White Noise: A Literature Review of Disrupting White Homogeneous Archival Collections

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Archival collections in the United States reflect and embody values from the European colonial origins of American *history* (specifically a counterpoint to prehistory) and the capitalist philosophies that the US is still laboring under. Values such as inequity, exploitation, and what it means to be (and to be recognized as) not just "important" but as human have infiltrated and become internalized in our collective consciousness. Archives, as human designed containers of "what has come before" (a phrase covering many interpretations of archival practice), are just as susceptible to internalizing these values. However, the primary sources archives tend to be most concerned with remain unaltered and open to new (or newly legitimatized) interpretations. Decolonizing efforts began decades ago and are picking up more traction with each passing moment and incendiary action by the current president.

The problem of how to shrug off the burden of colonial histories while retaining important, pertinent, and necessary information at the same time as adding un(der)represented histories, voices, and items does not lend itself to a simple solution. The aim of this literature review is to reveal aspects of colonial history mechanisms, understand how to situate archives in contemporary context, and most importantly how and to what effect archivists have begun to disrupt colonial collections biases.

In the last decade or so of archival scholarly and professional work concerned with disrupting American archival homogeneity (or, with the creation of a pluralist, inclusive representation of the historical record- the language is important), a nucleus has formed around certain influential groups and thinkers. Michelle Caswell, Associate Professor of Archival Studies in the Department of Information Studies at UCLA, and her fellow members of the Archival Education and Research Institute (AERI) and Pluralizing the Archival Curriculum

Group (PACG) are a substantial part of this nucleus and have heavily influenced contemporary American archival scholarship's choice of vocabulary, concepts, methods, and newly imagined outcomes that are present in the literature. Caswell's work informs much of this review. I look forward to her continuing efforts to saturate archival studies and education with social justice literacy. When AERI and PACG's 2011 article "Educating for the Archival Multiverse" was published, fully one-third of PACG members were affiliated with UCLA, so I will also be looking to them to continue to push boundaries and alter the archival landscape.

Perhaps due to the publishing requirements faced by academic librarians and archivists, the vast majority of resources consulted for this review result directly from university affiliations. Professional and emerging community archivists are certainly writing about their work, but it seems unlikely for them to be represented in academic literature outside of professional, trade, or conference settings.

Some Remarks About Place

This review is situated to be about archival works in America and practices that at once seek to disrupt white homogeneity of archives and cultivate healing relationships with the marginalized. I felt it was important to include two works in this review from contexts outside America. One of the ways globalization has unfolded in the last few decades includes the superimposing of Western traditions, values, and ways of being onto decidedly other-than-Western societies around the world. The Society of American Archivists (SAA) listed "diversity" as a priority for their 2013-2018 strategic plan, reinforced the term's place in their core values statement, and issued a call for case studies titled, "Diversifying the Archival Record". As a priority it seems to have been forgotten about, or perhaps the sentiment is that it's been paid the "lip service" it's due- just one case study appears on the SAA website.

Danielle Spalenka and Hao Phan (2016) describe a series of archival workshops geared towards assisting the Cham people, a minority group in Vietnam, with preserving manuscripts up to 350 years old. I would describe their efforts as well-intentioned but unthoughtfully executed, and a perfect example of "extractive practices of knowledge collection" (Daniel Heath Justice, 2018). Partially funded from the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library, which "typically funds projects that help relocate the endangered materials to professional archives or digitize the materials when they cannot be relocated" (p. 3), the case study is full of deficit thinking (*us* vs *them* mentality, comparisons happen by noting what the Other is lacking) and superimposing Western archival values even when impractical (e.g. deciding to raise funds for acid-free boxes instead of finding a locally viable and desired preservation solution). The authors try to balance the Cham people and their lives and wishes as first priority while the writing reveals the real priority is extracting what information they can for scholarly study.

