Uncovering Archival Silences and Investigating Institutional Initiatives to Ensure Diverse and Inclusive Collections

Final Research Proposal

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Introduction

We often turn to cultural heritage institutions to understand our past. But what do we do when the stories being told by these institutions are incomplete? These incomplete narratives are referred to as archival silences. Archival silences can occur when there is a gap, distortion or absence in the historic record that can either happen on purpose or unintentionally (Society of American Archivists, 2022). Information professionals often see archival silences with regard to underrepresented, marginalized groups whose narratives are missing from collections (University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 2022). The implications of these missing narratives have had a profound impact on our understanding of our collective human experience and will continue to do so if they are not identified and rectified by the institutions tasked with preserving them.

Realistically, collections can not include every record available on a subject, topic or period of history. Appraisal is a key component in the acquisition and accessioning processes (Society of American Archivists, 2022). When looking at how collections are formed, It is important to acknowledge that archives and libraries are not naturally neutral spaces. Archivists "evaluate sources to add to the collection based only on the potential value to researchers and the historical record. In truth, societal biases impact the work of archivists and librarians just like they would anyone else, and these biases can often shape what is determined to have historical value" (University of Maryland, Baltimore County, 2022, para. 2). The opportunity for narratives to be excluded can occur from the moment a source is created to the moment it is looked upon retrospectively as a potential historic record. When we see distortions and gaps

with regard to particular groups, cultures, events, etc., we begin to wonder why these records are not present. In an effort to recover and preserve these stories, institutions and the communities they serve are exploring new ways of ensuring diverse collections (Smith, 2021).

Fortunately, archival silences have not gone unnoticed. Examining existing collections and implementing programs and initiatives are several ways cultural heritage institutions may be able to fill these gaps. Primarily through case studies, narrative and ethnographic research, we find examples of these investigations taking place and insight into what methods are being employed to rectify the silences in our record keeping institutions. There are case studies that question past practices in archival collections such as one conducted by archivist Tesa Lark Burns (2020) where the concept of the privilege and societal power structures within private collections is explored. Burns affirms that private collectors were often the ones saving materials before they made their way to an institution and those with the means to do so could be prone to personal or professional bias. She raises the point that individual collectors have historically had an impact on who is seen and heard in our records. We also see studies focused on the intentional erasure of information on a much larger scale. Researcher Tamy Guberek (2017) investigated police records that were produced during Guatemala's civil war. She discovered that Guatemalan police used terminology and codes when reporting deaths in the official records to conceal and downplay the level of violence during this period of unrest.

Another set of studies document what is presently being done to combat and correct archival silences. Archival outsourcing and community archiving are on the rise. Programs, such as Arizona State University Library's Community-Driven Archives Initiative (Arizona State University, 2022), are directed at gathering stories, artifacts and narratives from community members themselves and are being implemented by cultural heritage sites committed to inclusion and diversity in their collections. Creative endeavors are being explored as a means for members of marginalized communities and groups to reinterpret how they have been represented in the past. In her master's thesis, Lisa See (2021) argues that everyone is an archivist. Simply due to our ability to create materials, we contribute in myriad ways to the historic record. The role and mission of archivists extends beyond the walls of the institutions tasked with preserving collective and cultural memory.

These studies have brought attention to the prevalence of archival silences and their detrimental effects on our understanding of the past. They have raised awareness about the non-neutrality of record keeping practices and shone a light on how this has impacted those whose narratives are not being preserved. They have also shown us the changes in institutional practices that are being explored to include communities in the archival process from the creation of records to the preservation of them. Few studies, however, mentioned practical steps a cultural heritage professional can take at smaller institutions to identify and correct these silences.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how cultural heritage institutions are

currently addressing archival silences and to explore what methods are being used to maintain more diverse and inclusive collections. I will base my research on my findings from a museum and a historic home in the community of Norfolk, Virginia. My research will seek to understand the genesis of these archival silences and investigate the initiatives taken by institutions and communities to correct them. My research will also aim to discover innovative ways this can be done in my own community and reflect on the impact of these practices.

