

The Silence of the Archive. David Thomas, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson. Chicago: Neal-Schuman / American Library Association, 2017. xxvi, 187 pp. ISBN 978-0-8389-1640-7

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Archival silences have increasingly become a topic of research interest for archivists, historians, and scholars in fields such as cultural studies, memory studies, and the digital humanities. In *The Silence of the Archive*, David Thomas (Visiting Professor, Northumbria University), Simon Fowler (Associate Teaching Fellow, University of Dundee), and Valerie Johnson (Director of Research and Collections, the National Archives, UK), add their voices to the scholarly conversation, discussing “the question of silence in the archives . . . holistically and from a broad perspective, looking at causes, responses and implications both for researchers and for the archive itself” (p. xxv). Drawing on literature and examples from within and outside of the archival field, the authors provide an overview of archival silences and offer an examination of the origins and ramifications of silences in archives. The book is divided into two sections, with the first three chapters focusing on the causes of archival silences and the latter three discussing their ramifications and remedies. Despite the multiple contributors, the authorial voice remains consistent between chapters, which results in a cohesive text.

Fowler begins the book by examining causes for archival silences in “traditional” archives. He identifies various factors that can lead to gaps in the archival record, among them systemic issues such as the Western archival tradition’s limited definition of records as written documents and the control of the privileged and powerful within society over record creating and recordkeeping.

According to Fowler, other causes of archival silences are informal processes that result in the decision not to create records; the destruction of records to ensure those in power cannot be held accountable for their actions; and the vulnerability of records during times of conflict. He also identifies archivists' roles in fostering archival silences through their work, particularly in the appraisal process.

In the second chapter, Fowler explains how record creation and recordkeeping practices have shaped the archival record, with the result that certain voices or types of records have been left out. He argues that the perception of archival silence is exacerbated as users expect to find certain types of records but instead encounter gaps in the archives where records either were not created in the first place or did not survive. He then turns his attention to archival description and problems with finding aids, stating that "catalogues can obscure as much as they can reveal" (p. 53). Fowler offers some solutions, such as including statements about what records were not selected for retention, and calls for the use of participatory description, where subjects of the records and users can add descriptive content.

David Thomas continues the discussions from the previous chapters, exploring the causes of archival silence in the digital world. He offers examples and explains how current records creation and records management practices have compromised the long-term preservation of records. He considers technological obsolescence, but argues that the vulnerability of digital records is more worrisome, particularly during times of transition, when records may not be transferred to an archival authority. The difficulty in producing meaningful contextual metadata for records and the sheer scale of digital records, which encourages institutions to pre-emptively destroy them rather than invest time and effort in processing and reviewing them for sensitive information, are other issues he identifies as leading to silences. Thomas also highlights the tactic of employing private email servers and social media networks to ensure records are not automatically captured for preservation in recordkeeping systems. Like Fowler in the preceding chapter, Thomas discusses the impact of inadequate tools to help users find and access records, which leads to the obscuring of potentially useful documents.

Valerie Johnson moves the examination from records creation and recordkeeping into the archival sphere. She examines methods researchers and archivists can use to deal with silences: listening to silences in archival records, letting

the silences speak by reading records “against the grain,” looking for alternative sources to provide counter-narratives, and finding meaning and value in silence. Johnson suggests that, with an emphasis on diversity and inclusion in modern archives, there will be fewer silences going forward.

In Thomas’s chapter “Imagining Archives,” he investigates the lengths people will go to in order to fill silences they encounter in the archival record and the variety of motivations for doing so. For example, he discusses the fabrication of documents that could or should have been created in order to help foster identity or to give voice to the voiceless. While many archival fictionalizations are presented transparently, others are more problematic. Thomas explores the fascinating world of archival forgeries, using an extended examination of “imaginings” about Shakespeare as a case study to demonstrate people’s strong desire to fill in gaps in the historical record. Thomas explores how generations of scholars have attempted to provide details of Shakespeare’s life through inferences, extrapolations, and outright forgeries. Thomas looks at other examples, demonstrating how some archival interventions are self-serving, recounting the alteration of testimony submitted by police officers in the Hillsborough disaster inquiry. He ends the chapter with an all-too-brief discussion of the meaning of forgeries for archives, quickly introducing concepts like the “shifting nature of evidence” and “multiple recordkeeping realities” from contemporary critical archival theory and suggesting that the introduction of these concepts “offers our falsifiers a welcome” (p. 136) into the archives. This is an overly simplistic, relativistic position, and his argument would have been strengthened with a more substantial investigation – on both theoretical and practical levels – of the implications of forgeries and their impact on our understanding of archives as sources for authentic and reliable accounts. The introduction of multiple narratives, particularly those that contest the records of the powerful, is very different from the deliberate falsification of records. The complex meanings of the archival imaginings discussed could have been explored in much greater depth.

