

2018

## Excuses for Silence: A Review of The Silence of the Archive

Anna Robinson-Sweet

*Simmons School of Library and Information Science, a.robinsonsweet@gmail.com*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas>

 Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Robinson-Sweet, Anna (2018) "Excuses for Silence: A Review of The Silence of the Archive," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies*: Vol. 5, Article 12.

Available at: <https://elischolar.library.yale.edu/jcas/vol5/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Contemporary Archival Studies* by an authorized editor of EliScholar – A Digital Platform for Scholarly Publishing at Yale. For more information, please contact [elischolar@yale.edu](mailto:elischolar@yale.edu).

Thomas, David, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson. *The Silence of the Archive*. London: Facet, 2017.

The 2016 presidential election was a referendum on many issues—race, gender, class, national identity, religion—but it was also ostensibly a vote that came down to the management of public records.<sup>1</sup> Whether or not one believes the sincerity of the outrage over Hillary Clinton’s use of a private email server, the debate over it undoubtedly revealed both a prevailing belief that government records should be a public good and a broadly held cynicism that they ever were. The electorate’s distrust of the powers that be, embodied by the Clinton dynasty, was confirmed by the revelation that she withheld her correspondence from government servers and therefore government archives. Of course, most people, and all archivists, are well aware that Hillary Clinton’s emails would not have been the first archival lacunae, but the fervor with which voters attacked the threat of this omission deserves examination. As archivists, how do we confront this outrage? How do we explain an absence? And what are solutions to the silence?

The 2017 publication of *The Silence of the Archive* by David Thomas, Simon Fowler, and Valerie Johnson could not have come at a more appropriate and necessary time. The book is the most recent in the series “Principles and Practice in Records Management and Archives,” edited by Geoffrey Yeo. The three authors are archivists in Great Britain, with an impressive combination of academic and professional credentials. As they explain in their introduction, they were motivated to tackle this subject by their personal experiences of archival silences, awareness of a growing body of literature on the topic, and feeling that the digital age has complicated the picture. The resulting book is “an attempt to peer into the archival silences—to determine whether they are the result of technology or power, or whether they exist because of society’s view of truth” (xx). The authors explain that this examination is intended for the benefit of archivists, users, and records creators.

As Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson correctly note in their introduction, there has been a growing focus on archival silences within the profession. Indeed, the proliferation of community archives and the response to this paradigm shift is in essence a profession grappling with existing silences and how to fill them. The Clinton email “scandal,” however, indicates that the public has a very different view of the archive—one reinforced by movies like *Erin Brockovich* and *Spotlight*, in which researchers visit archives to uncover smoking guns that reveal the truth.<sup>2</sup> *The Silence of the Archive*’s offer, then, to root out the cause of this discrepancy and to investigate the agents of archival silences is eagerly welcomed. Despite its relevancy, the text fails to dig into its subject, maintaining a vagueness in responsibility. Instead of an investigation, the book reads as a justification of silence. These excuses are more egregious when they exonerate the powerful.

This evasion is apparent even in the chapter titles. The first chapter, by Simon Fowler, is passively titled “Enforced Silences” and offers an explanation of the various causes of archival absences. These include archives’ privileging of written documents, the destruction of records

---

<sup>1</sup> “Hillary Clinton Survived Her Email Scandal, but Not Unscathed, New Poll Finds,” *Fortune*, July 15, 2016, <http://fortune.com/2016/07/15/hillary-clinton-email-scandal-poll/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Erin Brockovich*, directed by Steven Soderbergh (Universal Pictures, 2000). *Spotlight*, directed by Tom McCarthy (Open Road Films, 2015).

