



### Book Review

*Archival Silences: Missing, Lost, and Uncreated Archives*

by Michael Moss and David Thomas

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*Archival Silences: Missing, Lost, and Uncreated Archives* is a new entry in the discussion of archival silences that began with Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* in 1995. This book was edited by Professor Emeritus of Archival Science at the University of Northumbria, Michael Moss, and former U.K. National Archives Technology Director, David Thomas. The contributors are all archivists, archival researchers, or educators in archival and information science. The book interrogates if "silences" serves as an appropriate term to describe the destruction, concealment, and absences in archival collections (p. i). It further argues that "the failure of governments to create records, or to allow access to records, appears to be universal" (p. i). This universality serves as the hegemonic narrative against which the contributors write about the actions of archivists and researchers to address silences in their respective institutions and fields. In short, this book, while exhibiting some slight conceptual complications, offers fresh ideas to theorizing, addressing, and mitigating archival silences through the lens of social justice.

The book contains an introduction, twelve chapters, and an afterword. The introduction, by Moss and Thomas, summarizes the book's purpose, contents, and identifies common themes across the essays. Chapter one, by Moss and Thomas, refines and builds further on Trouillot's theory of silences. Because Moss and Thomas thought previous scholarship was limited to Haiti and England, the

book attempts to bring a global perspective with contributions from across the world in chapters two through eleven. From here, the organization of the book jumps from Australia to Iceland, Jamaica and Brazil to the Philippines, Africa to Turkey and India, and finally Denmark and the United Kingdom. The final chapter, also by Moss and Thomas, proposes strategies for filling in the gaps created by silences. David Hebb's afterword draws on decades of experience conducting archival research to discuss how silences can affect the researchers working with archival records.

This book makes a new theoretical contribution to the literature on archival silences through the editors' first chapter. Moss and Thomas recap Trouillot's central argument that silences can occur at the making of sources, the making of archives, the making of narratives, and the making of History in the final instance (p. 10). Through the lens of the creation of sources and archives, Moss and Thomas offer several nuances to the way that scholars have previously considered silences:

- Silences only exist when researchers notice them
- Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence
- The ending of silences does not always resolve issues
- The marginalized are not the only ones to suffer from silences

- Silencing has been part of government policies for millennia
- The textuality of archives can hide their meaning.

The most significant silence occurs when records intended to be spoken aloud are reduced to words meant to be read

While they argue that silences are inevitable, they propose in their final chapter that if conventional archives are to combat silences, then they need to broaden acquisition policies and actively resist actions that may deliberately create them.

The idea of silencing as a government policy is a persistent thread throughout the book. Michael Piggott's section on refugee detention in Australia (chapter 2) illustrates the silence that occurs when a state creates records about a group but does not preserve or facilitate the creation of records by them in kind. Eiríkur G. Guðmundsson's essay on providing access to the records of the Special Investigation Commission in Iceland (chapter 3) highlights the deliberate silences caused by an inability or difficulty by a government to provide access to contemporary records containing sensitive information. Renato P. Venancio and Adalson O. Nascimento's chapter on Brazil (chapter 5) features the struggles of a post-dictatorial government to both provide access to and reckon with deliberately destroyed records documenting oppression and violence. Lale Özdemir and Oğuz İcimsöy offer nuance to this theme in their essay on Turkey (chapter 8) by discussing its "perceived" silences: "unintended, and devoid of any ill intent" (p. 152). They explain that the "perceived" silences in Turkish archives such as those caused by natural disasters are quite different from silences born of inadequate description and a lack of infrastructure for incoming born-digital records.

Another strong theme in the book explores the silences created by collecting and management practices that assume a Western understanding of archives as textual. In other words, everything not falling under that definition is excluded. Piggott (chapter 2) summarizes this observation in the humanities and archival literature: "For law courts, historians, and 'middle Australia', corroboration of oral knowledge by written and archaeological evidence is valued. When, on rare occasions, archival theorists discuss recordkeeping in societies where oral

traditions are dominant, there is a feeling of reassurance when stories are complemented by song or ceremony, or even better tangible things ..." (p. 30). The following essays traverse this theme and elucidate how oral histories either comprise silences or may help to alleviate them. Stanley H. Griffin points out that archival records retained in Jamaica (chapter 4) perpetuate colonial attitudes and do not include the perspective of local oral traditions, creating a dialectic between the discourses of colonial power and the subaltern. Swapan Chakravorty concludes that in India (chapter 9), where "traditional" archives are lacking in records to write contemporary history, the only way out is to accept the validity of oral history to interpret and write History. Finally, Mette Seidelin and Christian Larsen show through their search for children's voices in Danish records (chapter 10) how record creators suppress or even alter voices as their purposes dictate what becomes the official record.

Overall, this book offers a thorough and nuanced account of different examples of silences and strategies for addressing them in archives across the world. While the book does make a strong case for the prevalence of government failures in creating and preserving records, access is a more vague vaguer component. Successful access is undefined by the editors which runs the risk of conflating different societal and legal conceptions of access across the world with U.S. and U.K. conceptions of access. Furthermore, it falls short in questioning "silences" as an appropriate term. Instead, the editors add more interpretive nuance to the term and do not overtly propose another in its place. As for scope, the global approach succeeds in addressing gaps in the literature itself. Before now, silences have not been broached outside of individual countries in a cohesive, global manner and Moss and Thomas have done a fine job selecting representative chapters. In conclusion, *Archival Silences* is a welcome addition to the literature that adds more to our understanding of not only how archival silences are created, but how our professions can address and attempt to minimize them. This book would be a worthwhile read for graduate students and professionals in the fields of Information Science and Archival Science, History, as well as for anybody interested in social justice, transparency, and the role of archives as a mechanism to hold institutions accountable.