Archives in Context

Archives today are quite like special libraries in that while a general definition exists, the practical domain of archives and archival principles can extend the width and breadth of human experience, leading to archives of myriad sizes, functions, applications, collections. How archives developed in America is key to fully understanding why decolonizing efforts are imperative steps for the field to take. To begin, the broadly Western European recordkeeping practices that accompanied and became part of the American colonial context is part of, and gave rise to, the contemporary archival domain. Many works in this review (AERI & PACG, 2011; Ahmed, 2018; Caswell, 2014; Cook, 2013; Daniel, 2010; Fultz, 2006; Hughes-Watkins, 2018; Justice, 2018; White, 2008; Wurl, 2005) place emphasis on the ways those practices were inequitable, exclusionary, objectifying/commoditizing, and unable to fairly represent the

collective goings-on of everyday people within the dominant culture, much less of those outside that culture.

Former prominent Canadian archivist Terry Cook's (2013) approach to describing the evolution of archives swaps precise timelines for more flexible *paradigms* that represent dominant "archival mindsets, ways of imagining archives and archiving" (p. 97). The four paradigms (Table 1) roughly correspond to a timeline but recognizes that the wide-reaching domain of archives means the paradigms coexist in their more or less appropriate contexts. That is, when shifts occur from one paradigm to the next, a complete erasure of the previous paradigm and its context does not also occur. A good way to visualize the development of archival paradigms is with a set of battleship curves, or seriation graphs (Figure 1) that have the flexibility to portray multiple relationships over time at once. This is a tool from 1960s archaeology and is likely to be outdated, but a future research project I would like to see involves the quantification of dominance of these paradigms (and their plotting on a seriation graph) in order to develop a more accurate picture of US archival development capable of creating more, and more nuanced insights.

Table 1 Paradigms of Archival Development (adapted from Cook, 2013)

Paradigm	**Key Concept**	**Key Time Periods in Use**
1. Evidence	Records as evidence, "Truth"; Custodian	Colonial – 1930s
2. Memory	Records as historical sources; Archivist/historian	1930s – 1970s
3. Identity	Archives as societal resource; Societal mediator	1970s - onward
4. Community	Archives as participatory process; Facilitator	Forming/Now - onward

Themes

The literature consulted for this review revealed that there are themes developing in the realm of decolonizing archives and repairing archival relationships. One theme is concerned with the vocabulary archival writers use, exemplified here with the difference between *diversity* and *pluralism*. The next theme reveals community archives as the type of practice favored by