during wars or by oppressive regimes, and records made inaccessible by secrecy. Although Fowler does acknowledge the “constant pressures on archivists not to release material, to keep it secret to spare the blushes of the powerful,” he also repeatedly makes excuses for this behavior (22). For example, he calls the decision by Tony Blair’s government to use informal modes of communication so as not to create records the result of a “cultural shift” (8). It goes unmentioned that such efforts are aided by the complicity of archivists. Indeed, the very organization of the chapter suggests, but never states, that archivists are themselves often the power brokers to blame for archival silences. Destruction, conflict, oppression—external forces of power that cause silences—are interspersed with explanations of how archival practices, such as appraisal, create silences. Fowler comes tantalizingly close to naming the connection between archives and power when he quotes Michel-Rolf Trouillot’s declaration that colonial archives are “archival power at its strongest, the power to define what is and what is not a serious object of research,” yet Fowler concludes that the silence of colonial archives is primarily the result of archives’ tendency to privilege the written word (4). Similarly, he acknowledges but does not interrogate how archivists at the United Kingdom’s National Archives remained mostly on the sidelines when the British government flouted public records laws (28). The various causes of archival silence that Fowler elaborates on point to a collaboration between state power and archival power. Instead, the chapter concludes that archival silences can be either historical, political, or related to “the changing nature of archival institutions” (34). The silence is enforced, but Fowler shies away from saying by whom.

“Inappropriate Expectations,” the next chapter, also by Fowler, discusses those silences that result from a mismatch between users’ assumptions of what they can find in archives and the nature of archives themselves. Fowler is here essentially explaining the shortcomings of records and archives, shortcomings that he presents as more or less inherent. The absence of records pertaining to the poor or racial minorities is excused as falling outside of the historical purview of archives and record-keepers. Although later chapters touch on ways of filling these silences, the tone of Fowler’s argument in this chapter seems to suggest users are to blame for expecting such information, rather than the archives that failed to collect it. Archivists do get some share of the blame when it comes to cataloging and description practices that obscure discovery, but Fowler leaves appraisal and preservation practices untouched. He concludes the chapter by saying, “The answer to these silences may lie partly in managing user expectations” (60). A more ambitious solution, and one that community archives and others are taking up, is trying to meet, rather than manage, expectations. In the title, text, and conclusion of this chapter, Fowler suggests that archival silences are caused by user ignorance rather than a failure of the archives to meet expectations.

Another amorphous agent in the silence of the archive is “The Digital,” as David Thomas titles chapter 3. Here the digital age is to blame for making previously described archival silences even worse. Among such silences is the destruction of records identified by Fowler in chapter 1, of which Thomas says, “The large volume of material encourages some institutions to automatically destroy sensitive materials in order to avoid the costs and difficulties of responding to Freedom of Information queries. This is understandable, as a simple enquiry could involve thousands of emails” (66). It is shocking that the willful destruction of records, an act Fowler in an earlier chapter calls “the ultimate Silence of the Archive,” is justified in a book on archival silence with a simple shake of the fist at that damned digital age (29).

The second half of *The Silence of the Archive* looks at responses and remedies to archival silences. Here the reader is rewarded with the first of Valerie Johnson's contributions, "Dealing with the Silence," which, with relative clarity, confronts the role of archives in creating silence. Before delving further into this and Johnson's other chapter, mention must be made of the strange one sandwiched between them: David Simon's "Imagining Archives," which looks at how users have responded to archival silences. Simon's chapter begins with a passing mention of the lack of archival evidence pertaining to the slave trade, disconcerting in its brevity particularly because it is one of the only mentions of the disparate impact of archival silences across racial and other social groups. The chapter continues with an equally brief overview of imagined archival recreations by writers, which references a few obscure examples despite the plethora of ways that writers and artists have recently imagined the archive. The bulk of this chapter is given over to a discussion of forgeries, with a twelve-page history of the forging of Shakespeare-related papers. This account is given at the expense of a consideration of the ways that community archives, oral historians, artists, activists, and lawyers, to name a few, use creative means to make up for archival silences that are much more consequential than the dearth of archival material related to Shakespeare. Among the many examples that come to mind are online community repositories like the South Asian American Digital Archive or Documenting Ferguson; creative projects like artist Martha Rosler's "If You Can't Afford to Live Here, Mo-o-ove" or filmmaker Cheryl Dunye's *Watermelon Woman*; and activist-run archives like Interference Archive or the Lesbian Herstory Archives, to name just a few.<sup>3</sup>

