

Book Reviews

The Silence of the Archive

DAVID THOMAS, SIMON FOWLER and VALERIE JOHNSON

London: Facet Publishing, 2017

ISBN 978-1-78330-155-3

As traditional understandings of archival wholeness and impartiality continue to be challenged, the archive is moving from a 'neutral' space to one of active and incomplete curation. Embedded in power structures, bureaucracies, and other information mediators, the voice of the archive speaks only of certain stories. But if the voice of an archive is shaped by deliberate action, what about its silences? What structures and processes create these silences, and how can we as archivists address them? These are the questions asked by David Thomas, Simon Fowler and Valerie Johnson in "The Silence of the Archive", a critical addition to the *Principles and Practice in Records Management and Archives* series. The three authors bring with them a wealth of knowledge from public, corporate, academic, and community sectors, using their experiences to explore different facets of that which is missing as a positive, rather than negative, space.

As Anne J. Gilliland writes in her foreword, "a multiplicity of literacies is required to approach the world's diverse archival legacy and its silences." Each chapter therefore highlights a different viewpoint, and explores its implications for the modern archivist. Simon Fowler opens the book with "Enforced Silences", discussing how archival silences can be introduced at each stage of selecting and processing records. He shows how the archival process can be particularly vulnerable to prevailing power relations, while conditions of war, instability, informality and institutional bias can further quiet the already marginalised voice. By exploring a range of causal pathways, Fowler begins to expose the sheer diversity of silences that an archive can host and maintain.

In what I considered to be a refreshingly broad perspective, Fowler then turns to address how the archival user experiences, and perpetuates, the silence of the archive. Often through inappropriate expectations of the wholeness and infallibility of an archive, the user can ignore gaps or skew information to fabricate the "missing clue" that they desperately seek. One fascinating observation is that user expectations can vary by country, culture, and even legal system – citizens of a civil law society may

expect far more detailed records from their notaries than in a common law environment. Fowler follows this chapter up with “Imagining Archives”, which draws attention to how users can compensate for silences through forging, re-creating, or imagining histories.

David Thomas has a strong voice throughout the book, giving an up-to-date perspective on the shaping of digital voice and silence. His chapters draw the reader into the complex terrain of digital preservation and continuity, digitisation, information overload, metadata, and access, exploring how these factors affect established and emerging silences. Thomas’ careful analysis situates the book squarely in the modern context, and I think it will speak to all archivists practising on the frontlines of digital curation.

The final chapters deal with potential ways to address the silence. Valerie Johnson explores options of legislation and shifting archival methodologies, and ultimately the acceptance and active use of embedded silences. Quoting Carolyn Steedman, Johnson notes that “an absence is not *nothing*, but is rather the space left by what has gone... the emptiness indicates how once it was filled and animated” (105). Johnson explores how archives can re-animate and empower these negative spaces for what they are, as well as what they are not. The book concludes by arguing for active and consciously managed silences as a powerful step towards accountability in archives.

This book fills an interesting gap by expressly focusing on what *isn’t* in terms of archives and archival methodologies. By unfolding the many dimensions of archival silence, it guides the archivist in how to break down their own ‘monolithic’ silence into distinguishable paths and patterns. However, at times it was hard to keep track of these paths as a reader – key concepts and definitions were repeatedly defined and re-defined in successive chapters by the authors. A clearer sense of the scope of each chapter, and a stronger interaction and progression between chapters, would have helped to really drive home the important messages offered within.

As a final thought, it occurs to me that some of the biggest silences in archives come not from incomplete archival methodologies, but from their neglect of categorically different epistemologies. I was reminded of Jared Davidson’s essay on “The Colonial Continuum: Archives, Access and Power” (*Archifacts*, Apr. 2015), in which archival processes are analysed through a postcolonial lens to reveal powerful indigenous silences. The desire to categorise and control information according to a Western worldview is surely one of the largest silencers of the diverse knowledge

legacies that archivists are called to protect. Although unfortunately not addressed in this book, *The Silence of the Archive* provides a number of cogent frameworks through which New Zealand's archival silences can come to life.

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