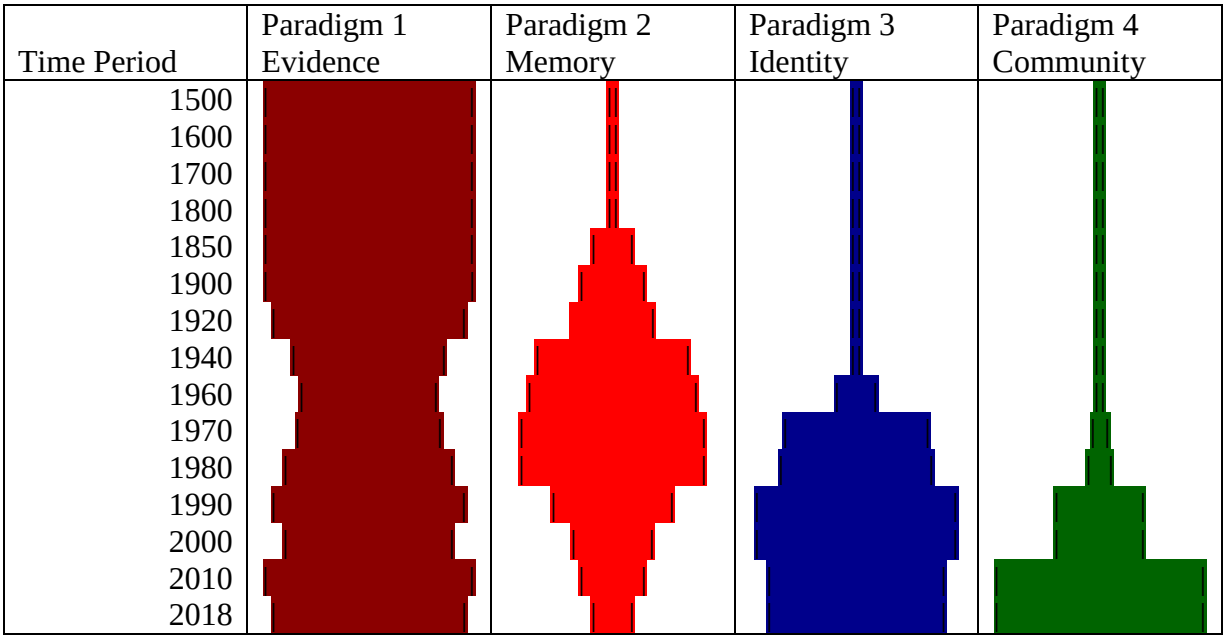

Figure 1 Example of seriation graph for dominant archival paradigms

archivists engaged with marginalized populations recently. The last theme in the literature consulted reveals what archivists expect in archive professionals and asks questions about what archivists can change about themselves to disrupt the archival power balance (and if the profession will survive!).

Vocabulary: pluralism vs diversity. One of the biggest issues faced by the Western archival tradition is the unequal power structures that influence what is of archival value. This pertains to people and the objects, records, writings, etc., that are created by, with, and about those people. Working towards a goal of organizing archival collections to be an accurate representation of a nuanced society means extending the privilege of archival representation to any and all peoples in that society. Some archivists have a difficult time expanding their worldview to imagine the possibilities of human expression and what constitutes worthy archival material. The field turned to the term *diversity* as archivists worked to understand their role in upholding harmful power structures, then moved to the more inclusive *multiculturalism* (Cox, 2000, as cited in Caswell, 2013, p. 277), and finally the term *pluralism* is becoming entrenched in the literature as an

archival concept (AERI & PACG, 2011; Ahmed, 2018; Caswell, 2013, 2014, 2016; Cook, 2013; Ramirez, 2015; White, 2008).

Caswell leveraged her background in religious studies to inform a deeper look at how religious pluralism (originally a religious term for clergy holding more than one position in the Church of England [Klassen and Bender, 2010 as cited in Caswell, 2013]) would transfer to the practice of archival pluralism. Caswell points to the work of scholar Diana Eck's four distinguishing features of religious pluralism to clarify its relationship to diversity:

- First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the *energetic engagement with diversity*. Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies.
- Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the *active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is too thin a foundation… It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another… and leaves in place… the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence.
- Third, pluralism is not relativism, but *the encounter of commitments*. Pluralism does not require us to leave our identities and our commitments behind. It means holding our deepest differences… not in isolation, but in relationship to one another.
- Fourth, pluralism is *based on dialog*. Dialog means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. (1997, as cited in Caswell, 2013)

AERI and PACG (2011) recognize diversity as merely the presence of difference and argue that:

> such an approach, while important, overlooks the systemic nature of the problems it seeks to address, that diversifying the student population without expanding pedagogy and practice perpetuates a lack of awareness and considerations of the perspectives, behaviors, and needs of many different communities. (p. 70)

Archivists interested in pursuing the relationships and imagination central to pluralist approaches are using community archives and archiving as one way to do it.

Practice: Community archives. Terry Cook's community paradigm of archives is centered around *activist-archivist mentors* that facilitate *participatory archiving* as well as *collaborative evidence- and memory-making* (2013, p. 113). The prevalence of community archives and participatory archive work undertaken in recent years is itself evidence of the dominant paradigm. How a community archive comes to exist, as well as where it exists, when or for how long it will exist, for who it exists, etc., is complex. The same goes for the motivations behind community engagement with the archives and working to establish one in the first place. In America, most community archiving efforts are undertaken by groups of people that are marginalized, systemically discriminated against, and seeking some form of empowerment for their community (Ahmed, 2018; Caswell, 2014; Cook, 2013; Hughes-Watkins, 2018; Ramirez, 2015; Wurl, 2005). Caswell (2014, as cited in Caswell, 2014) describes five principles that generally distinguish community archives:

> broad *participation* in all or most aspects of archival collecting from appraisal to description to outreach; shared ongoing *stewardship* of cultural heritage between the archival organization and the larger community it represents; *multiplicity* of voices and formats, including those not traditionally found in mainstream archives such as ephemera and artifacts; positioning archival collecting as a form of *activism* and ongoing *reflexivity* about the shifting nature of community and identity.

