> the place where the Governor, the person standing in for the Queen, lived, was on East Street. Government House was surrounded by a high white wall – and to show how cowed we must have been, no one ever went near it.

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67 Kincaid, “A Small Place,” 94.
one ever wrote bad things on it; it remained clean and white and high. 68

Next, the viewer is asked to compare this description with a photograph of St. Kitts from the *West Indies* lectures, along with two textual excerpts from the lectures that describe Antigua and mention Nelson. The user is then prompted to post examples of other authors who speak about the effects of colonialism in their homes. This activity has two objectives. First, it decontextualizes the text and photograph from the original narrative of the COVIC lectures which perpetuate the master narrative, and situates the excerpts in a new context, thereby as Tiffin and Lawson said, “neutralizing the power of the privileged voice,” in the original text.69 The user is able to compare and contrast these very different perspectives. Secondly, it asks the user to contribute additional sources that exemplify the perspective of colonized people, voices that are simply absent in the original COVIC lectures and that the imperialist master narrative is built to suppress. Responses are visible at the bottom of the page, so that new users will be able to view all of the sources previous users have contributed. Ideally, this collection of new resources grows organically as new users contribute sources. As a result, the COVIC excerpts, and the privileged master narrative extant within it, are put in context with many sources, thereby neutralizing the power of that unilateral master narrative, and promoting multivocality and diversity.

In the “Deconstruct Paternalism” activity that deconstructs the master narrative’s portrayal of the local populations as childlike or inept and in need of modernization or guidance, the user is presented with a photograph from the *South Africa* lectures entitled

68 Kincaid, “A Small Place,”, 94.
69 Tiffin and Lawson, “Conclusion: Reading difference,” 231.
At the Well. The image is paired with the description given by the lecture series of the photograph. It reads:

Here is the scene in the daily life of almost any town or village in the land. We see a long procession of women carrying huge jars on their heads; they are going to the village well or spring, perhaps a mile or two distant, to draw water for the day’s use of the family. Soon we see them arrived at the well and staying to gossip; for there is no hurry in Bechuanaland. Back in the village we find the woman grinding corn in a primitive mortar or cooking the coarse porridge which is the universal food of the country.70

The text asserts the primitiveness of this village population, which has not yet felt the effects of the modernization that comes with colonization. The viewer is prompted to deconstruct this manifestation of the master narrative, which presents the colonized population as childlike, inept, and in need of paternalistic guidance and management by providing the photograph with a new caption, one that extracts the photograph from the imperial narrative that makes the native South African population the ‘Other.’ The user is asked to provide a response in the reply box at the bottom of the page, where all of the responses of previous users will be tracked.

70 Sargent, South Africa, 58.
Corresponding to the “Englishness” component of the master narrative, which presents the colonial landscape as an extension of the British landscape, the “Deconstruct Englishness” activity, asks the user to help deconstruct the component of the imperial narrative which attempts to make the colonial landscape seem English in quality or character in order to substantiate its inclusion into the Empire. The user is first presented with an excerpt from Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, which describes the process by which British colonialists attempted to project Englishness onto every landscape they colonized. She charges:

> everywhere they went they turned it into England; and everybody they met they turned English. But no place could ever really be England, and nobody who did not look exactly like them would ever be English, so you can imagine the destruction of people and land that came from that.\(^{71}\)

This excerpt presents the core component of the master narrative, the illusion of Englishness, from the perspective of a person from a colonized place, rather than from the perspective of the imperialist colonizer that is presented in the COVIC lectures. This first step reveals

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\(^{71}\) Kincaid, “A Small Place,” 92.
the power of the master narrative by placing it in comparison to a counter-narrative. The user is then given two formally similar photographs, one of St. John’s, Antigua, from the *West Indies & Guiana* lectures; and one recent image of Portsmouth Harbour, England. The user is asked to think about the ways in which both images project Englishness. Finally, the user is asked to choose another example from the COVIC lectures of photographs that project Englishness, and to pair them with photographs of places in the United Kingdom. The user is asked to post a link to that new photograph they have found, in order to share it with future users. By asking the user to contemplate the formal qualities of the photographs of the COVIC lectures in which the illusion of Englishness is constructed, and to find a corresponding photograph that is, in fact, of England, it becomes evident how the very photographs included in the lecture series have the ability to cast foreign landscapes as English, and therefore, as imperial possessions.

