Recommendations for Research on Racialized Voices in Colonial Archives

SOAS Special Collections and One More Voice

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Date
2022

Special Thanks
Dino Franco Felluga
Purdue University
COVE: Collaborative Organization for Virtual Education

Menu

Recommendations context: *One More Voice*

In 2021, researchers for a *One More Voice* project ("BIPOC Voices from the Victorian Periodical Press") reviewed a selection of nineteenth century British missionary society periodicals held by Special Collections, SOAS Library across a sample of five decades. The goal of the researchers was to examine the extent to which these sources included entries by BIPOC individuals (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour) from the British empire, as a way of bringing these often hidden voices to a range of Victorianist and other scholars, generating new scholarship, and contributing constructively to a larger disciplinary decolonising agenda.

The work, funded by an Arts and Humanities Research Enhancement Program grant from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, centred on identifying at least 26 works by racialized[1] nineteenth-century creators. The grant allocated 106 reading hours for this work over a period of several months. The researchers comfortably achieved this objective and collectively identified several hundred voices, thereby far exceeding the project expectations. The relatively modest scale of the work, which focused on a sampling of journals using decade-long increments, indicates that many more such voices remain in the archives and need to be identified and documented. Further details on the rationale and objectives of the project can be seen on the SOAS Special Collections blog.

As part of this project, the researchers now share some of their best-practice recommendations for finding these voices in British imperial and colonial archives. These recommendations are directed towards scholars who will be using the SOAS Special Collections for similar work although the recommendations also have wider applicability for archival research in relevant British archives.

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[1] There is no ideal term to describe the range of individuals and groups that became the focus of our project. We have selected this term as it best defines the individuals our project engaged and the process by which race was constructed by Europeans in the nineteenth century and inscribed onto various peoples around the world.

Recommendations

1. Define your research question(s) and identify problems and challenges

As with any piece of research, it is important to clearly define your research questions and objectives. Specifically in this case consider *whose voices you wish most to identify, document, and engage, and where these might be found.* The answers will define your further research choices, such as region, epoch, and milieu. In its archival research, the *One More Voice* team prioritised Southern Africa, specifically within the context of the missions of selected British Protestant missionary societies the London Missionary Society (LMS) and Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS). We were interested in the voices of indigenous or 'native' teachers, ministers, pastors, deacons, and evangelists, and also in the voices of significant regional and political figures.

When attempting to trace the stories and voices of BIPOC authors in colonial sources where the bias of the narrative is generally towards white European authors, research questions should also address the question of *what is meant by 'voice' in this context?* Relevant pieces will often not be attributed to the individuals in question. Rather, you will need to look for voice in its various manifestations – often mediated or recounted by European missionaries. Examples of this might include:
- paraphrased or second-hand retelling of speeches, sermons, letters, prayers;
- translations of letters or speech acts into English from their vernacular originals (where the vernacular has not survived or cannot be located);
- mentions in which a person is named, often within a dated document, which can contextualise and locate the given reference;
- noted gaps, or, references made to written documents which are absent from the archive – these references go towards defining what we call a "trace archive" in which we can collate details of documents that we can see once existed, but that may have not survived.

Where evidence is found, you will need to ask *how much you can trust the veracity or self-expression of the voice as it is represented.* What are the constraints to our trusting a representation of a person's words as verbatim speech acts? Were any translators involved, and if so, how did he/she/they impact on the creation of meaning? What are the issues with translation particular to these languages? *In short, how might meaning have been mediated or modified in this particular context?*

2. Engage proactively with the archivists/librarians and provide feedback

Information professionals are there to help you and generally have a good overview of the sources available for a research topic, as well as the range of finding aids that can be considered. They will be an important first point of contact and an ongoing support, but they may not have the detailed knowledge that you expect and need. *Enter into dialogue with archive staff as a two-way process*. Engage them for their knowledge and understanding, but also be prepared to highlight your own findings and feed back details that you think may enhance a record description on the catalogues, for example a person identified, a discovery made, something of significance you have found in the course of your research. There may be an opportunity here to help future researchers to come back to this material and take it even further. Increasingly repositories are also looking at new ways of engaging the public with

historical source material to unlock content, so look out for interesting initiatives around [crowdsourcing](#).

3. Consider your sources but be source-aware and critically engage with your materials

Identifying and selecting source materials will be a critical part of defining your research strategy. As a result, it is important that you consider questions such as ***What kind of sources are you going to use?*** Will you use primary or secondary sources? Will you use unpublished archival records (e.g. letters, diaries, reports), or published accounts such as periodicals, magazines and newspapers? Or will you use hard copy originals or digitised copies?

In all cases, it will be important to ***look for the bias in the source***. Who was it written by? Who was the intended recipient or audience? Why was it written? What function did it serve? What broader cultural and political ideologies shaped the text in general? Whose voices are we hearing and whose voices are absent, obscured? Obvious bias does not mean that the source has no potential value, so sources should not be discarded on this basis, but used with critical awareness to extract meaning.

