

# Researching Historically Marginalized Communities

Museums today are seeking to expand their audiences and better serve their increasingly diverse communities. Efforts to highlight the comprehensive histories of any given community can seem challenging, as it is sometimes difficult to find information about underrepresented populations that were typically left undocumented in traditional historical resources. This technical leaflet includes research tips and guidelines on how to expand your research to be more inclusive in an effort to better reflect the diversity of experiences in your community.

## What types of communities have been historically marginalized?

Historically marginalized communities are groups who have been relegated to the lower or peripheral edge of society. Many groups were (and some continue to be) denied full participation in mainstream cultural, social, political, and economic activities. Marginalized communities can include people of color, women, LGBTQ+, low-income individuals, prisoners, the disabled, senior citizens, and many more. Many of these communities were ignored or misrepresented in traditional historical sources.

## Why research marginalized communities?

Including the stories of historically marginalized communities enhances how museums interpret and present history. Adding the voices of underrepresented communities to the prevailing cultural narrative tells a broader and more engaging story. This allows for a more complex and accurate depiction of historical events: including representation in, and contributions made to, the settlement and development of any given region and a more nuanced account of conflicts surrounding the ongoing struggle for minority communities to gain equal rights, recognition, and acknowledgement.



As history is primarily told through the lens of the dominant population and its surviving material culture, many underrepresented communities are invisible within museums. Promoting research on these groups brings their voices into the story and flips the perspective, allowing

for a more representative portrayal of the past. Instead of discussing historically marginalized communities as passive recipients of change, the story can now be told through their viewpoint, illuminating them as active agents in charge of their own lives and decisions.

The fact that some communities were documented better than others is one of the key challenges in incorporating a diversity of experiences into local or regional histories. This oversight might have been purposeful, political, or accidental; nevertheless it is important to make a concerted effort to reincorporate those stories into the historical record.

Holistic localized history offers a new perspective that is often more complicated, thought provoking, and challenging than the dominant culture version. Instead of one voice, many voices are represented. When interpreted well, these stories can then encourage visitors to engage with, and think more critically about, the subject matter.

Incorporating new voices into the museum greatly increases the



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museum's relevance to its community. More community members will recognize themselves and their stories in the museum, and when they do, they will come to understand the museum as a place where they are welcome and their story is told.

## Resource Highlight

Visitors of Color (<http://visitorsofcolor.tumblr.com/>) is a blog documenting the experiences of marginalized people with museums

*"I am constantly reminding myself that when I enter into any space, I have to ask questions about who controls the narrative. Not only who writes the story, but who chooses the information that is presented to me. Why did they choose that information? Do they believe they are providing me the full story or not?"*

- Anupama Selvam, Civil and Human Rights Activist, 2016

*"From history museums I want to see exhibits that tell the truth! There are so many lies that have been told for generations and most of us believe it. I want museums to be more inclusive of all events that helped shape our history."*

- Anthony, 2016

As community members increasingly view the museum as relevant and inclusive, the audience will expand. Museum can better reach new demographics and bring in visitors through the highlighting the range

of historical experiences. As our country's population increasingly diversifies, it will become even more important for museums to attract new stakeholders.

## Research Tips for Finding Marginalized Communities

### CONSIDER THE BIG PICTURE:

- Look at the larger historical context in order to best understand where to find an accurate representation of the diversity of populations in your area. What were the social and political movements of the era you are researching? Who was or wasn't immigrating at that time? Who was struggling with the dominant culture?
  - For example, lack of property data, tax or marriage records might not reflect an absence of specific populations, but rather was often due to laws restricting certain activities and civil liberties during those time periods.
- Laws are the system of rules that a particular community recognizes as regulating the actions of its members and may be enforced by the imposition of penalties. When a law is routinely amended or changed, you should question what societal factors might be promoting that change. Consider: Who is advocating for the law and why? What is the law designed to control, who is working around the law, and how are they doing so?
- It can be helpful to investigate the general income level of the community you are researching. Where else in society can you find people of that income level?

- What activities, clubs, or religions may your target community have joined or participated in? How else might they have contributed in society?

### THINK CRITICALLY:

- Absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Carefully analyze why information may be missing and who potentially benefitted from that absence. The answer may surprise you!
  - For example, early census records do not provide an accurate representation of women, children, or minority populations. In some cases this is due to the goal or biases of the census taker. In other cases, this was due to precautionary and protective measures taken by the residents who chose not to be documented.

