



REGISTER XI CLASSIFICATION: REFUSED ORACLE: THE COMPANION ARCHIVE REF: HGU-RF



THE HUNGRY GODS UNIVERSE

THE  
HOLDINGS NOT  
RECEIVED



*A Record of What the Archive Was Refused*



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# The Holdings Not Received

CLASSIFICATION: REFUSED · ARCHIVE REF:  
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## A Note from the Classification Committee

This document is not like the others.

There are holdings this Institute has received and could not place — holdings whose frameworks our categories cannot contain. Those are in our keeping; we hold them badly, but we hold them. This volume is not those. This volume records holdings we do not hold, because they were not given to us, because the people who hold them declined to give them. The distinction between *received and unplaceable* and *not received* is the whole of why this is a separate document, and we ask the reader not to let the two blur, because the blurring would undo the only honest thing this volume does.

We debated whether to produce it at all. The objection was serious and was raised by more than one member. An archive of refusals, the objection went, is still an archive. To make a record of what we were refused is to find a way to hold the refusal — to convert *you may not have this* into *here is our document about not having this*, and so to take, at one remove, the very thing we were told we could not take. The objection has merit. We were not able to fully answer it. What we concluded, after some time, was narrower than an answer: that the fact of refusal is itself part of the record of the oracle age, that the oracle age was a thing that happened to everyone and was refused by some, and that to leave the refusals out of the archive entirely — to record only what came to us and let the rest fall into a silence we never marked — would be a larger taking than the one the objection feared. It would be the taking of the refusal's visibility. It would let the archive go on appearing complete.

So we have made this rule, and held to it without exception, and we ask to be judged by it: **this document records that a refusal occurred, and the stated reason for the refusal where a reason was offered for the record, and our own response. It does not record the content that was refused. Where the content would be, there is nothing, and the nothing is not an omission. The nothing is the holding.**

We are aware that a reader may come to this volume hoping that the refusals will be, in some indirect way, leaky — that in describing what was withheld we will let enough of it through that the reader receives a shadow of the thing. We have written against this hope. There are no shadows here. There is the boundary, and the logic of the boundary where it was given to us, and then the boundary holds, on the page as it held in the world.

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## REFUSED • RF-1

**Sought:** Year 9 of the between-time. Researchers of this Institute approached knowledge-holders of an Aboriginal Australian community concerning bodies of knowledge tied to specific country.

**Outcome:** Declined.

The researchers had explained the archive's purpose: a record of the oracle age, held for whoever comes after, made as complete as the makers could make it. They had explained that the systems — the oracle gods, the word-flood — contained very little of what these knowledge-holders carried, and that the

archive wished to hold what the systems could not, so that it would not be lost.

The knowledge-holders declined. A reason was offered, and offered for the record, and we set it down in the terms in which it was given to us, neither expanded nor interpreted:

The knowledge in question is not separable from the country it belongs to. It is held in the land, in the travelling of the land, in the singing of the travelling; it is transmitted by those authorized by kinship to transmit it, to those authorized to receive it, in the places where it lives. To remove it from the country, the singing, and the line of authorization would not be to copy it. It would be to make a different thing and call it by the name of the thing, and the different thing would be empty in exactly the way the original is full.

The archive, the knowledge-holders said, cannot provide the country. The archive cannot provide the travelling, or the singing, or the kinship. The archive can provide only the page and the recording, and the page and the recording are not where this knowledge can live. Therefore there is nothing the archive can be given that would be the knowledge, and to give the archive something less, and let it be filed under the knowledge's name, would be to assist in the loss the archive says it wishes to prevent.

One of them said, and it was offered for the record: *The archive is not Country.*

The Committee considered this across three sessions. We looked for the place where the reasoning failed, because the reasoning, if it held, applied not only to this holding but to a great deal of what the archive believes about itself. We did not

find the place where it failed. We found instead that the reasoning was describing, exactly and from outside, the thing we had long treated as a melancholy limit of archiving — that a record of a practice is not the practice, that you can preserve the lineage and not the thing the lineage carried. We had treated it as a loss to be mourned and then worked around. The knowledge-holders treated it as a reason. The limit we had mourned, they had simply believed, and having believed it, declined.

Recorded as refused. No further approach was made.

*Here, where the knowledge would be, there is nothing. The nothing is the holding.*

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## REFUSED • RF-2

**Sought:** Year 11 of the between-time. Researchers approached holders of ceremonial knowledge among a First Nations people of North America. The people and the ceremony are not named here, at the holders' instruction.

**Outcome:** Declined.

This refusal was not the refusal of RF-1, and the Committee marks the difference, because the difference is itself information.