Whether the materials you access are available digitally or in the archives themselves, the methodology for using them is the same. The extent to which a collection has been digitised will vary by context and be determined by the resources and funds available so not everything has yet been digitised, but it is possible to find both published and manuscript primary sources online. See [SOAS Digital Collections](#) and the [*One More Voice*](#) website as just some examples of these growing digital resources. Adam Matthew Digital, Brill, and other commercial content providers have also digitised a lot of nineteenth-century content from colonial archives around the world, including missionary archives, although these can be locked behind an institutional paywall for a period of time in line with licensing agreements.

4. Use finding aids but be critically aware of their strengths, limitations and subjectivity

Archival finding aids, in the form of guides, indexes, contents pages, lists and catalogues, will be the next place to go to orient yourself in the materials, understand context and identify important clusters of information. This is all valuable information, but you should not be overly reliant on finding aids and ***approach them with the same critical awareness as the sources themselves***.

There will be ***different levels of detail and granularity in finding aids***, depending upon the type of material being described, the objectives of the cataloguer and the resources available at the time of cataloguing. Finding aids will vary from top-level guides and outline box lists to itemised listings with detailed descriptions of content. You may also encounter materials that have not been catalogued at all. ***In many instances it is the omission of racialised and/or minoritised voices in the finding aids which is the crux of the problem.*** Indexes do not always name all those mentioned, quoted or included within the content of the holding, with many individuals and subjects remaining hidden within the text.

Indexing is ultimately subjective, as is the compilation of a catalogue, executed according to the interests and conscious or unconscious biases of the contemporary indexer or publisher. When using a finding aid, you should ***keep in mind questions around how the***

finding aids uphold the power relations which are already present in the sources. Each finding aid has been compiled for a reason. Do you know whose interests it served, at the time and/or now? What does the finding aid document and what does it omit? Interrogate the context of the creation of the aids by asking questions such as Who made each aid? To what end? Which resources were employed in which capacity?

Keyword searching on digital catalogues can be useful, often yielding important discoveries and information quickly. However, the results of a search will be dependent upon the quality and detail provided in the original catalogue and there are no guarantes that searches will reveal all that there is to be known. *Just because you cannot locate the author/s or details that you seek, does not mean that they are absent from the source, merely that they are absent from the description or text being searched.* You will need to be mindful of variant spellings for names and places when constructing your search, and also prepared to work through quantities of results to separate meaningful from irrelevant information. You will need to judge when and to what extent keyword searches are useful before immersing yourself in the sources and using different strategies.

5. Allow time for detailed reading of the sources and try different techniques

The most productive activity in locating these voices will be to examine and read the sources themselves carefully, engaging substantively with the material on its own terms. *This will require time.*

You may choose to *scan or skim-read a document in the first instance,* looking for keywords or names, but as this risks missing the detail or clues that you are looking for you may *then need to consider what we call the 'combine harvester' approach, where you read closely and in depth*, noting every single important detail with full citation details for each entry so that you can refer to it and/or revisit sources as necessary. Reading in this way reveals nuance and important clues in the written sources, and knowledge of the voices whose narratives are constructed, which scanning or skimming will not normally enable.

6. Keep a detailed record of your research

Document your research with care, noting all sources, archival references and bibliographic details so that you can retrace your steps as necessary. Good references will also be needed for compiling bibliographies and will mean that others reading your final research can get to the correct place in the records quickly. Organise your files, in whatever format suits you best (hard copy or electronic), including image files, which should be named and stored in a meaningful system from the outset. All of this will avoid the need for repeat visits.

7. Be flexible and willing to change the direction of your research

Finally, be prepared to *be flexible and agile in your research*; follow clues as you find unexpected leads or stumble upon a potential goldmine. Try different sources. Try different time periods or regions to see if you have more or less success. You may need to narrow or widen your line of enquiry. Discoveries may be serendipitous and rely on good fortune and good reading, and most importantly an enquiring mind – ask questions all the time about the work you are doing. 'Undiscipline' your research: bring perspectives from other disciplines and ask it to make sense that way - see what answers you achieve and ask more questions

again. Do not make any assumptions and equally do not second-guess the material before you.

You may also need to ***adjust the timescales and speed of your research as you go***. Handwritten sources can take time to read, as can printed sources. Although these comprise colonial archive holdings, derived by and within Empire, the actual holdings are not uniform; they do admit of idiosyncrasy. Expect inconstancy, expect change: what is true in one decade, much as for current magazines, may not be true in the next; frames and content as well as manner of reportage can change, with no continuity at all. Each new source is particular and will require the same questions and learning of identities, and it is important to understand the dynamics when seeking these undiscovered narratives. Take your time. Once you get used to the idiosyncrasies of a set of documents, you can speed up again.