

ARCHIVES Have the POWER to BOOST Marginalized VOICES

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How would you feel if your entire cultural identity was erased? If someone else made the decision that you weren't important enough to be written down; or, if you were, that you weren't important enough to be kept and saved? What if your story *was* recorded and saved but wasn't told by you and, instead, represented someone else's perspective of you rather than how you would wish to be remembered? If your history isn't recorded and preserved somehow, did it happen at all? Did you even exist when, one hundred years from now, people look back on this time?

Well, yes! you might respond. *Of course, I existed. I mattered. My impact on this world means something!*

How I wish that were the case. History is not everything from now backward. That is the past. Historian A.J.P. Taylor declared that "history is not just a catalogue of events put in the right order"; it's a series of strategically curated choices that can uplift some or erase others, based on the decisions by those with the power to curate it. Whether we realize it or not, history is something that is chosen. Some events and people are included. Most are not. Moreover, what *is* included is hardly ever chosen or described by the people who create it. These choices are made by the history gatekeepers—people like archivists,

librarians, and historians. And these choices are reinforced by the interests of researchers and scholars, society values, politicians, etc.

Biases of Narrators and Curators

Let's take a step back: I am an archivist. An archives is a collection of historical records, primary source documents that have accumulated over the lifespan of an individual, organization, people group, or culture. However, based on recordkeeping traditions since the time of the first scribes, historic records (or archives) become full of collections primarily, if not entirely, supporting either the majority or most powerful culture. Because of their role in history making, archival documents have assumed a distinguished position as "truth," we implicitly trust the evidence we find in primary sources, such as original letters and photographs. We view them as the closest thing to actually being there.

However, in this perspective, we tend to overlook the biased decision-making of the archivist, who determines which documents find a final resting place within the archives and which do not. Beyond existing in the archives, it also matters who created the piece of historical evidence and what *their* position or biases were. It's overwhelming to fathom the first-person evidence of people, places, events, traditions, or ideas that is lost to us because it was not deemed important enough.

In its simplest terms, the selection of certain records over others is an assertion of power, and these decisions affect our history by uplifting or silencing certain individuals and groups over others. Such is frequently the case for African American history, which has traditionally been excluded from the archives or told by non-black narrators.

Theory Put Into Practice

At the Teenie Harris Archive, we've been attempting to break down some of these long-held traditional practices and elevate a community's history. Charles "Teenie" Harris was a photographer for *The Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the most influential black newspapers of the twentieth century. Much

of the rich history of Pittsburgh's African American community at this time is recorded in this extensive photographic collection of nearly 80,000 images. Teenie captured the events and everyday experiences of African American life, as well as visiting celebrities such as Nina Simone, Louis Armstrong, Josephine Baker, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Muhammad Ali, Jackie Robinson, and John F. Kennedy.

Archivists at the Teenie Harris Archive are working with Pittsburgh's African American community to determine how they would like to be remembered and to record their stories using the community's standards and vocabularies. We value, above all else, the power of collective memory to propel history into contemporary relevance—and that the "beliefs and ideas held in common by many individuals together produce a sense of social solidarity and community."

Toward a More Complete Historical Record

By better understanding how archival practices (such as selection, description, and access) can either uplift or silence historically underdocumented individuals in contemporary culture, archivists can develop better practices that contribute to racially-conscious and culturally-competent archival theory. Racially-conscious and culturally-competent practices seek to thoughtfully apply many, if not all, of these attributes when recording the histories of people. This critical look at how people are remembered is not possible when we ignore how privileges and biases are an aspect of archival work.

Archivists strive to harness the power of information and the historical record toward a greater societal benefit in uplifting people, cultures, and identities. When historically marginalized individuals, groups, or organizations are able to champion themselves, their property, and their culture through the archives, maybe then we can be assured that we are building a more complete and reflective historical record. ■

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