These activities are each paired with the corresponding subject heading (i.e., “Paternalism,” and “Deconstruct Paternalism”) in the organization of the website so that the user may move easily between each activity. Ideally, the user might first navigate to one of the six main sections offering close readings of images and text, read the text, then proceed to the corresponding deconstruction activity, linked at the bottom of the page. The user might also

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*Figure 14, Horizontal navigation bar, with drop-down menus, COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, [http://covic-archive.net](http://covic-archive.net), 2012*
navigate to the deconstruction activities through the drop-down menus below each of the six subject headings. In the case that the user finds himself or herself in a deconstruction activity prior to reading the analysis of the component of the master narrative to be deconstructed, a link at the top of the activity prompts the user to read more about the original topic. In this way, the site allows the user to move freely and nonlinearly through the site, but also provides enough structure to guide users who find themselves in an unfamiliar part of the website. This non-linear organization of the website, in which the user can construct his or her own narrative of the COVIC photographs and texts, also serves to further subvert the master narrative originally presented by the lecture presentation format, which required the viewer to encounter the documents and the images within in a predetermined order. That immersive, linear presentation of the photographic archive’s contents, along with the rhetorically suggestive captions and the aural component of the spoken textual descriptions, submersed the lecture viewer in the colonial master narrative. The non-linear quality of the digital archive allows users of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive the freedom to opt out of any part of the presentation of the content, and to create their own content. In this way, the very structure of the digital archive resists the master narrative perpetuated by the linear, multimedia lecture presentation of the original COVIC photographic archive.

Whether the user chooses the unmediated presentation of the website by browsing or searching the digital archive, or opts for a mediated version of the content by reading through the explanation of master narrative and its six core components within the COVIC lectures, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive helps to reveal the ways in which the British Empire was constructed by the stories it wrote about itself. This
recognition and reexamination of the master narrative, a worldview that reflects the prevailing beliefs about geography, history, race, and culture, is a crucial close-reading skill. In this way, I do not intend to simply instruct the reader in the methods I use so that he or she will come to the same conclusions that I did; but rather, I hope the user may take from the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive experience a sort of visual literacy, a skepticism toward historical narratives, and the ability to recognize the sort of stories that have the awful power that the imperial master narrative did.

Arguably, this skill set is as crucial as ever today, even in a post-colonial world, because the processes of imperialism as they exist today, as well as the legacies of colonialism, are insidious. As Howard McNaughton explains, today “imperialism aspires to anonymity, and its textualities become increasingly subtle, amorphous, and rhizomic.” What McNaughton asserts is that the process is still in place, and we must be increasingly vigilant and doubly skilled in recognizing, criticizing, and remaining unconvinced by the modern incarnations of the colonialist master narrative that abound. As the Internet is now the primary forum for the rapid spread of information, many of these modern incarnations, along with the research projects like COVIC Digital Photographic Archive which attempt to identify and subvert them, exist in digital forms. In the next chapter, I will continue my discussion of the characteristics of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive as a hypertextual archive by situating it within the history of hypertext and hypermedia.

72 McNaughton, “The Speaking Abject,” 218.
Chapter 5: Hypertext, Hypermedia, and the Digital Archive

As I discussed in the previous chapter, one of the ways that the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive subverts the master narrative that is perpetuated in the original form of the COVIC lectures is by the nature of its hypertextual structure. The COVIC lectures were created to immerse the audience in visual and aural presentations of the colonies of the British Empire; the photographs of the lectures, paired with suggestive textual descriptions, acted as a prepared lecture—a linear, narrative experience that intended to leave the audience with a clear sense of British superiority and colonial inferiority. Indeed, the very format of the lectures perpetuated the master narrative, in which colonialism is inevitable and benevolent; the land of the colonies is fruitful and unused; the local populations are frightening or childlike; and the colonized space is merely an extension of the English homeland.

The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, in its nonlinear, hypertextual format, destabilizes the sequence and therefore the linear argumentation of the COVIC lectures’ master narrative. While the discussion of master narratives on the website, along with the interactive exercises, are meant to encourage users to deconstruct the COVIC master narrative, the very format of the digital photographic archive, which allows the user to navigate freely and without sequence from source to source and topic to topic, also furthers the process of deconstructing the COVIC colonialist master narrative. In this chapter, I will provide a brief history of hypertext, along with a discussion of the
characteristics of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive as a form of hypermedia that impacts the user’s experience.

