

The *Vārchive* Revolution: The Imperative for Indigenous Truth-Telling and Redefining Heritage Preservation

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Abstract The following article discusses *Paradise Camp* by Sāmoan-Japanese artist Yuki Kihara, curated by Professor Natalie King which is on exhibition at The Powerhouse, Sydney, Australia throughout 2023. Authors delve into the significance of *Paradise Camp* as a vital and timely act of truth-telling. They highlight Kihara's concept and realisation of what she has coined as the *Vārchive*, a means to approaching First Nations archival materials. They explore the *Vārchive* as both artwork and archival practice that could catalyse a transformative shift within the heritage sector highlighting the imperative for Indigenous interventions within colonial collections. Reflecting on the *Vārchive* emphasises the need to redefine heritage, to encompass and consider Indigenous communities and landscapes as animate archives and memory holders that are increasingly threatened by climate change.

Keywords Archives. Climate Change. Climate action. Fa'afafine. Gender Studies. Sāmoa. First Nations. Indigenous. Paul Gaugin. Museums. Decolonisation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 *Vārchive* Background. – 3 *Vārchive* Is a Right of Reply to the Colonial Archive. – 4 The Body as an Archive. – 5 Conclusion.



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invisible hands
reach for your eyes to cover,
truth eludes you now
unaware of what's concealed
insidious ghosts
you never will hear their laugh,
that joke is on us
(Sentance [unpublished] 2023)

1 Introduction

We are what we remember, the self is a trick of memory... history is the remembered tightrope that stretches across the abyss of all that we have forgotten
(Wendt 2017)

On Gadigal Country, at Powerhouse Ultimo, interdisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara and Nathan Mudyi Sentance sat in Kihara's exhibition *Paradise Camp*, curated by Professor Natalie King, in front of Kihara's *Vārchive* featured in the exhibition and yarned. During this yarn, Kihara stated "I always consider who does this empower?".¹ It is a question, a focus, we wish more of those who work in memory institutions reflected on.

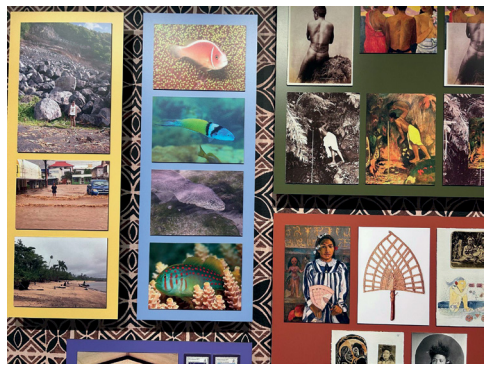
To do so, however, would mean to acknowledge the power that memory institutions such as government archives and museums possess. The power to shape what is remembered and how it is remembered, what voices construct the memory they hold, preserve and tell, and what voices do not (Finigan 2020). Some may say archives empower the public as it is them they serve, but this ignores that the power of archives has been often wielded against Indigenous peoples to serve goals of colonialism (Thorpe 2022; Sentance 2019).

Additionally, in thinking about who we in memory institutions empower, some may say everyone because we collect, preserve, and make accessible knowledge and memory for future generations (Sentance 2018). However, if we reflect on the *Vārchive* and its discussion of how climate change is affecting *fa'afafine* peoples, can we honestly say we are preserving knowledge and memory if we are not actively working to prevent environmental destruction and harm to Indigenous peoples caused by rising temperatures, rising sea levels and increased ocean acidification such as is happening in Sāmoa?

The *Vārchive* [figs 1-4] explores many themes and asks many questions. As we work with collections in a memory institution, we want to focus on a couple.² Namely, how Kihara's *Vārchive* is a Right of Reply that can create dialogues that empower people to be more critical

1 Personal communication (14 June 2023).

2 Cf. Positionality Statement in this paper.



Figures 1-4 Yuki Kihara's *Vārchive* at the *Paradise Camp* Exhibition, Powerhouse Museum. © Madeline Poll, 2023

of the constructed memory of collections, making them more aware that there is much memory and knowledge that exists outside of them.

We will also discuss the question posed by the *Vārchive* of what or more importantly, who is an archive? Through this we may expand our thinking of what an archive is to people and places. As such, we can understand the biggest threat to archives is climate change. Therefore, it is integral for us working in memory institutions to advocate for the rights of the people and lands most threatened by climate change. In fact, it should be a key tenet of our work, because if we do not, important memory keepers could be lost forever.