A Review of the Literature

The topic of archival silences has vast transformative implications for our society at large. Accountability for our past record keeping practices and the concept of neutrality in collecting must be addressed. Practically, we need to understand how these silences occur and what we can do to prevent them from skewing the narratives in our collections. From teaching others how to properly utilize and view primary sources to calling upon our communities to contribute their stories to cultural heritage institutions we can take steps to fill in the gaps in our historic record and ensure representation for marginalized and underrepresented voices.

Archives, by their very nature, can only provide access to the records that have been actively and intentionally collected, documented and preserved (University of Colorado Boulder Libraries, 2022). However, it was not until 1995 when Michel-Rolf Trouillot introduced the idea in his book *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History,* that archival silences as a concept were given a name and brought to broader

public attention (Society of American Archivists, 2022). Since this time, researchers have been embarking on studies to further uncover, understand and rectify archival silences in cultural heritage collections. This review of past studies will discuss research that has sought to define what constitutes an archival silence and investigations into past subjective record keeping practices with an emphasis on intentional omissions and distortions. Also covered will be an analysis of research that has been conducted with regard to the implementation of technology and modern resources to bring broader access to and awareness of areas that have been neglected in archival collections. Lastly, this literature review will explore the concept of archival outsourcing. Here, we will discuss the studies that document the steps taken by cultural heritage professionals in an effort to fill the gaps in our records in creative, collaborative ways.

Defining Archival Silences

An important first step in understanding archival silences is to define what constitutes a "*silence*" and to understand the conditions in which they can occur. The book, *Archival Silences: Missing, Lost, and Uncreated Archives,* draws upon Michel-Rolf Trouillot's findings when discussing the genesis of these gaps in the record (Moss & Thomas, 2021, p. 10). The editors state that according to Trouillot, silences can occur during four key moments in record-keeping.

1. The moment of fact creation (the making of sources)
2. The moment of fact assembly (the making of archives)
3. The moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives)

4. The moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final
   instance)

In their work, Moss and Thomas (2021) argue that silences only exist when they are noticed by researchers and not every absence of evidence is evidence of absence. They find that confirmation bias can occur when a researcher interprets data (or lack thereof) in the records in a manner "partial to existing beliefs, expectations or a hypothesis in hand" (Moss & Thomas, 2021, p. 11). In some cases, it may not seem as though a silence is occurring because there are an abundance of records regarding a topic at a researcher's disposal. Author Kaitlyn Smith (2021) addresses how this can be deceptive in her article, *The Problem of Archival Silences.* Presenting the example of slavery in the American South, there are numerous primary source documents available pertaining to the auctioning, selling and manumission of enslaved Africans. Yet these records, she explains, "were initially generated and kept as part of a system that existed to uphold the system of slavery, not to provide a rich accounting of the voices and lives of the people who were being bought, sold, auctioned, and freed" (Smith, 2021, para. 3). Smith (2021) encourages researchers to understand that archives have traditionally told "histories from above" (i.e., the stories of those in positions of power and influence rather than "histories from below") (para. 5). We see this exemplified in a study of the letters of Thomas Jefferson (Klein, 2013). In one correspondence, Jefferson makes mention of his former enslaved chef, James Hemings. Hemings' life and work is all but absent from the historic record and has been reduced to this brief description made by

Jefferson. His story and the story of many others like him have been dictated by those with the means to record and preserve them.