**Case Study:** Sometimes even our most cherished narratives need a good critical reexamination. The gold rush community of Kanaka Flat in Southern Oregon had the notorious reputation of being Jackson County's 'epicenter of sin.' This multi-ethnic mining camp was described (as were the majority of mining camps from this era) as bachelor societies ripe with vice and violence. However, when looked at more critically, it became clear that the historical descriptions of the male dominated communities were assertions not based on sex, but rather class



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and ethnicity. In short, while only a small population of European American women was present in the gold fields of Southern Oregon, there were many Native American and Native Hawaiian women present. Furthermore, these women were not all engaged in prostitution, but were often married with children. These ‘invisible wives’ and their families were underrepresented due to restrictive legislation prohibiting interracial marriage in Oregon during this era, which left little to no documentary evidence of these relationships. The reexamination of the demographics of Kanaka Flat not only showed that there were many families living and working in the small community, but documentation further indicated that the nearby city of Jacksonville was outsourcing its vice (in the way of saloons) and its disease (in the way of a small pox pest house) to the historically marginalized community of Kanaka Flat. Locating the saloon in nearby Kanaka Flat allowed the more socially self-conscious city of Jacksonville (which was the county seat) to distance itself from the less desirable aspects of life on the mining frontier. For more than a century historians have continued to inadvertently reinforce the Wild West ‘myths’ of mining camps like Kanaka Flat, and as a result under, or mis-, represent the contributions of many early Oregonians (Rose 2014).

- In addition, the absence of objects is not necessarily evidence of absence. Many museums lack collections that represent all

aspects of historical communities. Many factors can contribute to what ends up in curation. Some are political, such as how objects were valued by the dominant culture. Some sampling disparities are due to preservation, as some items are more fragile, disposable, or are just not intended to last. And sometimes diversity within a collection is due to populations leaving an area and taking their goods with them.

- Conversely, some museums have chosen to selectively highlight only “exotic” items of certain cultures, which also skews the sample and can add to the narrative that certain populations were disinterested in participating in mainstream culture, and can also serve to portray certain populations as ‘perpetual foreigners.’
- When working with written documents, be sure to try to identify the writer’s potential bias in order to best use it as a source. What was the document’s purpose? Who created it? What was the author’s background? Who was the intended audience? Who had access to the document? Who did not, and why?
- When analyzing objects, consider more than its provenance and function. What was the object’s original purpose? Who made it? How was it transferred from the maker to the owner to the museum? Who benefitted from its production? What material is it? Who had access to that material? Would the tools used to create it be available to everyone? Was it meant for everyday use or to be

saved? Who did not have access to this type of object and why?

**THINK VISUALLY:**

- Information presented on maps, as well as surveyor’s data, can provide important clues about where people lived on the landscape, how it was used, and what natural resources may have been available or altered.
- For example, Government Land Office (GLO) maps provide great information about the landscape as it changed over time. As many of these maps can date to the European American settlement period, they provide important information and insight into how Native American populations may have historically used and modified the land.
- You can find free and open access to historical GLO maps here: <http://www.gloreCORDS.blm.gov/default.aspx>
- Sanborn Fire Insurance maps are another important resource when investigating historical urban environments. Sanborn maps often provide detailed information about construction materials and building size, and can also note population demographics. For example, many West Coast communities had Chinese neighborhoods and businesses noted.
- Historical photographs can provide a great deal of information about people, their lives, relation-



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ships, homes, clothing, and material culture. Remember to consider the photographer's bias carefully, and note that early photographs were not the candid snapshots they are today. Many photographs were intentionally displayed as tableaux of idealized scenes or romanticized portraits, or taken in response to a specific need.

**Example:** A larger number of portraits of Chinese immigrants can be found dating to the end of the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. This is due in part to the Geary Act of 1892, which was an expansion on the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and required all Chinese residents of the United States to carry a resident permit at all times. Photographs were also needed for those interested in visiting or returning to China during this era.



While portraits taken for personal identification can be found in a variety of local repositories, the National Archives hold the Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, which

contain a variety of important information including photographs, personal interviews, and place of residence of the Chinese individuals living in the United States during the Exclusion Era. To learn more about the Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files and the resources they contain, check out this blog highlighting the volunteer efforts at the National Archives-Seattle to index the collection: <https://chineseexclusionfiles.com/about/>.

