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Onward to the Past

Geoffrey C. Bowker

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What a wonderful set of articles this is to think with. They frame the issue of what it means to archive knowledge, to classify multiplicity, at this point in time.

Both the Indian creation of the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL) and the Chinese drive to systematize ethnic knowledge confront immediate aporias. In order for the TKDL to do its work, it must assume categories recognizable by, in the first instance, the European Patent Office. For the Chinese project to succeed, overlapping heterogeneous modes of treating the body must be coalesced into clear ethnic clusters. Each exercise is historiographically deep and an exquisite instrument for understanding the present.

Let us start with the issue of justice. These four articles describe an attempt to achieve justice through archiving. For the (postcolonial) colonizers—led by big Pharma—have indeed endeavored to prospect knowledge out of those countries whose raw materials they can no longer pillage. Each project is about making a statement in the present.

But how does one make statements in this present? Gilles Deleuze, working through his reading of Michel Foucault, published in 1972 a tract entitled *Un nouvel archiviste*. In it, he imagines making up an archive of utterances (*énoncés*)—those things that can be said within a given discursive regime. These are not individual sentences or propositions that can proliferate infinitely: they are a primitive and very finite set of available modalities of discourse. When in the world of indigenous knowledge, a common utterance is to say: “We knew this substance had this effect before you, and therefore we have rights to it.” Each term here is charged, as so beautifully adumbrated in these articles; here I will concentrate on the first two words, out of which the rest of the utterance unfolds.

“*We* knew.” Farquhar and Lai, partly following Thomas Mullaney (2011), talk of the construction and touristic commercialization of ethnic categories in China where earlier there sometimes were only loose groupings. It is these categories of people created in the present who were then the knowers. Or, as Zhen and Hu put it, “The ancient and the modern are artificially divided, and a linear, homogenous (and thus unhistorical) genealogy of modern nationality medical knowledge is constructed” (this issue, 475). For them, the “we” who knew is created out of a false divide between the past production and current recognition of knowledge by (constructed) national-

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ities in the present which hold that knowledge. The temporality is rich: you both operate a discontinuity between past and present and forge a linear time line so that “we” then (since time immemorial) could know now in a modern way. For Jean-Paul Gaudillière, the “we” who know traditional Indian practices is another kind of entity constructed in the present—the nation-state. This knowing entity exists in the proximate future: it will in a future just around the corner have existed for a long time, just as soon as the full set of operations that recuperate and transform the past into appropriate forms for a modern nation-state. As Fish shows, the TKDL operating in present time has an author and architect, Sharma: “What I had to do first was to understand the adequacies and inadequacies of the patent system and then apply technology to fill the gaps” (this issue, 440). Moving across the discontinuity, you need to create an author.

“We *knew*.” The temporal discontinuity described by Zhen and Hu is a standard feature of accounts of indigenous knowledge—their knowledge has to be unchanging (known since time immemorial). When it gets transformed into the present, through that twin operation of salvaging and sorting (a highly resonant phrase proposed by Farquhar and Lai), it moves onto a different, progressive time line. This is a move described over several domains in Tanaka’s (2004) description of Japan’s adoption of modern times. What is known now is not ever that which was known then, since the purpose of this indigenous knowledge now is to assert a new nationality, create a tradition that aligns with Western knowledge. What was scattered in bodies and texts and practices (“prevailing medical practice and folklore” (426) for Farquhar and Lai; extricated from “yama [observations], niyama [abstentions], pratyahara [abstraction], dharana [concentration], and samadhi [Enlightenment as a state of being]”) is now collected in such a way as to both synchronize with current Western ways of knowing and to be commodified into prevailing forms of biocapital. As Gaudillière observes, “On the one hand, tradition is being fixed, on the other hand the path is open for its pharmaceuticalization and inscription into the drug proprietary economy.”

With a tip of the hat to Renan and to Jacques Derrida: every archive is founded on an act of violence. There is a paradox at work in the TKDL. On the one hand, it is a testament to an open and free past, in which all had access to traditional knowledge. But at the same time, it is locked in an ark—in order to prevent reverse engineering of that knowledge, access to it is highly restricted; it is only to be opened in a period of present or future threat. In order to protect it, a living and open tradition is rendered dead and secret. That is the downside.

However, there is an upside to this act of translation. I was delighted to read Choudery’s observation that he did not charge for yoga in India, but when he came to the United States he was forced to make it paying (in order to be taken seriously) and to protect his intellectual property. When in Rome, he observed, do as the Romans do. So for him, it was the same set of practices, scattered over the same heterogeneous list of concentrations. It would be possible to say he sold out, as one could of TKDL in general and of the Chinese move to create ethnic medical traditions. But, as Walter Benjamin argues in his essay “The Task of the Translator,” it is never the translator’s role to reproduce the original—where each word has different texture and reference in different languages, this is impossible. He turns this drive to faithfulness on its head, by arguing that a great work is that which spawns multiple different versions, each rich

in its own right. It is not about faithfulness but about being generative. In each of the cases so beautifully described in this issue, that possible future is present.

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