2 *Vārchive* Background

The closer I looked at the background, and then
the closer I looked at the models, it reminded me of
people and places in Sāmoa
(Kihara 2022)

Kihara and King's *Paradise Camp* is elaborate and unapologetic in its presentation of lies which have been passed as truths; and of truths which have been hidden amongst lies. The work pops with hot fuchsia and tigerprint, alluding to the exoticised projection of an 'untamed' Sāmoan homeland and people; and it unfolds through an extraordinary palette of textures and tones as Kihara responds, rejects and reimagine archival representations of her community and country.

Coming from a Japanese and Sāmoan background, interdisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara seeks to challenge historical narratives, most notably around Pasifika and Queer stories. Yuki often uses media and performance to convey her work, often opposing the historical narratives driven through colonial archives.

This is notable through the *Vārchive*, which is an archive and artwork currently displayed centrally in Kihara and King's *Paradise Camp* at Powerhouse Ultimo.

The exhibition is a vibrant *tableau vivant* of identity and landscape which shifts contemporary understanding of cultural autonomy in the Pacific, featuring a collection of constructed images captured by Kihara herself and other images that hold deeper significance in connection to Kihara's identity. These images are juxtaposed against traditional Sāmoan cloth backdrop, while the floor beneath them symbolises the Pacific Ocean as a tropical paradise. However, a deeper interpretation reveals that this waterline stands at the waistline, and is a commentary on the effects of rising sea levels due to climate change. Placing Kihara's *Vārchive* amidst a backdrop of rainbow headboards serves as a powerful reminder that this is no ordinary black and white Western archive. Kihara actively challenges conventional record-keeping practices through her use of a brilliant array of colours, shedding light on the exoticised portrayal of her Sāmoan homeland and its people.

The *Vārchive* is an example of storing Kihara's personal cultural knowledge and experiences, combining the Sāmoan concept of *Vā*, which in Kihara's words is "the space that unites separate entities". *Vā* is the bridge between the physical and the metaphysical that is always present and constant even when we are not aware. It is not empty space that needs to be filled, rather a space that connects a person to ceremony, spiritualism, cherished lands and each other. The concept of *Vā* and its interrelatedness, and its rejection of binaries clashes with the colonial archive and its rigidity and how archival practices attempt to sort all information, including people, into categories and taxonomies.

A major part of the *Vārchive* is Kihara's case study on Paul Gauguin, a Parisian Post-Impressionism artist (b. 1848) who inserted himself into the Tahitian lifestyle in 1891 with the hope of having a 'simpler' but successful career as an artist, painting the lives of Tahitian men and women, especially sexualising the women and their lifestyles. As told through the *Vārchive*, Kihara while in New York for her exhibition *Fa'afafine: In a Manner of a Woman* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, examined the two portraits by Gauguin that the Museum held from his Tahitian trip. Kihara noticed landscapes that reminded her of her home in Sāmoa. The supposed candidness of the subjects posed against the picturesque landscapes was also questioned by Yuki, leading her to dig deeper into the truth about the portraits supposedly from Gauguin's memories.

Kihara's thorough investigation into colonial photography revealed a notable connection to the photographic works of Thomas Andrew, a New Zealand photographer, who resided in Sāmoa for a significant portion of his life, spanning from 1891 to 1939. In her research, Kihara stumbled upon compositions remarkably like those depicted in Gauguin's artwork. Additionally, she uncovered evidence suggesting that Gauguin visited the Auckland Art Gallery in 1895, where some of Andrew's photographs were stored.

Yuki also noted the androgyny of some of the subjects he depicted, such as those described in *Migrating Genders Westernisation, Migration, and Samoan Fa'afafine* by scholar Schmidt (2016) who discusses how the Sāmoan word *fa'afafine* translates as 'in the manner of' or 'like' (*fa'a*) a woman or women (*fafine*). She goes on to define *fa'afafine* as biological Sāmoan 'males' whose gendered behaviours are feminine. Through the *Vārchive* and the accompanying catalogue, Yuki explores the animosity that is still present about *fa'afafine* in Sāmoan culture today is a post colonised ideology - connected to the religious beliefs that were imposed by white settlers.

Yuki's archive seeks to disprove the notion of 'Paradise', citing that the concept is 'heteronormative' and dismissive of the implications of tourism, Climate Change and the erasure of Pacifica cultures due to the influence of colonialism.

Calling a place 'paradise' also glosses over the complexities of the seemingly idyllic regions where tourists travel to escape, she added,³ including the land's own history of colonial violence and the looming threat of climate disaster, a battle in which Sāmoa is on the front lines.

