

Rethinking the Archive

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Archives are imprecise, unknowable, malleable, and calculated. Marked by institutions, they can be fixed, rigid, and impenetrable. Marked by technology, they are abundant, quick, and temporal. And then, there are the other archives. The ones we create, disavow, critically interpret, reconfigure, leave untended, and pull apart. In my experiences they are one and the same. Archives will also deceive you. They will test to see if you can find meaning in the gaps and in the unknowing. They will demand that you circle back multiple times, until you understand that not knowing the whole story is the story and that dwelling in the uncomfortable, in the gaps, is part of the telling. Archives will break your heart and save your life.

Fluidity and engineering are necessary if we are to write histories that were never supposed to be uttered, let alone written; if we are to render meaning to scraps of paper, newspaper clippings, photos, sound, performance, letters, and the memories of others. The three chapters that constitute the section *Rethinking the Archive* do exactly that; they rethink the very meaning and uses of archives. Their work reassesses legitimate and valid sources, and challenges the limits of knowledge production, the public record, and the written. In their hands, the archives are split open, parceled out, and yours for the taking.

These chapters reconfigure historiography and archaeologies of knowledge and information. They embrace fragmentation and understand that

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there is no place for linearity when writing histories and experiences that do not fit within larger historical narratives. Melissa Castillo-Garsow's chapter, "Afro-Latin@ Nueva York: Maymie De Mena and the Unsung Afro-Latina Leadership of the UNIA," examines the life of one of the United Negro Improvement Association's (UNIA) most valuable and influential leaders: Maymie Leona Turpeau De Mena. Despite her contributions, she rarely figures in the historical narrative and discourse. It is at this juncture, at this place of unknowing, that Castillo-Garsow puts the pieces together and initiates her brilliant analysis of De Mena.

Born in Nicaragua in 1891 to an upper-class family, De Mena quickly rose through the ranks to become one of UNIA's most important and trusted figures. Originally a member of the Chicago chapter of the UNIA, De Mena was an interpreter, organizer, and journalist. She toured the Caribbean as a Spanish translator in 1925, and after holding several posts, was named officer in charge of the American Field by Marcus Garvey in 1929. This made De Mena, Garvey's second-in-command and "the highest ranking official in the United States as well as the UNIA's most visible spokesperson." She was also the first woman to officially hold this post.

And yet, as Castillo-Garsow writes, we know so little about De Mena and her role in the UNIA. Considering the amount of research that Garvey and the UNIA have generated over the years, this is surprising. What makes Castillo-Garsow's chapter so powerful is that she does not let the archives off the hook. The lack of documentation of source cannot erase the fact that De Mena was pivotal to Garvey, to the UNIA, and to early twentieth-century Afro-diasporic, Latina/o, and US history. To her credit, Castillo-Garsow does an excellent job of researching De Mena's life and work, and moreover, demonstrating how De Mena disrupted gendered conceptions of leadership, political power, and historical privilege.

Writing about Afro-Latinas is particularly tricky. Archives are difficult to come by and their abilities as coalition builders is questioned under the expectation of male charismatic leadership. And yet, despite these difficulties, Afro-Latinas, like Maymie De Mena illuminate aspects of black organizing that were previously unknown.

An uncompromising, political, and deeply committed woman who straddled locative multiplicity with ease, De Mena's activism was fierce and meaningful. Her life not only opens a necessary chapter into the history of Afro-Latina political organizing in New York, it also provides, as

Castillo-Garsow writes, “the opportunity to tell a transnational US history without having to pass through the history told by and about men.”

Patricia Herrera’s chapter, “Listening to Afro-Latinidad: The Sonic Archive of *Olú Clemente*,” is like no other. Skillfully employing sound and ephemerality as archive, Herrera uses what she calls a “sonic archive,” to examine the history and production of the ritual musical drama *Olú Clemente: The Philosopher of Baseball*. Written by Miguel Algarín and Tato Laviera and performed in Central Park on August 30, 1973, Herrera informs that this was most likely the first Latina/o, let alone Afro-Latina/o, play to be produced by Joe Papp’s Public Theater. Herrera unravels a powerful history of community, art, spirit, love, Afro-Latinidad, and the refusal to be forgotten.