Johnson is the only author in this book to put the responsibility for silence squarely on the doorstep of archives. In "Dealing with the Silence" she makes two fundamental arguments that would be well placed at the beginning of this book: that archives are not arbiters of truth and have struggled to reflect a cultural shift that embraces a diversity of viewpoints over that of a privileged few. In the face of these archival limitations, silences are being filled outside the archive by organizations like WikiLeaks. Other authors in this book would point to the illegality of WikiLeaks' actions as a reminder that in many cases of silence, archivists' hands are tied. Johnson, on the other hand, argues that archivists should look to WikiLeaks as a reminder of their own societal responsibility to provide accountability. In directing her arguments to archivists, Johnson's contribution is refreshingly clear in comparison to her colleagues' diffuse hand-wringing. Much of this chapter seems dedicated to convincing archivists to admit their fallibility and to nudging archivists away from the urge to fill every silence, which Johnson warns is a similar kind of dominance as that exercised by a government seeking to control the archive for political ends: "There is a sense that this potential crystallization comes at a price: starting to fictionalize or control heritage, collapsing its complexity into simplicity and staticism, often accompanied by claims to own or control the authentic reality" (112). Johnson intriguingly suggests here that archives' own presentation of authority is responsible for silence. In response she argues for a more dynamic archive that is less concerned with preserving an inevitably

---

<sup>3</sup> "South Asian American Digital Archive," <https://www.saada.org/>; "Documenting Ferguson," Washington University in St. Louis, <http://digital.wustl.edu/ferguson/>; Seph Rodney, "An Archive on Homelessness and the Housing Crisis Brought to Life," Hyperallergic, July 1, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/306182/an-archive-on-homelessness-and-the-housing-crisis-brought-to-life/>; *Watermelon Woman*, directed by Cheryl Dunye (Dancing Girl, 1996); "Interference Archive," <http://interferencearchive.org/>; "Lesbian Herstory Archives," <http://www.lesbianherstoryarchives.org/>.

incomplete cultural heritage forever and more open to the contributions and reinterpretations of a large and diverse body of users.

The final pages of *The Silence of the Archive* pick up on Johnson's theoretical examination of archives' agency in creating silences by looking at specific archival practices that create gaps in the record and how these practices can be modified to alleviate silence. In "Solutions to the Silence," Johnson identifies a number of ways archivists can modify their practices in order to fill in the spaces in their collections: participatory appraisal, parallel provenance, and co-creatorship. There is a brief section devoted to the role that legislation can play, but otherwise state and corporate power goes unchecked, and the advocacy role of archivists is ignored. There is no impassioned call for more stringent public records laws or for more resources to be devoted to fulfilling those burdensome Freedom of Information requests that David Simon mentions in chapter 3. Nor is there an acknowledgment of the ways that those outside the profession have already begun to fill the silence through the creation of community archives.

Perhaps all this hedging is because *The Silence of the Archive* is at its core a book about the legitimacy and relevancy of archives. In identifying silences, Thomas, Fowler, and Johnson are essentially poking at the weakness of the archive. Cumulatively, these weaknesses could cause archives as we know them to crumble. The conclusion of the book ominously warns of various ways the archive could silence itself—by failing to meet the needs of an internet-based information world, by ceding control to private entities, or by failing to enact adequate public records laws. *The Silence of the Archives* retreats in the face of these threats; silences are acknowledged and explained, and methods of dealing with them suggested, but the hard truth is that for as long as there is power to be protected, silences will be enacted, and archivists will be expected to explain them away to the impatient user. The danger is that this book continues along the expected trajectory, offering professional practice as an excuse and modifications to these practices as an answer. The 2016 presidential election demonstrated how potent the loss of trust in the public record is and how suspicion of silence can be manipulated to dangerous ends. Finding ourselves in a postelection environment where the public record is often negated as fake, we need more than the standard explanations and solutions.