Johnson’s second chapter explores solutions to silences in the archives, including legislative measures, while acknowledging that access to information laws often have a negative effect on recordkeeping practices. As the answer to filling archival silences is not to be found legislatively, Johnson highlights the role of the archivist in opening appraisal through the implementation of participatory models. Archivists must acknowledge their own bias and subjectivity and allow for descriptions to be amended and updated – both to alter outdated and

offensive terminology and to add supplementary information. Johnson argues for the importance of challenging the single, authoritative archival voice and for the necessity of embracing a multiplicity of perspectives in order to contest dominant historical narratives. She suggests that the digital has great potential to alter archival practice, counter past silences, and prevent future silencing. Johnson does not, however, discuss the limitations of digital archives that would affect the ability to prevent, counter, or remedy silences. Her discussion does not consider the ramifications of the corporate ownership of social networks and other sites where individuals are making their voices heard, nor does she explore the ethical questions surrounding the capturing and preserving of these records. Questions need to be asked about who is capturing this data, how, and to what end, and about who is responsible for the diffuse digital archive. While the digital offers many new opportunities to create records, Johnson takes an overly optimistic view about the potential of the digital to prevent the silences in archives. She does not consider the privileging of those who are technologically literate, who have access to technology, and who possess the skills to create digital records; nor does she discuss the fact that only those who can raise their voices without fear may have their voices captured in a digital archive. It must be kept in mind that not everyone is able to speak or wants to speak.

In the concluding chapter, Thomas does address some of the real and potential pitfalls of the rise of digital recordkeeping that were notably absent from the discussion in the previous chapter. He argues that large data sets and other information being housed in online collections such as WikiLeaks erode the traditional archival model because there is no dependence on traditional memory institutions to acquire, preserve, and provide access to this information. Thomas highlights the uncertainty about the continuing availability of these information resources and notes the new ambiguity of roles: there is no clear answer as to who is responsible for keeping which parts of the Internet. This will lead to future silences as sites become neglected or ignored and are not preserved. In reflecting on the possible future of archival silences, Thomas sees some reason to be hopeful, as digital recordkeeping has given rise to new opportunities, including the ability to keep larger volumes of records, which can be more inclusive, and the ability to develop data visualization and other new ways to search and understand records. Although he recounts some positive developments in certain governmental recordkeeping policies and legislation, his assertion that “statutory oversight of the creation, selection, and disposition

of records” could “guarantee an end to silences” (p. 174) is an overstatement as things will always go unrecorded and unpreserved, and voices will always be excluded from archives. While he references and investigates many relevant issues related to contemporary digital recordkeeping, Thomas does not discuss the recent development in “right to be forgotten” legislation, which could have serious implications for archives. This is a missed opportunity in an otherwise strong chapter, which looks at current practices and attempts to unpack what the future of archives and archival silences might be.

Drawing on their experience and knowledge of recordkeeping and archival history and practice in the United Kingdom and around the world, the authors provide many pertinent and powerful examples of the reasons for and the reactions to archival silences. Their heavy reliance on examples, however, means that they often do not explore the nuances of the silences described. With the exception of the examination of the Shakespeare forgeries, few of the examples are given extended consideration. While they demonstrate the diversity and pervasiveness of the silences in the archives, a deeper examination of selected case studies would have better illustrated the contours and complexities of the issue. Their approach to archival silences is very pragmatic. The authors do not develop a theory of archival silence of their own, nor do they implement a theory of silence from existing scholarship in archives or any other discipline. As a result, they do not provide any striking new insights into the phenomenon of archival silence. While the authors could have gone further in their analysis of the implications of archival silences, they have nevertheless produced an accessible book that outlines some of the many factors that ultimately shape archives, which should be of particular interest to historians and researchers from outside the archival profession. For archivists and records managers, this volume will serve as a good introduction to the concept of archival silences, providing insight into some of the consequences of the phenomenon and ideas on how to recognize and counter silences in the archives.