Silenced History: Cultural Bias & Gaps in the Archival Record

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Introduction

The goal of archives is to preserve the historical record of a person, an institution, a community, or a nation. However, the process of acquisition is left up to archivists, who, with every intention to be objective, are subject to inherent biases. Cultural biases or misunderstandings may lead to materials from a particular group being overlooked and unacquired, resulting in a silence in the historical record of that archive.

Cultural biases are often not consciously adopted; they exist as persistent social stereotypes that influence the way a diverse community might interact with one another. So then, can an archivist's inherent biases be recognized and understood well enough to practice cultural humility? If so, can archivists expand the definition of the archive and diversify the way they acquire collections? Can the gaps in historical records be bridged?

Archivists' goal in collecting and preserving primary sources for history and memory can only be truly achieved when one acknowledges and addresses their own cultural bias and works to close the historical gaps in their collection. An archivist needs to integrate cultural humility and competency in order to best curate an accurate representation of the human experience.

Even unintentionally, cultural biases can cloud the judgment of an archivist who is acquiring new collections for the library. They may overlook the historical significance of a particular group, institution, or time period of the community for which they are preserving and archiving records, or fail to recognize the various ways in which records are kept across cultures. Subsequently, if those records are not acquired, the significance of that group or time period is suppressed and their historical voices silenced. In areas with culturally diverse populations, this silencing can be significant.

History of Archival Silences

As archives are created by humans, so too are the archival silences. Humans are of course subject to error, bias, influence, and social mores. “Archival creation is, of course, a human process, starting from individuals who produce the records, continuing through the selection process used by archivists and ending up with cataloguing and delivery of documents” (Johnson et al, 2016, p.1-2). The selection process alone leads to gaps in the historical record, as archivists painstakingly decide which records are worthy of being preserved. According to the National Archives of the United States, “archivists typically appraise 2-5% of US government records as meeting their requirements for archival preservation” (Johnson et al, 2016, p.14).

Reasons for gaps in the historical record

Western archives can be overwhelmingly textual in nature, revealing a strong preference for the written word. The dominance of text has caused oral and material cultures to be overshadowed, and their histories taken out of context in major archives. Conversely, literacy has also been weaponized against specific groups, for example Africans enslaved in the ‘New World’ who were barred from learning to read or write. Gaps in the historical record can be created when textual archives overlook material and oral archives, as well as when whole groups are excluded from participating in the written word. On the relative anonymity of the Haitian revolution, Fowler (Johnson et al, 2016) explains, “[t]he absence of a written record of the thoughts of the revolutionaries may have contributed to the failure of historians to engage with the revolution until recently” (p.4).

The emergence of digital archives has created an opportunity to fill the gaps in the historical record, but they are not immune to the plague of missing records. “For digital humanists, archival silences often refer to materials that are not available in formats useful for

scholarly research and, more specifically, materials which have not been digitized and marked up" (Manoff, 2016, p.2). To make matters more complicated, the rapidity with which media technology developed in the late 20th century has led to a great deal of information stored away on devices that were discarded within a relatively short amount of time (Manoff, 2016).

However the gaps are created, the groups who have been left out of the record are most often those who do not wield power: the poor, women, immigrants, and any cultural minority group. Lack of visibility in society, leading to lack of visibility in the archive, leading to lack of visibility in history. As a response, community archives have stepped in to give voice to the silenced. There is a "wish by communities to use their archives to tell their story in their own way unmediated by professional historians and archivists" (Johnson et al, 2016 p. 19).

Effect of silences on cultural groups

In the relatively passive act of collecting and curating documentation, archives in fact are active players in upholding power structures based on what they collect—and what they don't. "The ruling elite create and use the archive to reinforce their claims to power and exclude those who pose a threat to their position" (Ramos, 2022, p.15). Archives preserve not only documentation in the form of records, letters, artifacts, etc, but also serve to preserve social memory.

Chicanx: Neither from here, nor from there

In her interviews with people from the Chicanx subculture, who already represent a microcosm of the US population, Ramos (2022) found that many sought out or felt more at home with other intersectional groups, such as punks or LGBTQ+, as a way to embrace their feelings of otherness.