3 Personal communication (14 June 2023).

3 *Vārchive* is a Right of Reply to the Colonial Archive

What the archive conceals and obliterates are the people behind the paper filed away in cardboard boxes, stored in cold vaults in the basements of buildings. These places are the prisons of Aboriginal history that attempted to incarcerate our memories of blood and Country – just as the official state-operated prison system incarcerates our physical bodies – the dual imprisonment. (Leane 2017, 244)

As Worimi archivist Thorpe (2022) discusses in the Australian context, archives have been used as instruments in service to the Australian colonial project by supporting the construction of narratives about Indigenous peoples by outsiders, mainly colonial agents, and suppressing Indigenous perspectives or how Booker (2022) describes “othering and silencing”. These constructed narratives have often contained misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples, depicting us, Indigenous peoples, as less than human, as savages, thus in need of civilising by the colonial state and less deserving of our lands (Nakata et al. 2005; Finigan 2020). This othering and silencing can be seen in the *Vārchive* through the art of Gauguin.

Barrowcliffe (2023) states, Indigenous peoples can combat this underrepresenting, misrepresenting and vilifying of them by memory institutions or as Caswell (2014) names it, symbolic annihilation, by exercising their Right of Reply. The Right of Reply is, according to the *Position Statement on the Right of Reply to Indigenous Knowledge and Information Held in Archives* released in 2021 by The Indigenous Archives Collective, a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners who think about and/or work in Indigenous archives, a right and a participatory framework where Indigenous peoples can update, correct, critique, or enhance archival material held in memory institutions related to or depicting them, their culture and their histories.

Kihara’s *Vārchive* and *Paradise Camp* as a whole is an assertion by Kihara of her *Right of Reply*. As Fusco (2022) notes, *Paradise Camp* is re-examining and challenging the tropes and myths about Indigenous peoples reinforced by colonial archives and classic art. By doing so Kihara and King are adding dimensions and perspectives often missing in archives, setting the record straight.

By deconstructing tropes and myths *Paradise Camp* is also showing that they have been constructed in the first place, naming the power of archives, making it visible. Sentance (2019) has argued previously that the power of archives is partly maintained and hard to challenge or change because it is concealed behind archival professional standards and government bureaucracy, which gives an illusion that archives are neutral sites of memory (Christen, Anderson

2019). Yet, neutrality bias and power dynamics can be hidden making conversations of who archives empower or disempower difficult. The *Vārchive* makes this power visible and inverts it. It shows the archives' structures, it bares its bones.

One thing this *Right of Reply* makes clear is there is much Indigenous knowledge and truth that exists outside the archive which is being brought to the forefront by Indigenous artists like Kihara. Our hope for those who visit *Paradise Camp*, including us who work in memory institutions, is an increased awareness of the power dynamics that shape colonial archives thus shaping colonial memory.

We hope this could shift discussions around the preservation of memory and history to not just the material within institutional collections, but to extend it to sources of Indigenous knowledges that exist outside of them. Who are we empowering if our preservation does not include people and places historically excluded from the colonial archive?

4 The Body as an Archive

The body speaks.
It does not lie.
The more you try and lie with your body
The more it will tell the truth on you.
(Dr. Elizabeth Cameron-Dalman)⁴

Using a multitude of contemporary archival mediums, Kihara collides cold hard facts with memories - both actual and imagined - with a beauty and humour necessary to confront the wounds that colonialism, climate change and exclusion incur and perpetuate upon Kihara's community. Yet, at the core of *Paradise Camp*, it is the body itself which remains firm as the epicentre of knowledge keeping and of truth telling.

Gissel (2022) has previously described Indigenous bodies as *animate archives of their people* and Kihara's revelations regarding Gauguin's mis-appropriation (trying to tell lies) with the bodies of his subjects are a significant example of the bodies' power to prevail as a source of truth.

The bodies of Kihara's subjects, in stark opposition to Gauguin, are empowered, standing firm in truth, and the artist - Kihara - does not attempt to deceive her audience about who or where these subjects are. They are not 'othered and silenced' as Booker describes. Instead, they are recognised and given their voice. Kihara is allowing the bodies of her subjects to speak and they are telling the truth.

⁴ Personal communication in rehearsal with Gissel, The University of Western Sydney 2005.