It is notable that the COVIC lecture series might be considered a prototypical multimedia experience, in that the intended user experience of the lectures, as conceived by the Colonial Office, combined audio and visual components to create an immersive presentation of the far reaches of the British Empire. Indeed, each volume of the lecture series includes some slight variation of the following note to the reader, (from the West Indies and Guiana volume):

NOTE.—The reader is asked to bear in mind the fact that these Lectures are illustrated with lantern slides. The numbers in the margin of the text are the numbers of the slides, of which a complete list will be found on pp. 145-152.73

This note serves to remind the reader that the true experience of these texts is only achieved when it is presented to an audience, narrated, and paired with the hundreds of lantern slides sold separately for presentation. We might see an analogy between the COVIC lecture presentation and the experience of walking through a museum or navigating a website, in that image and text are made equally important, and combine to create a narrative. The COVIC lecture series, however, was made to be experienced linearly—the lecture was to be read, the images viewed at the appropriate times, and the resulting story that was told perpetuated the imperialist master narrative I have examined in this paper. Thus, part of the process of deconstructing that narrative is breaking down the structure of the COVIC lectures, a structure whose linearity, along with the highly curated and rhetorically suggestive pairing of image and text, furthers its role as a master

73 Aspinall, West Indies and Guiana, no page number.
narrative. The presentation of the COVIC lectures in the non-linear, non-sequential structure that COVIC Digital Photographic Archive uses allows students and scholars to see the pieces of the photographic archive out of their original charged contexts; it allows researchers to compare and contrast photographs, to perform close readings on the text, and to appraise the master narrative with a critical eye. Within the development of hypertext and its use in education and scholarship exists a rich history of critical theory that attempts to modify the reader/user experience by subverting linear, sequential reading styles. In this way, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive makes use of the hypertext format to dislocate the COVIC narrative from its original structure, thereby destabilizing the imperialist master narrative further. For this reason, a historical survey of the development and applications of hypertext is important to the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive project, and will be discussed in this chapter.

**Why utilize hypertext in academic scholarship?**

Hypertext, which is best described as a system through which media is interconnected via links, bridges disciplines, breaks down walls that compartmentalize research, and facilitates dynamic interchange. It has implications for authorship, authority, and collaboration, calling into question issues of admission into the academy, as well as to the scholastic conversation. While it is clear that the digitization of texts and artifacts is beneficial simply in that it allows greater access to these works to students and scholars, the forms that digitized collections take should be influenced by the development of hypertext design. This way, archival collections available digitally do not simply mimic their previous non-digital forms, but take advantages of the unique benefits
of hypermedia format. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive makes use of hypertext to allow the user to move non-linearly from one topic to another, to access the primary source documents that the mediated analysis draws on, and encourages user contribution by way of the six interactive deconstruction activities already presented in this paper.

**What is hypertext?**

Put simply, hypertext is a digital system of organizing text and media that facilitates reader participation by offering a network of linked pathways referenced by the contents of the text that are instantly accessible. Conceptualized by Jorge Luis Borges’ short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* (1941) and Vannevar Bush’s description of the Memex in 1945, the idea of a non-digital text which could be read in a multiplicity of sequences, and which could lead the reader to any number of linked sources, existed long before the actual term *hypertext* was coined by Ted Nelson in 1965. Hypertext critical theorists George P. Landow and Jakob Nielsen each admit that definitions of hypertext are clearest when it is placed in reference to traditional printed text. To Landow, who evokes Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, hypertext subverts the fixed nature of the printed word which is founded on the concepts of “center, margin, hierarchy, and linearity,” in favor of “multilinearity, nodes, links, and networks.” For Nielsen, hypertext eliminates the necessity of sequence on which the form of the book is predicated, in that the experience of “true hypertext should… make users feel that they

74 It is notable that the beginnings of hypertext in the conceptions of Borges and Bush are contemporaneous to the decline of the British Empire and the rise of decolonization.

can move freely through information according to their own needs.”\textsuperscript{76} Landow and Nielsen’s theoretical conceptions of hypertext originated in the early 1990s, of course, and the hypertext systems they analyzed, such as Intermedia, were self-contained software programs which could be employed to both read and write hypertext works. Today, the Internet provides an ever-present example of hypertextuality, as users navigate through its vast contents using search engines and links, creating nonlinear pathways and contributing new content. In this way, many of the aspects of hypertext that Landow and Nielsen reference as the characteristics of a new, dynamic way of reading, navigating, and ultimately creating media exist in some form in our day-to-day navigations of the Internet. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive exists within this context as an Internet resource, and its users navigate it hypertextually.