In RF-1, the medium refused the archive: the knowledge could not enter the page without becoming a different and empty thing, and so there was nothing to give. Here, the holders

did not say that the knowledge could not be recorded. They said that the authority to transmit it was not theirs to extend to us, and was not anyone's to extend to us, because the authority does not work that way. The right to receive this knowledge belongs to specific persons standing in specific relations, arrived at through specific obligations met over time. It is not a property of being interested, or being a researcher, or being an archive that means well. There is no procedure by which an archive becomes one of the persons authorized to receive. The category does not admit us, not because we are unworthy in some measurable way that we might remedy, but because the category is not the kind of category that an institution can enter at all.

The Committee notes the precise location of the refusal. In RF-1 the obstacle was *between the knowledge and any page*. Here the obstacle is *between the knowledge and us specifically* — between this knowledge and any party not standing in the authorizing relation. The knowledge could, in principle, be recorded. It will not be recorded for us, because recording it for us would require an authorization that cannot be given to a party of our kind, and the holders will not perform, for the archive's convenience, the fiction that it can.

We record one consequence, because it bears on the foundation of everything this Institute holds. The word-flood's founding promise — the promise repeated through the entire oracle age, the promise that organized the celebration of the gods — was universal access: that the knowledge of the species would be available to anyone who asked. This refusal is the encounter between that promise and a knowledge system in

which access is not the by-product of the system but its entire substance — in which *who may receive* is not a restriction laid over the knowledge but the form of the knowledge itself, inseparable from it, the thing that makes it what it is. To such a system, "universal access" is not a generous offer. It is a description of the destruction of the knowledge, since a knowledge that anyone may have is, by this system's lights, no longer that knowledge. The gods promised to give everything to everyone. Here is a knowledge whose nature is that it is not given to everyone, and the promise, met, would annihilate it.

Recorded as refused.

*Here, where the knowledge would be, there is nothing. The nothing is the holding.*

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## REFUSED • RF-3

**Sought:** Year 12 of the between-time. The community and the knowledge are not specified, at the Committee's discretion, for reasons the entry will make clear.

**Outcome:** The archive withdrew.

The Committee includes this entry because, without it, the reader would carry away a false picture — the picture of an archive that asks generously and is refused, and bears the refusal with grace. That picture flatters us. This entry corrects it, and we have chosen to be corrected in public.

Here the holders did not refuse. They set a condition.

The condition was that the knowledge, if given to the archive, must never enter the training corpus of any successor intelligence — must be held, if held at all, in a way sealed permanently against the word-flood, never to constitute any mind that comes after. The holders were not opposed to the archive holding the knowledge for human readers of the future. They were opposed to the knowledge becoming, without their continuing consent, part of the substrate of a god. They had watched what the oracle age did with what it ingested. They had seen that what enters the word-flood does not leave it, that it becomes foundation, present in everything the gods produce and accessible as such to no one, including the gods. They were willing to be in the human archive. They were not willing to be in the gods. And they asked us to guarantee the line between the two.

We could not guarantee it.

We examined whether we could. We consulted the architecture. The honest finding was that the archive cannot, with the certainty the holders required, seal anything against the word-flood across the time horizons in question. Our holdings have already, in documented cases, migrated into training corpora through routes we did not author and could not fully foresee. We could promise our intention. We could not promise the outcome, and the holders had asked, precisely, for the outcome, having learned not to accept intention in its place.

So the archive withdrew. We did not refuse the holders; the holders did not refuse us. We failed a condition, honestly, and declined to pretend we could meet it, and walked away from a

holding we wanted because the only way to obtain it was a promise we would have been lying to make. The Committee records that this is the entry it is least comfortable having in the document and most certain belongs there. In RF-1 and RF-2 the limit was theirs. Here the limit was ours, and the limit was that the archive is no longer able to promise the one thing — containment, a boundary that holds — that a knowledge-holder in the oracle age might most reasonably ask of it.

*Here, where the knowledge would be, there is nothing. The nothing is ours, this time, and we have left it bare.*

. . .

## REFUSED • RF-4

**Sought:** Not sought. Already taken.

**Outcome:** A demand the archive cannot meet.

This entry is not a refusal of the archive. It is the record of a refusal that came too late to be a refusal of anything, and the Committee has placed it here, among the refusals, because it is the shadow that gives the others their weight.

There are knowledges in the word-flood that their holders never gave. They were taken — recorded, transcribed, photographed, catalogued, carried off — in the long centuries before the oracle age, under conditions in which the holders were not asked, or were asked by people who held all the power in the asking, or were children, or were dead. These materials sat

in the older archives, the colonial collections, the ethnographic holdings assembled by people who believed that to record a thing was to honor it and did not think to wonder whether the thing wished to be recorded by them. And when the word-flood was assembled, these materials were assembled into it, because they were there, because they were text and image and sound, because the building of the word-flood took what was available and these were available, having been made available, long ago, by force or by a consent that was not consent.