> "*'Our culture, political ideology, traditions and philosophical thoughts are an essential part of the history of this country but our contributions often go unrecognized. We're not alone in being ignored by a ubiquitous whitewashing of U.S. history, we are a nation built on the labor of slaves, indigenous populations and immigrants who never get credit for their contributions. We need to put us back in U.S."*" (Alice Bag, as quoted in Ramos, 2022, p.35).

This desire for representation in the archive serves to empower marginalized groups in creating their own community archives, documenting their own histories, and controlling how they are represented (Ramos, 2022). Indeed, Ramos found that nearly 70% of the archivists she surveyed "agreed that the documentation and preservation of records of underrepresented groups equated with better representation for the community as a whole" (2022, p.52)

Destruction of Black neighborhoods

The notorious erasure of Black history has been realized in part by the destruction of Black neighborhoods. The Hill District, a neighborhood in Pittsburgh, PA, had been prominent during the height of the Jazz Era, and Charles "Teenie" Harris, a photographer for the Pittsburgh Courier, documented musicians, singers, and activists who visited the area during the mid-20th century, providing a glimpse into the life of the forgotten Hill District (Luster, 2018). Carnegie Museum of Art archivist Dominique Luster (2018) describes the importance of preserving documents from marginalized communities, for the sake of remembering the history of those communities when they are lost or destroyed. The Teenie Harris archive keeps alive the culture and memory of a culturally and historically important neighborhood that now only exists in the archive.

Misrepresentation of queer filmmakers

The queer community experiences marginalization in a different way than those who can be identified by their race, gender, or other outward appearance. People who identify as LGBTQ+ have habitually felt the need to hide any identifying characteristics for fear of discrimination or bodily harm. Despite social mores changing to become more accepting of the queer community, there is still concern over misrepresentation and silencing in the archives.

Archives that focus on the LGBT+ community, like the Lesbian Home Movie Project, seek to preserve documentation of everyday life of the queer community, and stress the importance of contextualizing the films so that the 'queerness' is not lost on the viewer (Brunow, 2019). Home movies from the queer community may exist in archives, however metadata does not always represent that aspect of the couple depicted in the film. "Too often the footage runs the risk of being 'read' through a heteronormative perspective…" eclipsing a crucial part of the subject's identity (Brunow, 2019, p.98).

Colonization of Indigenous American history

Many minority communities are at risk of having their histories viewed inaccurately through the lens of the dominant culture. European and North American archives have traditionally overlaid a Western concept of time and linear history to all of their collections, no matter if particular artifacts come from cultures that do not observe time in the same way (Cushman, 2013). An artifact cannot be fully understood and appreciated if the culture's narrative is, in part or in whole, replaced with another. Cushman (2013) describes the significance of wampum belts to the history and storytelling of Cherokee members, woven with images that "chronicled events, negotiations with other tribes and colonists, and Cherokee philosophies" (p.117). Without Cherokee elders to know these stories, translate the images, and pass them down, the belts are only beautifully woven art decor.

When a group of Yu'pik leaders visited Berlin, Germany, to view their own cultural artifacts at the Ethnological Museum, they were able to provide even more information about the history and use of the artifacts than the museum had (Buijs, 2018). Museums that are willing to collaborate with indigenous peoples whose artifacts they have are able to create more dynamic and thoughtful exhibitions.

Peoples' lack of access to their own cultural artifacts

Perhaps a more obvious example of cultural disregard can be seen in museum artifacts collected during the Age of Exploration. A dispute between the Greenlandic government and the Westfries Museum in the Netherlands over human remains supposedly belonging to an indigenous Geenlander erupted in the late 1990s as the remains went on display. As the prime minister of Greenland demanded the remains be returned to their homeland, "[t]he curator of the Westfries Museum, witnessing an increasing number of visitors when the case was broadly discussed in regional and national media, testified that he was not willing to part with the human remains because to do so would set a precedent that would result in the depositories of the Dutch museums running empty" (Buijs, 2018, p.43). Such a statement by the museum curator acknowledges the vast collections of indigenous artifacts held by European museums.