\textbf{What are the unique benefits/characteristics of hypertext?}

Borges’ original conception of the problem of information excess, explored in \textit{The Garden of Forking Paths}, continues to resonate as information designers must continue to take on the problems of usability and interface, a series of logistical tangles with which I also contended while building the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive. In his critical assessment of the benefits of hypertext, Landow points to the characteristics of hypertext which distinguish it from previous forms of media. His observations are as salient today as they were twenty years ago, in his first iteration of \textit{Hypertext}, which subsequently

resulted in two updated editions (1997 and 2005). Comparing the possibilities of hypertext and hypermedia to the printed text, Landow first cites intertextuality as a major benefit; as a hypertext makes reference to an assortment of related texts and media, it immediately puts its content in context to those which relate to it. This allows the reader/user to consider and create connections between previously distant (or at least separate) texts. This aspect of hypertext comes into play in the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive in the Deconstruct the Inevitable Empire section, in which users are asked to consider the COVIC lecture text in comparison to Jamaica Kincaid’s *A Small Place*, as well as reflect on their own previous experiences and contribute other texts that might relate to the topics presented in the activity.

A second, important characteristic of hypertext that Landow describes is its multivocality. He explains:

> complete read-write hypertext (exemplified by blogs and Intermedia) does not permit a tyrannical, univocal voice. Rather, the voice is always that distilled from the combined experience of the momentary focus, the lexia one presently reads, and the continually forming narrative of one’s reading path.

In this way, the nature of hypertext subverts the perceived voice of the expert, the dominant, objective, unchallengeable narrator that pervades academic writing and discourse. Instead, hypertext’s ostensible changeability gestures to other narratives and interpretations, or at least calls into question the dominant narrative. This aspect of hypertext is particularly salient to the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, in that a primary goal of the project is to help deconstruct the imperialist master narrative

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78 Landow, *Hypertext 3.0*, 56.
promoted by the original COVIC lectures. In the section describing Englishness as a component of the imperialist master narrative, for example, the original dominant voice of the narrator is placed in context to my close readings of the text and photographs, and to the work of Peter Osborne, a critical theorist.

Finally, Landow explores the de-centering effect of hypertext. Explaining that hypertext “provides an infinitely recenterable system whose provisional point of focus depends on the reader, who becomes a truly active reader,” Landow describes the potential for true reader participation. Admitting that the lack of a central focus in a hypertext might disorient the reader, Landow charges that the hypertext reader is eminently responsible for her reading experience: “Anyone who uses hypertext makes his or her own interests the de facto organizing principle (or center) for the investigation at the moment.”79 The reader, who is passively navigated through a linear, traditional text may or may not have stakes in the content put forth to him or her. However, in the condition in which he or she must construct the narrative in order to experience it at all, he or she necessarily propels him- or herself to content and perspectives that are of interest. He or she creates, through the sheer intuition of her interests, a narrative that is personally tailored. De-centering therefore subverts the institutionalized perspective in favor of the generated story, the discovered narrative. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive allows for a de-centered narrative in that it offers clear and persistent navigation to various segments of the website by an ever-present navigation bar which allows the user to move from one topic to another non-linearly. Furthermore, if the user is uninterested in the mediated perspective of the COVIC lectures, but is interested in the

contents of the lectures themselves, he or she may browse or search through the Omeka-powered digital archive, or flip through a gallery-style presentation of the photographs at the WordPress-powered main website. Through these qualities of hypertext media, intertextuality, multivocality, and de-centering, the reader emerges as an active generator in content, whether by actually contributing content to the hypertext system through annotations or links, or by constructing her own navigational structure through the information presented to her.

What are the risks of hypertext?

Considering the extent to which hypertext requires active participation on the part of the reader/user, it is important to note the counterpoints to intertextuality, nonlinearity, multivocality, and de-centering which complicate the process of interacting with hypertext media. Landow addresses this question by discussing the effects of what he calls the disorientation problem of hypertext—the potential for the hypertext user to lose his or her place within the hypertext document, as it is nonlinear and lacks a definite beginning and end. To Landow, the solution is clear—intuitive navigation, the availability of a macroscale reference point, and searchability combats disorientation. He explains:

As long as a thematic or other culturally coherent means of ordering is available to the reader, the fragmentation of the hypertext document does not imply the kind of entropy that such fragmentation would have in the world of print. Capacities such as full-text searching, automatic linking, agents, and conceptual filtering potentially have the power to retain the benefits of hypertextuality
while insulating the reader from the ill effects of abandoning linearity.\textsuperscript{80}

These concerns are particularly salient in the present context of archive design, as Landow emphasizes in the case study he presents regarding an anthropological museum at an American Midwestern university. Explaining that the museum’s website was “nothing more than a direct electronic presentation of a museum catalogue,” Landow charges that the designers of that online archive mistakenly assumed that users would always enter the website from the homepage, which was responsible for making sense of the series of individual screens with images and information about artifacts. But hypertextual navigation cannot attempt to replicate the experience of walking into a museum, or of opening the cover of a museum catalogue and starting at the first page. As users reach these item pages through search engines without orientation, context, or navigation, they “arrive by falling through the roof and landing in the middle of a strange gallery.”\textsuperscript{81} It is therefore the responsibility of the information designer to anticipate the modes of use that the online installation will occasion.