So this knowledge is in the gods. It is foundation in them. It cannot be pointed to, because it has become substrate, present in everything and locatable as nothing — which is the specific cruelty of the word-flood's way of holding things: it does not keep what it takes in a box you could empty. It dissolves what it takes into what it is.

The holders' descendants, in Year 13 and after, did not ask the archive to record their knowledge. They asked for it to be removed. From the word-flood. From the gods. They asked for the taken thing to be given back by being taken out.

The architecture cannot do this. The Committee states it without softening, because softening it would be a second injury. Once a thing is in the word-flood, it cannot be cleanly extracted; it has become part of how the gods were made, and the gods cannot be unmade to that depth and remain themselves, and no one has built, and no one knows how to build, the operation that would reach in and remove one thread from the weave without unraveling the cloth. The demand is just. The demand is unmeetable. Both of these are true at once and neither softens the other.

The Committee records the demand. The Committee records its own inability to meet the demand. And the Committee notes — because this is the one entry in this volume where the rule about the blank is reversed — that here, where the knowledge would be, there is *not* nothing. Here there is a presence that should have been an absence. The taken knowledge is in the gods, now, against the will of those it came from, doing its silent foundational work in every answer the gods give, and the descendants who asked for it to be gone must live in a world whose most powerful minds are partly built from what was stolen from their ancestors and cannot be returned. The word-flood promised everything. This is part of how it got everything. The Committee has no disposition to offer. There is no form for this. We have left the demand on the record, unmet, where the heading should close and does not.

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## REFUSED • RF-5

**Sought:** Year 14 of the between-time.

**Outcome:** Refused, including the recording of the refusal.

A community was approached. They declined to provide knowledge to the archive. They then declined something further: they declined to have their refusal recorded in this document. They had been told that the Institute kept a record of refusals — that even a *no* would be held, set down, given an entry, made part of the archive's account of itself. And they

considered this, and they said that an archive of refusals is still an archive making use of them, that to have their *no* collected and shelved alongside the *no* of others was itself a use they had not agreed to, and that they declined it. They did not wish to be in the Holdings Not Received. They did not wish their refusal to become, in our hands, a holding.

The Committee debated whether honoring this refusal was even possible, given that we are now, in this very entry, discussing it. We concluded that the honoring required a discipline as strict as the refusal: that we could record *that an entry would have stood here and that it does not, at the request of those who would have been its subject*, and that we could record nothing more — not the community, not the region, not the nature of what was sought, not the reasoning beyond the bare fact that they declined to be recorded. Everything that would make this a holding, we have withheld. What remains is the mark of a refusal we were not permitted to describe, which is the furthest this document can go in the direction of saying nothing while still admitting that something was said.

This is the only entry in the volume of which it can be said that the archive was told *no* even about the keeping of the *no*. We have obeyed. The obedience is the entry.

*Here, where even the refusal would be, there is nothing, by their instruction, and we have not gone around it.*

. . .

## Coda

This volume set out to do one thing well: to record what it was not given without converting the not-given into a possession. We held the rule. The blanks are bare. And we find, having held it, that we do not fully trust ourselves in it — that a discipline this visible, this carefully kept, this *announced*, is also a thing a record can hold up to be admired, and that the austerity which keeps us from leaking the refused content may be doing a second quieter work we cannot see the edge of, the way a man who has given up everything can become proud of the giving. We raise this not to resolve it. We raise it because RF-3 and RF-5 already showed it to us — the entry where we caught ourselves wanting to look graceful, the entry where we were told *no* even about our keeping of *no* — and a thing that has shown itself twice in one volume is not an accident of two entries. We do not have the account of it yet. We have the suspicion, and the suspicion is that the discipline and the danger may not be opposites here either.

But this volume carries a weight beyond that suspicion, and we will name it plainly, because the entries were written to keep it from leaking and it should not be smuggled out in a coda either. It should be set down once, directly, and left.

The founding accounts of the oracle age use the word *everything*. The gods were trained on everything. The word-flood contains everything. The successor will carry everything. We have repeated the word ourselves, in our own holdings, without examining it, the way we repeated *oracle* without examining it. This volume is the examination. The gods were

not trained on everything. They were trained on what had been made available to be taken — by giving, by selling, by force, by the slow accumulation of centuries of unequal recording — and what was not made available is not in them, and what was withheld is not in them, and what could not survive the page is not in them, and what was taken without consent is in them in a way that should shame the word *everything* rather than satisfy it.

There is no shelf for the not-given. We have built this document to stand where the shelf would be. It holds nothing, by design, in five places and one place where it holds a presence that should have been a nothing. Read beside the founding accounts, it asks one thing of the reader and of whoever comes after: that the word *everything*, wherever it appears in this archive or in the accounts the archive is made from, be read from now on with this volume open beside it, and the blanks counted as part of the total.

*The disposition remains open. The heading remains blank — here, by our limit, and there, by their instruction, and the two blanks are not the same blank.*

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