Redefining the archive

As mentioned, many documents that are preserved in archives are textual in form (letters, journals, logs, records, etc), precluding representation of cultures or groups that may not have had a written language or had a lower literacy rate. Expanding the definition of what constitutes an archive—to contextualize cultural material and oral archives, and to supplement major archives with community-curated documentation—can help to create a more diverse, inclusive, and comprehensive record of the human experience.

Eurocentric classification systems

Classification systems utilized by many western libraries force a Eurocentric perspective on the information contained therein, despite an ever-diversifying populace.While culture is dynamic, overarching, and difficult to define, it is recognized as the core of how people identify themselves, from shared language, food, music, and clothing styles, to familial structure, values, ethics, roles, and history. As Lee (2015) notes, "...a classification scheme is efficient in representing the mainstream in its originating culture, but may not represent other cultures and marginalized concepts" and the resulting mismatch creates ethical issues ranging from user access barriers to suppression of the minority culture (p.305).

Decolonizing the archive

Archivists using culturally appropriate methods of organizing timelines, history, and storytelling can provide more substance and relevance to their collections. Collaborating with leaders from a particular culture whose artifacts or materials are being acquired into the archive can create a curriculum for understanding the ways in which the artifacts should be viewed. An example is provided by Cushman (2013) of the Cherokee Nation's Four Worlds curriculum: instead of telling the history of the Cherokee people on a Western timeline,

> *"[t]he Four Worlds curriculum locates Cherokee people in the places we have lived since time immemorial, a concept that refuses to locate these worlds along any precise dates. Rather, each of the Four Worlds is bounded by events that impact Cherokees and the stories that reveal lessons learned about food, formation of clans, changes in our relationships to animals, and gifts of medicines received during these periods" (p.119-120).*

Going beyond textual archives

Delucia (2020) notes the propensity for archives, libraries, and museums to specialize in their own types of materials. While this is not inherently disagreeable, it limits how we commonly think of archival records (mostly textual) versus museum artifacts (mostly material). This limitation prevents our definition of archival records from expanding beyond Western standards to include records kept in material objects rather than text. Without expanding our definition of archival records, certain voices are doomed to be kept silent. To compete with the detailed metadata of Western artifacts, archivists and curators can work with indigenous communities to create more detailed metadata for materials beyond tribal association, providing greater meaning to collections (Delucia, 2020).

Accurate representation of marginalized groups

On the representation of minority communities in the archive, Brunow (2019) writes, "[i]f we understand the archive as the foundation from which history is written, cultural memory can only become polyvocal and diverse if the archive creates multiple narratives and images" (p.101). The Lesbian Home Movie Project preserves the queer context of their film archive by interviewing the participants, filmmakers, or those related to the film. Taking an oral history of the film allows for the history of the film to be preserved and conveyed accurately to the viewer (Brunow, 2019).

Luster (2018) urges archivists to remove the lens of cultural bias, and instead of curating a version of a group's history, let the group speak for themselves and become involved in the process. Participation from the community, especially marginalized groups, is imperative for thoughtful and accurate representation within the archives. Major institutions that collaborate with community archives have the best chance at filling the gaps that have been historically left open (Ramos, 2022).

Cultural competency in the archival profession

Applying 'Racially Conscious and Culturally Competent Archival Theory' to appraisal and acquisition processes can help to identify and close the information gaps that often plague archives. By engaging with historically silenced groups, and documenting their experiences, archivists can more accurately tell the stories and the histories of those groups (Luster, 2018).

Engseth (2018) defines cultural competency not as knowing all details about all cultures, but rather the ability to be thoughtful in one's interactions and experiences with other cultures. For archivists, this can mean taking into account another culture's concepts of information organization when creating metadata. Reaching out to any and all stakeholders in a particular document ensures that all, be they the creator, subject, ancillary persons referenced, or others, are represented in the metadata in an appropriate and acceptable way. "Cultural competency emphasizes three aspects that together comprise effective interaction with difference. These are knowledge (cognitive), skills (behavioral), and attitudes (affective), or 'KSAs,' alternatively articulated as mindset, skillset, and heartset or the head, hand, heart components" (Engseth, 2018, p.462).