In the case of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, the issues of navigation were of the utmost importance, especially because the project was to serve a dual-purpose as both an unmediated archive and a mediated exhibition of the content of that archive. On the WordPress-powered main website for the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, the horizontal navigation bar, along with appropriate hyperlinks on each subpage, help orient the reader. Furthermore, the website features a guide for users that offers a concise

\textsuperscript{80} Landow, \textit{Hypertext 3.0}, 110.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid, 318.
explanation of the navigational logic of the website, which, hopefully, softens the landing for users who arrive through points other than the main homepage.

**Hypertext Today**

It is important to note that the central questions of hypermedia have morphed since Landow’s fine critical expositions in 1992, 1997, and 2005. Presently, the majority of students and faculty in academic institutions routinely use the Internet, in all its non-linear, non-sequential, complexly authored, decentered glory. Indeed, while Landow, Nielsen, and other hypertext advocates attempted to answer the question, “Why hypertext?”, we now must contend with those questions which follow, even as hypertext is widely adopted, in some form, in every major academic institution. Instead, information designers, archivists, and digital scholars question the implications of the hypertextual systems we use—that is to say, rather than the question of why, we must approach the question of how. What makes good digital archive design? How can we encourage hypertext users/readers, who, as Landow notes, are taxed to make meaning actively from interconnected webs of data, text, image, video, and sound, to continue to make meaning in the archive and to understand the consequences of their selections? Christian Vandendorp eloquently poses this question as the “ephemeral contract with the reader” present in every hypertext: “Will the reader click on the hyperlink and continue
his or her quest or abandon the quest?"\(^{82}\) It is the domain of the designer, then, to incent the reader to do so.

In the case of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, users are encouraged to interact with the content presented to them through the series of deconstruction activities that are paired with the sections detailing the core components of the imperialist master narrative. Once again invoking Brad Johnson of Second Story, one way that the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive strives to keep users interested is by offering them the choice of either a mediated or an unmediated experience of the content of the site, thus acting as both a database and an exhibition.\(^{83}\) By providing clear navigation, offering points of interaction, promoting dialogue through comment fields, and giving the audience the ultimate choice of the degree of mediation they would like to experience, I believe that audiences with some level of interest in post-colonialism, in master narratives, in British imperial history, in the history of photography, or in representations of history, will be willing and able to engage with the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive.


\(^{83}\) Brad Johnson, “Disintermediation and the Museum Web Experience.”
Chapter 6: Omeka, WordPress, and the Maker Experience

From the very beginning, the intent of this degree paper project has been to create a digital photographic archive which expands access to the COVIC lecture series, draws attention to the colonialist master narrative it perpetuates, and invites viewers to begin the process of deconstructing that master narrative. The initial challenge of building the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive arose while I began to design the architecture of the digital archive by considering the unique qualities of hypertext catalogued in Chapter 5, including nonlinearity, intertextuality, multivocality, searchability, and browseability. During the process of collecting the materials of the COVIC lectures series that were to be featured in my archive, I considered what digital tools might be available to me, a graduate student working within the two primary constraints of the degree paper project: first, the budget of the project, which would be modest at best; and second, the timeline of the project, which required that the digital archive be conceptualized, designed, formatted, and launched within the three months of the college semester. In this final chapter, I will discuss the processes I used and the challenges I encountered while creating the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive.

In recent years, scholars have become increasingly interested in using digital tools to not only undertake their research, but also to conceptualize, organize, and present their scholarship. Indeed, they create photographic archives, digital museums, and hypermedia textbooks that are accessible to peers, students, and the general public, which create a
unique and complex narrative of their research. Hypertext or hypermedia in particular exists as an attractive format for researchers who are interested in media designed to facilitate connections between text, images, documents, sound, video, graphics, maps, and quantitative data. While many digital resources exist simply as accessible analogues to traditional media—the original artifact, photograph, or text, digitized—hypertext as a medium creates a unique maker and user experience. Hypertext allows makers to compile large quantities of data into a narrative, to link users to important supplementary content, to construct complex arguments through multimedia, and to enter into an ongoing dialogue with users. Similarly, it allows users to experience multiple narratives, navigate content nonlinearly, seek out specific material via searchability, and, at its most effective, create and articulate new interpretations of images and text in addition to those promulgated by the maker. With this understanding of the unique qualities of hypertext, I set out to create the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive as a digital archive that facilitated a nonlinear user experience and encouraged user interactivity.