Case Studies Investigating Archival Silences

Investigating past subjective record keeping practices is necessary to understanding how and why archival silences have occurred. Case studies regarding a particular collection or a specific institution can provide insight into this phenomenon. One example comes from the Alice Marshall Women's History Collection. Author Tesa Lark Burns (2020) points out that while this collection gives a distinct voice to women, it is not all-inclusive. She states that we must look at the privilege and interest of private collectors and recognize how that influences the narratives upheld in their collections. Burns (2020) affirms that this collection largely reinforces a white American woman's experiences and inadvertently silences "a multitude of women's voices, including women of color, LGBTQ+ women, women with disabilities, and more" (p. 701).   We see another example of this in a personal reflection by researcher Debra Hardy (2021) who, while attempting to locate information regarding a black educator, repeatedly found her to be missing in the school's yearbooks and records.

In the above examples, we saw how private collections can exhibit bias and lead to unintentional silences. However, intentional omissions and distortions in the historic record have occurred on a much larger scale. Case studies investigating archival silences perpetuated by governments, institutions and public programming have shed light on how these gaps in the record can affect collective memory and citizens' accepted knowledge of a particular topic (Yeager & Culleton, 2016; Dunsworth, 2018;

Griffin, 2014; Guberek & Hedstrom, 2017). In the one such study investigating the

history of female prisoners of the Irish Magdalene Laundries, there is evidence that the

Irish state and the Catholic church had sought to silence these events through archival

restrictions and shaped narratives (Yeager & Culleton, 2016). It has also been implied

that archival silences are common in countries ruled by authoritarian regimes or in

areas where colonialism has occurred (Moss & Thomas, 2021; Nemser, 2015). They

state that archival restrictions are heavily influenced by the politics of a region and for

reasons of state security (Moss & Thomas, 2021).

　　　Archival restrictions are still a blight to researchers, as demonstrated by historian

Kacie Lucchini Butcher (2022). In one case study she details an undercover filming

project conducted in 1961 to document racial discrimination with regard to housing in

Madison, Wisconsin. The film came into the possession of the University of Wisconsin

in 1962 with a note reading, "I send you here with ten cans of film and magnetic tape.

These are the hidden camera scenes of a film on housing discrimination in a

medium-sized northern city. They are packed in a single, sealed box. These materials

are not to be used or released except on the specific authorization of the University

administration" (Butcher, 2022, para. 12). This restriction was unchallenged until 2018

and the film was not released and made accessible to the public until 2021; an example

of when materials do exist in the record yet limitations to access foster and perpetuate

an archival silence.

Implementation of Modern Resources to Address Archival Silences

There are various methods that can be used to rectify archival silences. Increased digitization of records has the potential to increase access to collections that were not previously available to the public. Yet digitization as a cure-all for archival silences is not without its critics. It has been argued that while digitization has the power to increase engagement with cultural heritage materials, its selective nature can compound the issue due to the fact that documentary evidence for marginalized populations is not as prevalent as that of privileged populations, thus the gap in the digitized records remains (Levi, 2022). "To rectify such gaps, we also need to go beyond documents and include links to material culture, non-tangible heritage, and archaeological data, and of course employ different approaches to 'unearth' the voices embedded in the text" (Levi, 2022, p. 4). An example of this searching beyond standard documentation for unheard narratives is discussed in a study that incorporated sound recordings from WWI prisoners of war (Lange, 2017).

Ensuring that archival collections reach a broader audience is one avenue cultural heritage institutions are exploring. Studies have been conducted on popular culture representations that rely heavily on the use of archival materials, like *Hamilton: An American Musical* (Madison, 2017). Also worth noting are social media initiatives from indigenous groups that can result in ownership of their own memory and story, not bound by the traditional *archival* parameters (Fisher, 2018).

Community Archiving and Outsourcing Initiatives

In addition to broadening access, institutions are working to broaden participation in the archival process itself. Research has been carried out documenting the emerging trend of *community archiving* defined as "documentation of a group of people that share common interests, and social, cultural and historical heritage, usually created by members of the group being documented and maintained outside of traditional archives" (Society of American Archivists, 2022). Several studies detailing the processes undertaken by community archives have shown how calling upon members of the community that belong to traditionally marginalized and underrepresented groups can help fill the gaps in existing collections (Tummino et al., 2021; Riter et al., 2021).