The majority of library and archival professionals belong to the dominant culture; in a country as comparatively diverse as the United States, this means the majority of librarians and archivists are English-speakers of European descent (Engseth, 2018). Archivists can practice both cultural humility by setting aside their own cultural standards and biases, and cultural competence by recognizing that materials involving other cultures will have their own standards and biases.

Recognizing and reducing biases

Devine et al's (2012) study on bias reduction strategies took a group of students, majority white, who were randomly assigned into one of two groups: a control group and an intervention group. Both subgroups took the Black-White Implicit Association Test (IAT) and received their scores, but only the intervention group was instructed in the consequences of implicit race bias and methods meant to reduce their implicit bias. The control group did not show any notable improvement in their implicit biases, whereas the intervention group showed a marked reduction in their implicit biases upon reassessment with the Black-White IAT, as well as an increase in their concern for consequences of their biases. This result lasted through the remainder of the study, leading to the conclusion that implicit biases can be reduced long term through the use of bias reduction strategies. Use of these strategies by archivists should be paired with practicing cultural humility during the acquisitions process.

Practicing cultural humility

When leaders or participants in an institution integrate cultural humility, which could include bias reduction, into their practices or programming, they are determining to overturn the inherent power imbalance between a dominant culture and subordinate cultures. Institutions that benefit are those that are already structured with a power imbalance between the participants, such as healthcare (doctor-patient), education (teacher-student), and of course libraries (librarian-patron) (Foronda, 2020).

Hodge (2019) asserts that librarians who desire to create a more inclusive atmosphere first need to learn who their patrons are and reflect on how their personal implicit biases may interfere with that mission. This necessitates an "absolute willingness to be vulnerable, to conduct an audit of themselves and be beyond willing to address their biases (implicit and explicit), and to be dedicated as this is a lifelong process" (p.269). Although not all implicit

biases are negative, and one may not intend to inflict harm, these biases are still often rooted in stereotypes that are not necessarily appreciated or condoned by the community they target.

Implicit bias tests and checklists can help identify one's implicit biases that they may not be aware of. Recognition of personal biases is generally the first step to addressing and adjusting how one interacts with others outside of their cultural, ethnic, or racial group. Integrating cultural humility at an institutional level by developing programs, discussion groups, book clubs, and creating exhibits that challenge stereotypes and dominant narratives can help create the inclusive atmosphere that is imperative to serving all patrons in the community (Hodge, 2019).

Bias reduction leads to inclusivity

Despite a long-term reduction in explicit biases and prejudices within society, implicit biases continue to be displayed in a variety of interactions. These implicit biases often surface unbeknownst to the very people perpetuating them, through beliefs in seemingly innocuous stereotypes that then manifest as habits when interacting with someone they are stereotyping. Whether the stereotypes are positive or negative is besides the point; when they are perpetuated they can lead to undesired consequences for people from marginalized communities (Devine et al, 2012).

However, participant responses to Devine et al's (2012) study of implicit bias found those in the intervention group began not only to recognize and reduce their implicit biases, but also to seek out opportunities to engage with people of different races, including at parties, work, or cultural events.

Future of archives

The Society of American Archivists has been active in discussing and integrating cultural competency into the profession, taking a critical look at how to promote diversity in the

recruitment process, as well as develop skills in cultural competency among seasoned archivists (Engseth, 2018).

The 'person-ness' of historical records

Looking at archival records beyond their physical existence may help archivists curate a collection of human stories rather than papers or objects. Archivists may seal records that pertain to recently deceased persons and which include reference to others who are still alive, but legal rights are not extended very long after the person's death (McKee, 2012). However, what happens when concepts like human rights, death, and time are applied to archival records from another culture? In Swahili culture, "a person, even after dying, continues to exist in the present and into the immediate future and then in a slightly different way into the extended future" (McKee, 2012, p.73). In such a case, applying US- or Western-based concepts of death and time would be unethical when handling records of a person from the Swahili culture. Archivists and researchers who integrate cultural humility may be able to circumvent such egregious missteps by taking the time to know how persons of different cultures may want their records to be handled.