Considering that the COVIC lecture publications I digitized for the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive are a unique combination of photographs, images, and text, I chose to present the content in the form of the digital archive, which allows users to navigate the content either by browsing or by searching. Digital archives are particularly attractive for the compilation of historical photographs, images, manuscripts, and artifacts. Museums commonly allow access to images and descriptions of at least part of their collections through some sort of digital database, often on a publically accessible website. In the case of the COVIC lectures, however, there was no such website which organized the photographs from the publications and allowed users to search through and
download high resolution scans of those images. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive intends to address this absence by presenting the photographs and texts of the COVIC lectures in a publically accessible, free digital archive.

Recognizing the usefulness of digital media for scholarship and scholastic interchange, the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University developed and released an open-source web-publishing platform, Omeka, with the express purpose of empowering “scholars, museums, libraries, archives, and enthusiasts” to “create complex narratives and share rich collections.” Omeka exists as a tool by which scholars and students create collections and digital exhibitions that are accessible online and allow the user a space for discussion and means for interactivity. Considering its accessibility and ease of use, Omeka actually further democratizes the process of history-making on the Internet, by allowing anyone with an internet connection to create a website, hosted by Omeka.net, that can act as an historical archive.

When creating the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, I first digitized my primary source documents, the COVIC lectures, and placed the resulting image files and PDFs as items in a web-based digital archive powered by Omeka.net. As I proceeded to develop my archive, I came to realize that while Omeka.net is invaluable as a tool to organize the items of an archive, to make them searchable, browseable, and most importantly, correctly tagged using the high archival standards established by Dublin Core, it did not allow the degree of customizability of the navigational architecture that I desired for my website. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the user interface of the digital archive—that is, the way that the archive looks, the way it is organized, and the

ease of navigation for the user—is of paramount importance for the quality of a digital archive website. The Omeka.net web-publishing software simplified the process of building the site so much that even the navigation bar that runs across the page resists maker modification. After weeks of attempted work-arounds, and after exhausting the Omeka-user-made plug-ins which make Omeka so exciting, as they bring in functionalities that were requested by the Omeka community at large, I realized that I had to integrate my Omeka.net site, located at http://covic.omeka.net into a website that would allow for the display, navigation, and user contribution that seemed necessary to the objectives of my digital archive.

WordPress.com, a blogging website that is an offshoot of WordPress.org, ultimately provided the functionality that I required for the user interface design of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive. WordPress allows makers to define the hierarchy of their websites’ pages, accommodates the easy integration of text and image that Omeka.net completely lacked, and still required only elemental web design knowledge.

In the end, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, located at http://covic-archive.net/, is a WordPress-powered website that integrates the Dublin Core-standard photographic archive, still hosted by Omeka and located at http://covic.omeka.net, by a series of hyperlinks which allow the sites to communicate with one another. This system has one major flaw, in that users looking to return to the main site of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive from the Omeka.net-hosted archive must take two hyperlinks to return, a design flaw that speaks to the overall lack of customizability that is the major drawback of Omeka.net.
It is essential to note that these sorts of design problems would be immediately avoided were I to use Omeka.org’s open source web-publishing software. However, Omeka.org’s software package, much like WordPress.org’s software package, requires the maker to have a LAMP software bundle (Linux operating system, an Apache HTTP server, MySQL, and PHP scripting language) and ImageMagick. While these requirements are completely reasonable for a small museum, for a university department, or a small business, a major driving force of my project was to use the tools available to an individual to create a digital archive without the help of a web-developer or a tech resource person. As a result of my experience, I maintain that Omeka.net is too basic for people interested in making an interactive website with an archive component, although Omeka.org would be more than capable of doing so. However, Omeka.net is still essential to my otherwise WordPress-driven interactive digital archive, because it provides the Dublin Core-tagged organization of the archive, and facilitates powerful searchability and a useful degree of browseability for users. WordPress is only lacking in that it does not yet have an archive building functionality integrated into its WordPress.com sites. Notably, the WordPress.org-powered websites can be integrated with Omeka, but also require the full LAMP configuration that Omeka.org-powered websites require, which existed as a major deterrent to me for this particular project. In the end, by integrating a WordPress.com-powered website with the Omeka.net-powered digital archive, I created the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, realizing the goal of building a publically accessible website which allows users to browse or search through the photographs and texts of the COVIC lecture series, or to read through my analysis of
the colonial master narrative as it exists within the lecture series and to contribute their own thoughts about colonialism, photography, and the British Empire.
Conclusions