Innovative programming and rethinking the traditional definition of *archives* has also been explored (See, 2021; Al-Amoudi et al., 2022). With the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement and in the wake of the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and Ahmad Arbery, the University of Florida and the Gainesville community recognized the need to document protests and memorials surrounding the events (Pennemon & Coates, 2021). Library staff and volunteers began collecting photographs, memorabilia and posters from the sites in an effort to "aid in the teaching and remembering of history and how the Gainesville community responded in these enduring moments of tragedy and injustice" (Pennemon & Coates, 2021, p. 16).

Confronting Archival Silences in My Community and Filling the Gaps

With increased awareness of the subjective nature of traditional archival practices and the push for more inclusivity in our institutions, I believe more case

studies will be beneficial. My research will investigate the steps being taken in two different departments at The Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Virginia. I will conduct interviews with the Librarian at the Chrysler Museum of Art and with the Coordinator of the Myers House (a historic home operated by the museum). The Chrysler Museum is dedicated to diversity and inclusion in its collections, so speaking with these two individuals will yield information and insight into whether or not this mission is evident at these sites. The data I will analyze will include documentation, photographs, and interview transcriptions. I will examine how these materials are used to tell the stories of underrepresented and marginalized groups and how this information is being utilized to remedy any archival silences through programming and offerings by the institution.

Methods

This study will be completed implementing a qualitative research approach. Using a qualitative research approach will allow for collection, analysis and interpretation of data to discover patterns (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017) that have influenced past collecting behaviors and practices and to understand what is currently being done to maintain more diverse and inclusive collections. This research study will investigate the occurrences and phenomenon of silences, distortions and omissions in the historic record and will seek to understand the reasons behind them in archival collections. Drawing meaning from the findings, this research will identify methods that can be implemented by cultural heritage institutions to rectify these silences and shed light on the stories of historically marginalized groups that have not been preserved.

A transformative worldview guides my research. Transformative qualitative studies focus "on the needs of groups and individuals in our society that may be marginalized or disenfranchised" (Creswell & Cresswell, 2017, p. 32). This philosophical view seeks to provide a voice to these groups and individuals through the research being conducted. In doing so, a transformative approach hopes to address social oppression and presents "an action agenda for reform that may change lives of the participants, the institutions in which individuals work or live, and the researcher's life" (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2017, p. 32). This research study's focus on archival silences within record keeping institutions is bringing broader attention to this timely issue. Through investigating two different departments at the cultural heritage institution where I work, I am hoping to gain a better understanding of the current collecting practices in place, determine whether there is evidence of archival silences occuring, and find out what actions are being implemented to ensure collections are inclusive, diverse and more representative of the community they serve.

This research will take the form of a case study that will follow an applied research design. Applied research is appropriate for this study because it will provide new information and perspectives "immediately usable in the resolution of actual problems" (Conaway & Radford, 2021, p. 429). The study will also be evaluative in nature. Evaluative research as a form of applied research tests this new information within a specific setting (Conaway & Radford, 2021, p. 430), in this case, cultural heritage institution sites responsible for maintaining, interpreting and sharing collections. This study also falls under action research (Conaway & Radford, 2021, p. 438) due to

the fact that it will directly affect my immediate workplace and lead to solutions that can be implemented in the museum's programs, initiatives and community outreach offerings. Additionally, the topic of archival silences falls under the umbrella of social justice research and decolonizing research methodologies as this research will be addressing the biases in traditional archival practices and procedures and investigating methods that "challenge the Eurocentric research methods that undermine the local knowledge and experiences of the marginalised population groups" (Conaway & Radford, 2021, p. 446).