Intent on tracking down the few available artifacts that speak to the history of this *one* performance, Herrera builds a narrative of meaning and delves into the politics of temporality and marginalization. Her research and tenacity are invaluable, especially considering that for months “the script of *Olú Clemente* was the definitive archive and the only entry point into the world of *Olú Clemente*.” Looking through Joseph Papp’s papers at the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Herrera found several black and white photos, “a prompt book, past iterations of the script, and a sound recording of the performance.” It is the sound recording, what Herrera terms the “sonic archive,” that both drives and grounds the chapter. Her fundamental question is how do such archives, especially those that are recovered, change how we think about performance, historical readings of cultural productions, and archives that privilege written documentation over other forms of archival source?

Herrera argues that these sound recordings “are significant sites of cultural production that illustrate how African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Latinos use sound and music to narrate a history of resistance and create a sense of belonging.” She explains that this kind of close reading “requires historians to listen to the sounds.” Her call for historians to listen to sound is both meditation on what constitutes archive and a call for historians to expand their definitions of source, and as she herself notes, understand the making of source. Like so many other sources, sonic archives if not properly preserved, “run the risk of being erased from history.”

Herrera maneuvers through the historical, emotional, political, and spiritual to depict the rich and layered meanings inherent in the audio of this one-day historic performance. She historicizes the performance within

the Nuyorican Arts Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Third World Liberation Movement. She explains the significance of the title *Olú* and its place within *Santería* (Seven African Powers) and how in naming Roberto Clemente *Olú*, Clemente, who died tragically in a plane crash in 1972 while on a humanitarian mission to Nicaragua, is transformed into a spirit that remains intact and part of a community that so reveres him. In contextualizing the play in this manner, Herrera has elevated the one-day performance into an important historical marker in Puerto Rican, Latina/o, and Afro-Latina/o cultural productions. This is key, considering as she herself notes when citing Juan Flores, that much of Puerto Rican arts, music, theater, and other cultural productions are deliberately left out of the canon.

The conversation between Petra R. Rivera-Rideau and Los Rakas, “Panabay Pride: A Conversation with Los Rakas,” is best described as an *archive in the making*. Rivera-Rideau interviews the Afro-Panamanian rap duo, Los Rakas—two cousins known as Raka Dun (Abdull Domínguez) and Raka Rich (Ricardo Bethancourt) based in the Bay Area. According to Rivera-Rideau, Los Rakas’ music presents “a unique blend of hip-hop (especially Oakland-based “hyphy” music), dancehall, Panamanian *reggae en español* (also called *plena*), house, R&B, and other genres, that stands out in a Latin music scene where the “urban” label is often synonymous with reggaetón.”

Los Rakas uses the term “Panabay” to define their music. Taken from the words “Panama” and the “Bay Area,” Panabay directly reflects the duo’s experiences and influences as Panamanians who live in the Bay Area. Panabay relocates Afro-Latinidad to the West Coast, thereby creating the necessary disciplinary spaces to discuss the politics and influences of location in the process of making and performing reggaetón.

This, as Rivera-Rideau so well explains, has meaning. Often associated with the East Coast, Afro-Latinidad and reggaetón have been “rooted” in certain typographies. By foregrounding the experiences and identities of Afro-Latinos in California, a “community that often goes unnoticed given the very rigid distinctions between blackness and Latinidad in the region,” Panabay articulates a different reading of Afro-Latinidad and engages in what Michel Rolph Trouillot has called the “unthinkable.”

Rivera-Rideau knows this and in an effort to relocate and expand Afro-Latinidad she examines the music video for the song “Abrázame,” which begins with several scenes of the San Francisco carnival, an annual festival in the Mission District of San Francisco that features performances by

West Indian, Brazilian, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, and other African diasporic groups. For Rivera-Rideau, the video operates as a source that allows for a rethinking of Afro-Latinidad outside of familiar geographical sites and locations.

In addition to employing a “sonic archive” of listening, viewing music videos, and analyzing performance, Rivera-Rideau inserts her interview of the duo within the chapter. By including the interview within the larger article, she allows the reader to engage with the interview directly and to establish meaning from their vantage point. The combination of method and form complicates Rivera-Rideau’s theoretical analysis by reasserting a simultaneous reading of primary and secondary source.

The three chapters in this section are excellent examples of how to write against and toward the archive. They understand what it means when certain historical figures, moments, experiences, and performances are refused their history. They go beyond the recuperative model to one that acknowledges and uses the absences, gaps, and silences in the archive, for they too have meaning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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