

More Than a Fever: Toward a Theory of the Ethnic Archive

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DURING ITS 2008 ANNUAL MEETING AT MLA HEADQUARTERS, THE COMMITTEE ON THE LITERATURES OF PEOPLE OF COLOR IN THE UNITED STATES and Canada (CLPC) took up the question of archival work in the study of ethnic literatures. After much discussion of the various ways ethnic literatures are rendered “illiterate” or unreadable, the CLPC proposed a session titled “Practices of the Ethnic Archive” for the 2009 MLA Convention in Philadelphia. That session revealed, and for some of us confirmed, that scholarly discourse on the archive continues, for the most part, to ignore the ethnic archive as distinct from its white, European counterpart.¹ Four of the five essays included here (Carr, Cruz, Kaufman, and Washburn) grew from the conversation the session engendered; the *PMLA* editorial board invited Nicolás Kanellos, founder and director of the project Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage, to participate in the discussion as well. We are grateful to the contributors for their insights about what the ethnic archive reveals and about the unintended consequences of applying to its holdings the theoretical practices informing archival studies writ large.²

Those practices still revolve around such seminal texts as Michel Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” and Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*.³ In large part, recent developments in the field challenge these scholars’ findings but retain the essential principles that Foucault, Spivak, and Derrida all saw as most characteristic of the archive and its function: archives are concerned foremost with preservation; such preservation involves censorship, editing, and judgment; the archive makes memory durable and delicately accessible; and, as a site of political authority, the archive produces knowledge about the past for both the present and the future. Spivak’s recognition that the archive’s audible silences implore us to recognize linguistic repression and the gaps in our knowledge remains crucial to any archival consideration.

But the question we must now ask, one the more radical ethnic archive has consistently grappled with, is whether the principal goal should be simply to refigure the archive. Should scholars continue to

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recover and foreground artifacts that reveal indigenous knowledge, or should they reconsider the archive wholesale, questioning its politics and practices, and implement new practices and methodologies? If the archive is to be reconsidered, any new cartographies for the ethnic archive, such as those charted in the essays included in this section, must learn the lesson of transnational and diaspora studies, which until recently have generally employed conventional methodologies rather than self-determining ones capable of meaningfully engaging distinctions of nonimperial cultures and traditions.

Indeed, it is culture and tradition that make an iconoclastic approach to the ethnic archive necessary. If the archive has historically provided an opportunity to establish tradition, the ethnic archive affords an opportunity to do the opposite: to challenge assumptions cultivated as truths; to contest the hegemony of the nation-state's imagined pasts and futures; and to invoke a multiethnic cacophony of voices that require reconsiderations of established knowledge and knowledge production alike. In its commitment to recovery and revision, however, ethnic archival work also challenges the ethnic "canon" and acts, at times, as a site of resistance to the regulation of voices from within. Archival findings are thus as capable of establishing genealogies as they are of destabilizing the ethnic histories and selves we thought we already knew.

The continuing challenge before those of us working with the ethnic archive, then, in many ways involves wrestling with the tension between ethnic studies in general and the academy. "Can and will the imperial hear?" is perhaps the best question we might ask. Spivak's critique of postcolonialism's adoption of European temporality and methodology is crucial but limited by its goal of measuring silences to ensure their articulation. The impulse to recover lost texts is also reflected, in part, by this journal's recurring Little-Known Documents section. Equally important to the ethnic archive, however, are new methodologies of in-

terpretation and translation informing archival practices. Traditional methodologies and frameworks are, in the broadest sense, nation-centered and ill-suited to ethnic literatures that often challenge the fixity of the nation-state—its values, ideologies, and worldviews.⁴ Kathleen Washburn's essay puts pressure on this tension as she explains the contradictions apparent in the archives of the Society of American Indians, which in its attempts to articulate a progressive New Indian subject in the early part of the last century rendered itself vulnerable to accusations of reifying damaging frontier stereotypes.

Denise Cruz's theorization of transpacific feminism also illustrates the inherent transnationalism of the ethnic archive nicely, as does Eleanor Kaufman's close attention to traces of Jewish settlement in the rural, western United States. Challenging traditional practices of the archive more fundamentally, Greg Carr's essay proposes extending the definition of the archive to include any place of national import as a textual repository and expanding the definition of the reader to include academic and nonacademic textual observers alike, thus diminishing the class dimension that traditionally privileges the liberal elite as official or acceptable readers and excludes most others. Nicolás Kanellos describes how the project *Recovering the U.S. Hispanic Literary Heritage* attempts to equalize the archival playing field in the way Carr suggests. Kanellos's essay brings institutional perspective to this dialogue as he documents the challenges a Latino archive poses to traditional United States literary histories and the ways in which large grant-making bodies have historically condoned the erasure of the Hispanic presence in the United States.

The essays that follow reveal that because knowledge is perpetually translated, interpreted, and then mediated through power relations, archival methodologies must be organic; they must evolve along with their objects of inquiry.⁵ Those working in and establishing ethnic archives must grapple

with the underlying assumptions informing conventional methodologies: does the ethnic archive reject traditional practices' insistence on and desire for the primacy of a unique and self-preserving interpretation or articulation of memory? If not, does it exhibit, as Derrida argues in *Archive Fever*, a primordial jealousy and correlating capacity to erase itself? Or is the ethnic archive less violent, less "radically evil," and less conditioned by the "death drive" (13, 9)? When the ethnic archive is the site of resistance discourses, as it often is, must it reject the deconstructive impulse? Is the backward glance too onerous, as traditionally assumed, or must the full weight of the past inform the interpretation of a present moment? Is the past ever dead, even after the commandment to commence historicizing has been given? These are the questions the essays that follow begin to ask.

Challenging the established law or the social and political order requires challenging, at the point of departure, its ways of knowing and of producing knowledge. If the mere contents of the ethnic archive make silences audible and write footnotes to the stories we have already heard, imagine what the archive does when it begins to reveal uncomfortable, necessary truths. Imagine what new knowledges will emerge when the ethnic archive begins speaking to itself on its own terms.

NOTES

1. We are using *archive* here, reluctantly, to represent repositories of world-historical knowledge, though we are careful to note that the abstract use of the term is highly problematic, since the univocal naming of "the" archive as representative of a collective repository reinforces the amalgamation we are arguing against. We must note, too, that Asian American, Native American, African American, and Latino archival research may each present unique challenges.

2. We are also grateful to Doug Taylor, Yasmin DeGout, and Kristin Bergen for their thoughtful commentary on an early draft of this essay.

3. George E. Marcus's "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography" and "The Once and Future Ethnographic Archive" could easily be added to this list. We might also add Foucault's essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History."

4. Derrida's *Of Grammatology* is a case in point. While he is willing to challenge the primacy of writing as a civilizing characteristic, highlighting that Europe's fascination with creating a universal script and language is related specifically to its crisis of consciousness, he adopts a research design that follows texts, signs, and symbols of oppression and dislocation rather than social, cultural, and political norms and modes of alternative knowledge spheres, many of which he is aware of. In *Archive Fever*, as he traces the etymology of the word *archive*, he concedes that there is no escape from tradition, even for the deconstructionist. Yet he positions the term as Greek in origin, despite having demonstrated effectively in *Of Grammatology* that both hieroglyphics and Chinese scripts predate Western languages. That the archive as concept and "tradition" exists before the Greek *arkhē* and the *arkheion* seems but a foregone yet unacknowledged if not disavowed conclusion.

5. We thank Kristin Bergen for this astute observation. A new proliferation of queer theory scholarship on the archives makes a similar observation. See, e.g., Cvetkovich; Halberstam; and Arondekar.

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