Throughout *Paradise Camp*, one is swept up in tides of extravagant colour and sound and then dumped on shores of realisation that as it is the marginalised who are most affected by climate change and as Kanemusu and Liki (2021) point out, it is the *fa'afafine* who are the most marginalised community in Sāmoa. *fa'afafine* bodies as archives do not lie. They remain, as Bardiol describes “a receptacle of memory on the surface of the skin”.

The gestures, postures and even the eyelines of Gauguin’s models spoke out beyond his paintings. They spoke truths Kihara recognised because the collective embodied knowledge – the animated archive of her people – is the source of her knowing. Kihara has access to this archive because she is a living inheritor and contributor to it. Rosey Simas Dewadošyö (2022) explains:

I realised how the movements of my childhood, of play, dance, ritual and ceremony – movements deeply connected to the earth – informed the very architecture of my body. As my bones were shaped by gestures, my senses became developed to receive and perceive information in culturally specific ways.

It is clear that so much of Indigenous knowing exists outside of colonial archives. This knowledge is lived and passed through Indigenous bodies in relationship to landscape as a body unto itself – the body of Mother Earth⁵ if you will. The survival of our species is predicated on an embodiment of knowledge in relationship with Mother Earth.

As Jacinta Koolmatrie (2019) states “by destroying land you are destroying the ‘books’ and ‘libraries’ of Indigenous people”. Indeed, by denying the *fa'afafine* their real bodies and by denying Sāmoa her real body, what perpetuates is further decline for a community already deep in post-colonial traumatic amnesia.

In light of the climate change crisis it is imperative we return to original sources of knowing – to the animate archives of Indigenous peoples and places to guide us back to living in harmony with each other and our lands in Sāmoa and beyond.

Without a body, one cannot sense their land nor live in harmony with it. Without land, our bodies have nowhere to go. A renewed relationship between people and place is paramount if we are ever to return to collective responsibility and genuine caring toward addressing today’s climate crisis.

This renewed relationship can only be achieved through a willingness to hear and speak the truth. The good, the bad and the very, very ugly truth. Mother Earth is in crisis and she is calling out for

5 It is common with Kooris (New South Wales Indigenous peoples) to refer to the Earth as our Mother.

our help. Kihara is sounding the call for her Sāmoan homelands and her people. It would do us all good to harken her call.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, as Indigenous collections professionals, we are thankful to Yuki and the *Vārchive* for providing us with a profound lens through which to examine the intersection of art and archival practice. Through their thoughtful exploration, we have gained invaluable insights into the *Vārchive*'s potential role as a transformative force within the heritage sector. Yuki and the *Vārchive* have illuminated the pressing need for Indigenous interventions in colonial collections, offering a compelling impetus for truth-telling.

The reflections offered by the *Vārchive* compel us to redefine our conception of heritage, extending its scope to embrace Indigenous communities and sites as living archives and memory bearers. In an era where climate change threatens to erode these vital cultural resources, this redefinition takes on even greater urgency. Yuki and the *Vārchive* challenge the status quo and point towards a future where heritage preservation and cultural understanding are more inclusive and sustainable. By acknowledging and safeguarding the diverse narratives of Indigenous peoples, we can forge a path toward a more equitable world where memory embedded in us, and in our Mother Earth is celebrated and cherished by all.

Positionality Statement

As collection workers who reject notions of neutrality and believe our experiences and relationships to knowledge inform our work, we believe for transparency, it is important to share our positionality. Positionality, according to Queens University following the work of Alcoff, refers to an individual's location in relation to their different social identities, such as gender, race, class and geographical location (Queen's University ND; Alcoff 1988). The convergence of these identities and their interactions influence our perception and engagement with the world, as well as our knowledge and perspectives. Both as individuals and as people who work with collections in memory institutions we embody multiple identities that are flexible and interactive, shaped by context, and subject to constant revision and reproduction. We see our identities, embodied knowledge and relationships to knowledge as a strength we harness and not a limitation. Because of this, we will write citing literature as well as citing our experiences and interpretations.

We are writing this essay on the multiple unceded Aboriginal lands on which we work and live, namely Gadigal, Bediagal, Gaimaragal. We acknowledge we are visitors to these lands as Indigenous peoples from elsewhere and hope our work honours and respects the continuous sovereignty and connections of the Traditional Owners of these lands, waterways and skies we surround ourselves with. We also want to honour the Ancestors and Elders who are captured in collections and recognise the significant strength and guidance of our fellow First Nations collections professionals who have and still do lead the commitment of working with collections for truth telling, cultural revitalisation, repatriating love to our Ancestors in collections.

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