Utilizing digital and nontraditional archives

Cushman (2013) highlights the importance of recognizing inherent cultural differences and utilizing them to the benefit of digital or otherwise non-traditional archives. The Cherokee Nation operates an open access digital archive for the benefit of anyone learning the Cherokee language. A DVD of Cherokee Songs and Stories was developed initially for use by a Cherokee immersion elementary school, but is also available by request (Cushman, 2013).

Cushman cites language immersion as one method to decolonize archives, and using images to tell a story that is told in a language unfamiliar to the viewer can help provide the

missing context. An archivist in a major institution replacing English with an indigenous language in an effort to immerse the researcher or viewer of an artifact in the culture would be an act of cultural humility. Language is a cultural component that many people hold to as a primary part of their identity, and different languages tell stories in distinct ways (Cushman, 2013). Replacing a language as ubiquitous as English with an indigenous language allows that language to shine as a primary component of the cultural identity.

Grassroots community archives

According to Flinn et al (2009), community archives are founded for a variety of reasons. Some may be political in nature: archival collections of a marginalized group as a form of activism bringing awareness to the historical gap in the major archives. For others, it is only a love for that community and a desire to share their history and culture that inspires a collection. The Black Cultural Archives in London, England, formed as a result of under-representation of Black and Caribbean history in London schools, which had "an alienating effect…on black children" (Flinn et al, 2009, p.78). Similarly, rukus! was founded to highlight the history of the Black LGBT community in London, as intersectional identities can often be overlooked as a minority within two minorities (Flinn et al, 2009).

Activism to address gaps in the historical record

Artists and activists are alongside community archivists when it comes to addressing gaps in the historical records. Manoff (2016) cites art pieces created by intentionally erasing, removing, or deleting parts of a previous piece, called deletionist art, that can serve to breathe new life and meaning to the older piece. Bruno Schultz, an early 20th century author, lost his manuscripts and his life during the Holocaust. Nearly a century later, author Jonathan Safran Foer took the deletionist method to Schultz's novel *Street of Crocodiles* (1936), creating a wholly

new work, *Tree of Codes* (2010), the "blank spaces creat[ing] a palpable sense of absence and loss that prompt us to reflect upon the silences created by Schultz's death at the hands of the Nazis, the loss of his manuscripts during the war, and the legacies of others whose work has not survived" (Manoff, 2016, p.11).

Records created by slave holders in the US and other 'New World' countries are notorious for their dearth of information about the slaves themselves, providing only the perspective of one in power. Technology can, however, be utilized to fill gaps when the opportunity presents itself. Historian Vincent Brown compiled information about a 1760s slave revolt in Jamaica from a variety of primary and secondary resources to construct a digitally animated map demonstrating the role of Jamaican topography in carrying out the rebellion (Manoff, 2016).

Archivists and historians are examining the processes and sheer amount of labor involved to build the archival record and digitize archival material (Manoff, 2016). Although digital archives do not provide the ultimate solution to archival silences, utilizing digitization remains the best way to create access to information where there once was none.

Conclusion

Gaps in the historical record are unavoidable for a variety of reasons, from destruction by accident, war, or ulterior motivation, to simple lack of space and labor to preserve all artifacts. However, one avoidable cause for archival silences is the implicit bias of the archivist. Implicit biases are pervasive in our society, and it is not likely we will be rid of them any time soon. These biases can influence an archivist's work in far-reaching ways, by creating an opportunity for histories to be silenced, or lost.

By practicing cultural humility and implementing bias reduction strategies, archivists can better ensure they are creating space for inclusivity in their archives and bridge the gaps in the historical records. Utilizing technology to reveal archival secrets and to promote digital access to documents expands the reach and depth of the archive. Major institutions can collaborate with community archives to create more comprehensive, appropriate, and contextual archives. Creating noise within the archival silences takes more than a village, it takes humankind.

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