The possibilities of working with people within their own communities, empowering them to make decisions counter to traditional archives, of experiencing more of the awe-inspiring human modes of creation is truly exciting to me. However, I have lingering doubts about the sustainability of the archival field's current understanding of community archives. Generally, the road to community archives begins when someone (usually a community member, archivist, or

scholar) notices a discrepancy in the representativeness of a group within a memory institution or the community memory-holdings. Next, someone decides to begin a community archive immediately or they approach a traditional memory institution to share their idea of expanding the collection for and with their group. Too often, archivists at established memory institutions answer calls to expand collections by flipping the responsibility back to the un(der)represented group and saying theirs isn't the place for that kind of material. Shouldn't *they* make their own archive if they want those materials cared for? With the rising popularity of community archives I fear it will become a fall-back answer and an easy way to maintain the power structure of the archive and its collections.

Inspired by Lae'l Hughes-Watkins' (2018) powerful claim that "traditional archives have taken on the role of coconspirator in the violence against black bodies" (p. 1) and Michael Fultz's 2006 article *Black Public Libraries in the South in the Era of De Jure Segregation*, I am wondering if the way community archives has begun to develop is any different than the way Jim Crow libraries became fixtures in the South. Black communities facing segregation pushed for libraries in the same ways marginalized communities are pushing for archival representation, and black communities facing segregation were told there was no room for them at established libraries, so they better create their own if they want them- a common answer for marginalized communities seeking archival representation within existing memory institutions.

To counter this, Cook (2013) argues there is simply too much memory material for traditional memory institutions to ingest and care for it all, and that the responsible act is to develop participatory archives at the community level (p. 113-114).

Though this review is concerned with the state of American archives, it is important to note how international contexts give rise differently to community archives. Ahmed (2018)

writing about the rise of documenting oral history in Qatar and around the Persian Gulf, gives different reasons for the emergence of community archives. The general dearth of a traditional archive system is one reason, and the other is not as a counter to formal archiving, "but for the purpose of addressing deep desires to know the past in the face of silences and lacunas" (p. 237-238).

Professional values: Embeddedness, relation/partnerships, commitment to two-way sharing of knowledge, tools, and value. This section deserves more time than I am able to devote to it at present, and it especially will warrant revisiting after I have established my own archival or librarian career. PACG group member Kelvin L. White (2008, p. 119) developed a framework for archival curriculum that has powerful implications for all aspects of the profession.

Conceptual expansion to address issues related to: • Different conceptualizations of the record (kinetic, aural, spatial) • Different notions of ownership (who owns co-created records and how should this be addressed?) • Different notions of the archive (does an archive always have to be a building? What would a living archive look like? When might this be more appropriate?) • Different ways of remembering (inscribed or incorporated? What are the implications of each on archival ideas and practices?)
Embeddedness, which addresses: • Internships and field experiences to expose students to the archival needs of marginalized communities • Locating teaching within communities where learning can be supported through the participation of the entire community
Collaboration, which could address: • Integrating community teachers and critical learning models (pedagogy) • Partnering with community-based organizations in efforts to strengthen sustained community engagement (and produce equitable mutually beneficial partnerships) through culture-keeping projects
Leadership, activism and ethics to address: • Identifying how records and archives (however defined) contribute to the constitution of national and individual identity and history • Expanding the archival role in promoting visibility of under-documented communities, especially to secure rights and responsibilities
Reflexivity to address: • Critical examination of archival theory and practice and its lineage • Critical examination of the educator's role in the community and its implications • Integration of critical approaches (e.g. cultural theory, critical theory, and critical pedagogy) • Need more research • Expanding the scope of research • Examination and addressing of one's own cultural competence

Table 6. Framework for pluralizing the archival paradigm

Conclusion

This literature review was mainly concerned with archives in their contemporary context and recent practices to bring social justice to archival collections, or disrupt white homogeneity of the historical record, or decolonize archival collections. It discussed work by archivists in and outside of America, found pluralism to be a key vocabulary term to inform the rest of the work, covered the rise of community archives and wondered about their future, and briefly listed

important considerations for the future of the profession. It will be a struggle to raise the archival profession to the empathetic, imaginative place it can be. The transformation has already begun and there is no turning back. How it will end up, though, is anyone's guess.

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