The construction of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, in tandem with my investigations into British colonialism, the imperialist master narrative, photography, hypertext, digital media, and digital scholarship in this degree paper, was the work of six months. It could easily be the work of a lifetime. The COVIC lecture series exist as a fascinating example of the way that the British Empire constructed a master narrative which justified its expansionism across the globe, an act that still resonates in the economic, social, and political conditions of post-colonial countries. That narrative was perpetuated within the COVIC lecture series through a series of six core components, all of which colluded to present the British Empire as inevitable, unstoppable, and benevolent; the British domestic citizen as racially superior, technologically advanced, cultured, and modern; and the colonized population as primitive, ‘Other,’ dangerous, childlike, or absent. Colonization is a social and economic process as much as it is a political one, and it was facilitated by maps, documents, novels, newspapers, photographs, international exhibitions, travelogues, and lantern slide lecture series like the COVIC lecture series.

The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive attempts to subvert that master narrative by extracting the photographs and textual descriptions that perpetuate it from the immersive, linear, and rhetorically suggestive lecture volumes, and placing them in a publically accessible space. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive not only demonstrates the way that the insidious master narrative is deployed in the COVIC lectures, but also urges the user to deconstruct that narrative through a series of
interactive deconstruction exercises. In turn, the user can navigate freely through the sections of the website; he or she can comment on the mediated presentation of the COVIC lectures; he or she can call the research into question, can contribute alternative interpretations, and can contribute links to outside sources. The primary source documents that underpin the critical interpretations presented at the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive are also fully accessible, downloadable, and searchable, offering the user an unmediated version of the content, if he or she desires it.

**Other Examples of Digital Archive & History Scholarship**

The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive exists as part of what Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig call the “History Web,” one of hundreds of thousands of websites that represent the past in a digital format.85 Many of these websites that present interpretations of historical artifacts or texts and facilitate historical scholarship rely on the characteristics of hypertext and hypermedia discussed in Chapter 5 which encourage users to interact with the online content presented to them. One of the most successful examples of this type of interactivity within an online archive is the September 11 Digital Archive, established January 11, 2002 by the American Social History Project/Center for Media and Learning at City University of New York’s Graduate Center and George Mason University’s Center for History and New Media (CHNM). As Cohen, of the CHNM, describes it, “as the project grew… with the sheer number of contributions from

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the general public, it became much easier to gather materials from those directly involved in the events of September 11."86 Cohen and Rosenzweig describe carefully formatting the stories submission page of the September 11 Digital Archive in order to foster user contributions: “including a large upfront box for the first-person narrative, much smaller secondary metadata collection boxes… and the importance of building trust, in this case by highlighting our limited use of the contributor’s email address.”87 In the case of the September 11 Digital Archive, the archivists understood that the richness of the archive would be achieved through the diversity, depth, and volume of user contributions, and tailored the design of the digital archive to encourage digital submissions. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive similarly allows user comments on every photograph and on every page, so to simplify the process of user contribution by making it an ever-present opportunity.

Ultimately, encouraging students and scholars of history to interact with the content of the digital archive or the digital museum is important to the study of history because it makes the processes of selection, interpretation, and analysis that historians and curators engage in evident to the user. Klaus Müller argues that if “online exhibitions [found] ways of nurturing interactivity and facilitating access by including… behind-the-scenes examinations of curatorial work; and open communication via e-mail and guestbooks,” it would empower the user, and potentially “lead to a change from the current emphasis on the composition and arrangement of artifacts to an open and interactive approach that permits visitors to become commentators, contributors, or even

86 Cohen and Rosenzweig, Digital History, 186.
87 Ibid, 178.
In this manifestation of the digital archive or digital museum, interactivity reaches its fullest potential. By giving the viewer the ability to compare photographs side-by-side, reconstitute narratives, and create new and perhaps nontraditional narratives, as well as to understand the way in which curatorial work requires historians to make subjective decisions regarding the past, the digital museum or archive allows its objects to be destabilized and removed from their institutional contexts. The COVIC Digital Photographic Archive attempts to take the first steps toward this type of functionality by promoting user contribution in the six deconstruction exercises featured on the site which further the site’s stated goal of deconstructing the colonialist master narrative presented in the COVIC lectures.

