

RESEARCH ESSAY

Repair Without Completion: An Ethics for Fragmentary Historical Narratives

David Cope^{1,*}¹Music Department, University of California, Santa Cruz, United States

Correspondence: david.cope@ucsc.edu

A broken narrative does not always ask to be mended. Some gaps testify to destroyed records; others protect a person, expose the historian's distance, or refuse a conclusion that the evidence cannot bear. When does repairing a fragment clarify the past, and when does completion overwrite the conditions that produced the fragment? Ethical historical repair should improve orientation around a gap while leaving the gap's evidentiary status perceptible. The central difficulty is not a shortage of examples but a mismatch between the scale of the evidence and the scale of the conclusion. Concentrating on physical lacunae, provenance chains, interview pauses, contradictory witnesses, and editorial interventions keeps the link between narrative coherence and the right of evidence to remain incomplete within view.

Strategy matters because the phenomenon changes across time and position. Using a layered account distinguishing conservation, contextual reconstruction, conjecture, and imaginative response, the investigator can align physical lacunae, provenance chains, interview pauses, contradictory witnesses, and editorial interventions without pretending they share one perspective. The contrastive reading is disciplined by whether readers can identify exactly where the archive ends and the researcher's repair begins; where that test cannot be met, the result should remain a question or a limited description.

Too much caution can fetishize absence, leaving audiences without enough context to recognize violence or institutional responsibility. Answering this concern requires more than adding a warning to the conclusion. It changes source selection, since evidence of burden, refusal, and exclusion must be gathered alongside evidence of creative success. The governing test remains whether readers can identify exactly where the archive ends and the interpreter's repair begins,

applied from more than one position.

A damaged diary can be stabilized, transcribed, and cross-referenced without inventing the sentences missing at its burned edge. The responsible edition names likely contexts but separates them typographically from surviving language. The investigative gain comes from following implication rather than symbolism. A feature becomes material because it changes what someone can perceive, do, remember, or contest. In that sense, the case supplies an operational account of the association between narrative coherence and the right of evidence to remain incomplete and establishes a standard against which the second scene can disagree.

Sequence supplies the most useful discipline. Physical lacunae, provenance chains, interview pauses, contradictory witnesses, and editorial interventions should be ordered according to when actors could know, act, revise, or object. This chronology reveals where the interdependence between narrative coherence and the right of evidence to remain incomplete enters the process and prevents later justification from being read backward as original intention. The interpretive threshold remains whether readers can identify exactly where the archive ends and the researcher's repair begins at the moment a resolution could still be changed.

In an oral account interrupted by fear or fatigue, the missing portion belongs to a living alignment rather than a defective source. Returning later may be possible, yet the narrator's refusal must remain a valid outcome of the critical work. Juxtaposition also exposes a temporal problem. Practical results that seem minor at the moment of production can become decisive after circulation, repetition, or institutional adoption. The scene therefore expands the link between narrative coherence and the right of evidence to remain incomplete beyond immediate experience

and into the artifact's later social life.

Case alignment introduces necessary friction into the reasoning. The link between narrative coherence and the right of evidence to remain incomplete names a pattern only after differences in position, timing, and capacity have been retained. Using a layered account distinguishing conservation, contextual reconstruction, conjecture, and imaginative response, the inquiry separates constitutive conditions from features that are merely frequent. That distinction provides a basis for transfer while protecting local meanings from being flattened.

Historians should supply multiple bounded reconstructions, state the cost of each, and preserve a observable route back to the unrepaired record. These actions are modest by design. They do not resolve every conflict; they move conflict to a stage where affected people can still influence form. Evaluation should follow results over time rather than end with a launch, premiere, publication, or exhibition opening.

The archive for this topic will always be uneven. Physical lacunae, provenance chains, interview pauses, contradictory witnesses, and editorial interventions may document formal determinations closely while leaving informal negotiation unrecorded. Readers should treat that imbalance as a finding, seek accounts from those absent in official files, and avoid translating archival silence directly into agreement, passivity, or lack of expertise.

Longitudinal critical work is needed because the apparent success of an encounter can reverse after circulation. Following records of physical lacunae, provenance chains, interview pauses, contradictory witnesses, and editorial interventions would reveal who retains access, credit, control, or interpretive authority. The decisive question is whether whether readers can identify exactly where the archive ends and the fieldworker's repair begins survives when the initial facilitators, tech-

nologies, or funding arrangements are no longer present.

The examples are investigative scenes, not evidence of frequency. They clarify how the connection between narrative coherence and the right of evidence to remain incomplete might operate but cannot establish how often it does. Broader claims would require purposive sampling, longitudinal follow-up, and participation by readers positioned differently from the

present account. Until then, the framework is best used to generate precise questions and bounded interpretations.

The broader value is diagnostic. The framework helps locate where inference becomes authority, where participation becomes labor, and where preservation becomes transformation. Those boundaries are rarely fixed, but they can be documented well enough to support practical disagreement.

What appears to be a problem of representation is also a problem of process, access, and impact. Repair becomes accountable when it supports understanding without claiming ownership of what history has withheld. Completion is not the measure of care; sometimes care is the craft of building securely around an opening.