- Historical photographs of towns and cities can show how societies functioned. They include important information such as transportation methods, types of businesses, appearance and upkeep, and how people mingled. Much of this information will be in the background or periphery of photographs. Close inspection of digitally scanned photographs can provide a wealth of fine detail about the past.
- Historical photographs of towns and cities can also provide clues through architecture. Are the buildings meant to last a long time, or are they temporary structures? How does this reflect the choices, opportunities, or circumstances of people who may have lived or worked in them?

**ENGAGE:**

- Talk to community members. Ask them about their experiences and memories. Look for family stories and local knowledge. Ask them if they have any relevant documents or material culture they would be willing to share.

- For example, hold a community forum. Choose a space that is familiar to and frequently used by that community so they are as comfortable as possible. Bring food and drinks to show your appreciation of their time and energy. Facilitate the dialogue by asking questions and taking notes, and let the community guide the conversation.
- Oral histories can help add detail to the historical record and illuminate emotional reactions. They can describe an individual's memory of a specific event, and they can provide a contemporary opinion about an individual from the marginalized community. Oral histories themselves have been historically marginalized and often discounted, but modern scholars now recognize their importance as a critical data source.
- Spread the word. Public outreach events, newspaper articles, traditional media, and social media can help alert people about your research. Someone might hear about your project and contact you with helpful information or leads. Some of these will be dead ends, but you never know when you might hit the jackpot.
- Appreciate community members' participation. Be respectful and considerate of their time and contributions.



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## LISTEN:

- Allow space for the community to tell their story. When working with a community, your role as a curator/interpreter shifts to become more of a facilitator. Give space for that community to tell their story in their voices. You have the tools to do so (exhibit space, programming), but the story is their own.
- Do not reinvent the wheel. Find out if there are already established groups or efforts to look into historical populations that you can collaborate with.
  - For example, look for cultural organizations, public event organizers, archaeological sites or labs, or Facebook groups. While sometimes more casual than traditional historic sources, these groups may lead you down unexpected avenues.
- Collaborate with stakeholders when possible. This might take a little more time, but the result will be more meaningful. There are local groups, family historians, and amateur historians who often are active in researching underrepresented populations. If you can find these people, you will not only potentially have access to their research, but you can help them share their story with a wider audience.

## INTERPRET:

- Emphasize the story and values of the community you are trying to represent.
  - For example, when discussing discrimination against the community, use personal stories that illustrate the dis-

crimination instead of quotations from the dominant culture about the discrimination.

- Use an active voice whenever possible when describing the community. This technique shifts the tone and focus of the narrative to the community and how they chose to engage with their surroundings, instead of how they responded to the dominant culture.
- Create space within the exhibition or program for current members of the target community to share their experiences, memories, and reaction to the content. This method will encourage the participation of community members and will allow other visitors to read firsthand accounts from community members.
- Emphasize the effects of biased language.
  - For example, when using newspaper articles show how biased language can greatly change the meaning and tone.
- Create opportunities for non-community members to relate to target community members. Are there universal experiences for both, such as a particular type of job, hardship, struggle, or opportunity?

## Conclusion

In summary, dig deep, think critically, and be creative. While the above tips are based on our experiences, available resources (and obstacles) will vary depending on where you are and what historical event or population you are trying to highlight. Wherever you may be, incorporating diversity, complexity, and nuance into local

history is an important part of remaining relevant to the communities that your institution serves.

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Amy Drake is an Independent Museum Consultant, specializing in exhibitions and community engagement.

Chelsea Rose is an historical archaeologist at the Southern Oregon University Laboratory of Anthropology, specializing in the settlement and development of the American West.

## Resources

- <http://visitorsofcolor.tumblr.com/>
- <https://queeringthemuseum.org/>
- <http://www.glorerecords.blm.gov/default.aspx>
- <https://www.archives.gov/research>
- Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration, edited by Viv Golding, Wayne Modest
- Rose, Chelsea, 2013, *Lonely Men, Loose Women: Rethinking the Demographics of a Multiethnic Mining Camp*, Kanaka Flat, Oregon. *Historical Archaeology* 47(3):23–35.



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