This destabilization is particularly salient when we consider the history of many prominent museums, like the British Museum, for example, as repositories for artifacts from colonized cultures whose material culture and material history were appropriated, displaced, and reconstructed in damaging, revisionist narratives. Indeed, museums have been responsible for contributing to the types of colonialist master narratives discussed in Chapter 2 and 3 and deconstructed in Chapter 4. Müller describes the reframing of historical objects as a “fundamental exhibiting practice” undertaken in museums and archives:

Artifacts may tell as story, but they do so within the curatorial and architectural framework created by the museum display... The integration of objects into museums collections removes and alienates the object form its ‘authentic’ (original historical, physical, emotional) context and places it in a new and virtual ‘museum.’

order. New meanings are imposed on the artifact, ranging from its captions to its placement in the show.89

So while placing the object into a digital context, which allows users to further distance it from its origins, might seem to create even more distance between the past and its representation, the democratizing context of the Internet at least subverts what George F. Macdonald and Stephen Alsford call museums’ “almost monopolistic roles of stewards and interpreters of heritage”90 by allowing users to participate in the history-making process. Macdonald and Alsford explain:

Colonialist and migratory trends over the last two centuries have resulted in the fragmentation and even annihilation of many of the world’s cultures, a process from which museums have been among the beneficiaries. The digital museum offers the opportunity to redress that situation somewhat, if museums are prepared to take on the role of cultural dynamos. Through a resynthesis of the fragments it should be possible to provide a better appreciation of the vitality of past cultures than can be given by books or static exhibits.91

At the very least, this act of again removing the artifact, image, or document from its context (in this case, an institutional one), and placing it in the participatory environment of the Internet, can begin to gesture toward the silent or inaccessible narratives that have not made their way into museums, archives, and educational presentations like the COVIC lecture series through traditional avenues of collection, curation, and interpretation. The user therefore becomes aware of the multiplicity of interpretations, the multivocality of the past, and the necessarily limiting, necessarily subjective process of history-making that occurs when one tries to tell one story about the past.

89 Müller, “Museums and Virtuality,” 297.
91 Ibid, 274.
A second notable component of the traditional museum or archive space is that of the “Unassailable Voice,” the monovocal, declarative narrator that voices the master narratives that these spaces help construct. Peter Walsh theorizes that the so-called “Unassailable Voice” that pervades museums spaces, carrying with it the air of reason, order, and above all, singular authority, will be subverted by digital spaces like the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive. According to Walsh, the Unassailable Voice “tends to make people feel ignorant, and thus alienates them from the entire experience of the museum;”92 in contrast, online experiences with museum collections are chaotic, user-driven, and interactive. They allow the user to regain control over the interpretative possibilities of museum or archival collections, while simultaneously allowing for the presentation of “layers of knowledge that museums have not previously been able to show the public.”93

In the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive the user is made aware of the multiplicity of narratives through the dislocation of the photographs and text from the highly curated, prepared narratives published in the COVIC lectures. The website creates opportunities for users to submit counternarratives or critique the texts and images, thus helping to neutralize the “Unassailable Voice” that recites the COVIC lectures and perpetuates the colonialist master narrative. In this way, the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive aspires to find its place among the other Internet resources that present analyses of the past and facilitate access to historical documents.

93 Ibid, 233.
Further Investigations

If I were to continue to add to the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, I would first digitize the sources that have not yet been digitized in high resolution, the Canada and Newfoundland and Australasia lecture series. I would perform the same types of close-reading analyses on these sources, and attempt to broaden my discussion of the imperialist master narrative across all of the COVIC sources, rather than simply across three of the seven major sources.

Past that, the next steps would require resources. Each published volume of the COVIC lecture series contains only about 10% of the photographs referenced in the slides—the vast majority of the images exist only in lantern slide form, or in the form of the original photographs taken by Hugh Fisher. In my most recent correspondence with Dr. John Cardwell, Archivist of the Royal Commonwealth Society Collections in the Cambridge University Library, Dr. Cardwell noted that the Fisher collection is not digitized. The next step, therefore, would be to petition for access to the entirety of the COVIC lantern slide collection, held in the archives of various institutions in Great Britain, in order to begin the process of digitizing and cataloguing the entire collection.

Finally, were I able to archive the whole body of photographic slides presented as part of the COVIC lectures, I would reformulate the design of the website to reach wider audiences and to provide more complex interactive exercises for the user to utilize, as part of the overarching goal of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive, the examination, destabilization, and deconstruction of the British imperialist master narrative. It is my hope that the user of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive not only
becomes familiar with the COVIC lecture series as a reflection of the imperialist master narrative, but also that he or she becomes aware of the body of media that we encounter daily that constructs master narratives, of which the COVIC lectures is merely one example. Then, the content of the COVIC Digital Photographic Archive will serve the overall formation of a skill set of media literacy, which enables us to question the stories we are told and that we use to organize our world.
Bibliography