My research will sample a small number of participants within one cultural heritage institution. I will conduct interviews with the Dickson Librarian at the Chrysler Museum of Art and with the Coordinator of the Myers House. According to its mission statement, The Chrysler Museum of Art (2022) is dedicated to diversity and inclusion in its collections, so speaking with these two individuals will yield information and insight into whether or not this mission is evident at these sites. The reason I chose these particular individuals is due to their direct responsibility for the records in their care. The museum's librarian is in charge of a collection of books, exhibition catalogs and ephemera all related to the history of art. These materials exist in a non-circulating library that is primarily used by staff and researchers. So I am curious as to how inclusive our current collection is and how it can potentially be shared with the community at-large in creative ways. The coordinator for the Myers house has been on a mission to include the stories of the people who were enslaved by the Myers family. She has been poring over documents, conducting her own research and is beginning to

implement changes in the programming offered in the house to better reflect these diverse stories.   I am interested to see how she is actively advocating for change at her site.

I will be administering an open-ended interview consisting of ten questions to each of the participants in my study. I wanted to include questions that will be applicable at both sites. The questions are as follows:

1. Could you describe the collections in your care? The materials that you primarily work with?

2. Are you familiar with the concept of archival silences? (If not, I will share the Society of American Archivists definition and provide a brief overview of the topic).

3. Are there any group's narratives that you feel are missing from your site's collections? Could you provide an example of any encounters you may have had with archival silences within your collection?

4. In terms of diversifying the collection, where have you seen shortcomings or areas that need to be addressed?

5. What community do you feel is most represented by your current holdings?

6. What community is primarily served by your current holdings? How so and in what ways? Who are your users?

7. How is community outreach and engagement incorporated at your site? Has there been past or upcoming programming that includes diverse voices in your collection?

8. Are there any initiatives that you have undertaken or would like to initiate at your site to diversify your collection?

9. With regard to diversity, the Chrysler Museum of Art states, "We value diversity and recognize that our differences make us stronger. We welcome different perspectives, experiences, beliefs, and values and strive to maintain an inclusive environment" (Chrysler Museum of Art, 2022). How do you feel your site ties into your parent institution's mission?

10. Do you feel as though your own worldview and experiences affect your collecting decisions? Is there a formal process in terms of acquisitions?

This case study will rely on narrative research and content analysis of multimodal data. With the participant's consent, I will record the interviews so that I will have accurate and detailed transcriptions that will inform my study. I will examine documents, photographs, artifacts and any other materials that may shed light on the types of stories that are being told at the library and at the Myers house. At the library, I would like to obtain information and statistics that show the percentage of holdings that represent marginalized cultures and artists in comparison to those of a Eurocentric background. At the Myers house in particular, I believe obtaining a copy of the "script" used for tours will be beneficial. This will provide an idea of the type of stories that are being shared with the public. In terms of community engagement and involvement, I will examine the past and upcoming programming that has been offered to discern if there are any differences or discrepancies in content over time. With these materials, I will seek to understand the dominant narratives that are represented in the collections. I will

examine how these materials are used to tell stories of underrepresented and marginalized groups and how this information is being utilized to remedy any archival silences through programming and offerings by the institution.

Since I am an employee of the Chrysler Museum of Art I will need to steer clear of bias. I will clarify to readers that I am working within my own institution. I will also define my role at the museum to inform readers that I am in no way in charge of collecting decisions or in the planning of programming. While I am an employee of the museum, I am approaching my research as an observer.   I hope to establish validity through my own transparency and the sharing of concrete details.

With regard to ethics, consent and privacy will be a key consideration for the participants that will be engaging in interviews. I will be transparent with them regarding how the answers will be interpreted and utilized in the study. I will also compare my findings with the available literature on the topic that has been conducted by individuals from different professional and cultural backgrounds. My two participants are both Caucasian women. The respondents' experiences and worldviews need to be taken into consideration while conducting this research study. Comparisons between the collections in my study and those that are maintained by a collections staff with more diversity on the team could yield information on how varied perspectives and experiences may affect the acquisitions and preservation processes.

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