

GAAS Conference “Archiving America / American Archives”

University of Siegen

June 12–14, 2025

Workshop Proposal

Organizers:

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Confirmed Speaker:

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Archival Absences

Acknowledging that the project of archiving America is selective, fragmented, and subjective, and hence in need of continuous reconstruction, our workshop is committed to exploring and potentially rewriting American archival absences. Archival absences, as we understand it, constitute present absences, i.e., traces that indicate what once was, or what might have been. Narratives of what has been obliterated, hidden, or lost are manifest in a) gaps, lacunae, omissions, and silences in archival collections, b) erasures, distortions, and manipulations of archival records, and c) lost and reconstructed archives. Archival absences may result from often implicit standards, systems, and practices of archiving. They point to a Foucauldian notion of the archive as a site that not only reflects but also reproduces power asymmetries, unequal regimes of knowledge, and (neo-)colonial and imperialist tendencies that render the archive a “place of violence” (Derrida 14). According to Martha Schoolman, critical scholarship has emphasized “the vulnerability of materials (to fire, to acidification, to rot, to loss, theft and accidental disposal, to malicious attack” (26), which led her to aptly diagnose an air of “destruction” looming over the archive (ibid.).

The major goal pursued in our workshop is twofold: thematically, we want to explore American archival absences as indices of exclusionary historical experiences and social realities, such as slavery, migration, social oppression and marginalization, and states of dispossession and deprivation. These can be read as manifestations of power imbalances, epistemological injustices, and the precarity of (specific) knowledge resources in the face of violence, disaster, and decay. Methodologically and theoretically, we are interested in possibilities and limitations of uncovering archival absences and filling in blanks through specific methods, such as reading records against the grain (Schwartz & Cook), critical fabulation (Hartman), thick description (Geertz), or listening to silences (Hedges & Fisher Fishkin). All these and others tackle the critical and creative potential of research on archival absences in lieu of what has been discussed as the Western-centrism of the archive, its assumed impartiality and textuality in archiving America. At the same time, existing archives also bring about diverse, e.g. collaborative or performative, counterarchives (e.g., Popple et al.; Taylor).

While we acknowledge conceptualizations of the archive as spaces that constitute social memory, a repository of personal and cultural identity, and active sites of knowledge production, our major focus on archival absences aims to interrogate, scrutinize, and complicate such notions. We aim to bring into view the possibilities that lie in rewritings of the American archive and its cultural narratives through interdisciplinary contributions by scholars from fields including literary and cultural studies, media studies, performance studies, (art) history, Black studies and postcolonial theory, gender and queer studies, geography, politics, economics, sociology, and law.

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