

In his influential book *Archive Fever*, Jacques Derrida asserts, “There is no political power without control of the archive, if not memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation” (1996, p. 4). Indeed, the archive as the subjective space of memory and history-making, and its role in the constitution of political power and ideologies, has been a theme prevalent in archival literature over the past 20 years. Contestations on the part of a number of marginalized groups in the United States, a manifestation of the burgeoning political movements of the late 1960s, brought about a paradigmatic shift that questioned the inclusiveness and propriety of the historical record. As a result, the perception of the archive as a space of historical and political neutrality—a historical fallacy if one looks closely at the history of archives—was brought into question. In addition, whatever claims may have existed as to the neutral role of the archivist in the documentary endeavor came under scrutiny, insofar as it had become quite obvious that the various professional gestures that make up an archivist’s work—from appraisal to the acquisition of materials—shape and determine what is considered historical by students, researchers, and the general public. For the Latino/a archivist, this role is heightened precisely because she or he is often faced with the task of documenting communities that have been rendered historically ephemeral through, among other things, racism, classism, and xenophobia. Therefore, the process of archiving for the Latino/a archivist takes on the seminal and politically charged role of re-inscribing Latino lives into existing historical narratives and of retrieving previously existent notions of self and community.

Implicit in this constitutive effort is the need to determine and locate communal and personal identifications that have a base in history as such, and that can be used as a means of validating current identifying sensibilities. Rather than having to be reliant on a historical vacuity as a space for negotiating being, the Latino/a individual with a communal/racial/ethnic history would therefore have a “concrete” historical precedent from which to read the Latino corpus. But I would contend that inherent in this effort to document marginalized groups is a potential slippage into essentialist determinations of being that could forestall a more nuanced reading of individual and community histories. For while the attempt to document the under-documented is historically and politically necessary, the process of constituting a cohesive historical narrative for, in this case, Latinos, often results in the construction of rigid identifying boundaries that circumscribe the kinds of individuals and histories that are recorded for posterity and interpreted as Latino. As Kaplan (2000) noted, the move towards documenting the heritage and history of racial and ethnic communities often comes dangerously close to the search for and determination of authentic notions of self and community that can obscure internal differences and serve to validate a

certain essentialism, thus marginalizing individuals within these communities whose negotiations of identity do not correspond with prevalent archival interpretations. Moreover, Kaplan asserts that at the forefront of these historically essentializing gestures is the archivist him/herself who, in his/her ongoing naiveté about contemporary theories of identity, continues to reify reductive interpretations of ethnic and/or racial belonging and to construct a historical record devoid of difference.

Given these circumstances, what then is the task of the Latino/a archivist? Indeed, how can the Latino/a archivist go about documenting Latino groups, and therefore lend them subjectivity, without of necessity restricting the multifaceted ways in which they construct and negotiate their identities? Is the establishment of a historical narrative for various Latino groups necessarily indicative of a codification of identity? Can the stuff of communal history be deployed in such a way as to encourage difference and not essential notions of what it meant and means to be “Latino” in the United States? In the hopes of addressing some of these questions, I now want to focus on how recent theoretical work on Latino identity and Foucaultian notions of the archive can help inform our conceptualization of the Latino archive and its role within our communities. Implying a greater differentiation within discourses of history and identity, these bodies of thought present a challenge to potentially reductive interpretations within archival practice. In tandem, I will briefly review recent initiatives by the New York State Archives to document Latinos in New York State and speculate on the potential of their Latino Documentation Project and *A Guide to Documenting Latino/Hispanic History & Culture in New York State* for a process of archival documentation that engages recent debates on Latino identity and resists the tendency to reify one-dimensional interpretations of Latino lives. Recognizing how the actions of archivists are embedded in discourses around identity and often contribute to their constitution, I hope that this discussion will help elucidate the particular role of the Latino/a archivist in the documentation process, as well as the particular risks and challenges he or she may face when trying to archive the variability of Latino life and identity.

With the current prevalence of multiple readings of *latinidad*, *latinismo*, and *hispanidad* within disciplines such as Latino Studies, which imply a greater variation in identity in those individuals labeled as Latino or Hispanic in the United States, there would seem to be a greater theoretical resistance to the reification and interpretation of static notions of Latino identity in the archive. Indeed, according to Laó-Montes (2001), concepts such as *latinidad* function to disable the reification of fixed identities and their meanings, and instead promote a reading of Latin American identities in the United States as transcultural, transnational, and translocal, exceeding the boundaries of traditional historical and/or cultural categories. Part of the process of “subjection and subjectivation,”

(p. 17) *latinidad* stops short of constructing codified identities, rather perceiving the racial, ethnic, and cultural categories that contribute to the construction of Latino identity as variable and flexible, productive of a space of historical location that involves the “complex interplay of relationships of identity and difference” (p. 14) owed to the legacies of domination, exploitation, and migration that are particular to Latin America. Similarly, Flores (2000) suggests that any analysis of “Latinoness” or “latinismo” must take into account the national, cultural, class, and racial differences that contribute to the negotiation of these terms and conditions, and how they, in turn, determine the levels of identification that exist with collective aggregates such as “Latino” and/or “Hispanic.” Insisting on the need to recognize “among kinds and levels of difference” (p. 196) within Latino identities, Flores moreover emphasizes how specificity of historical and cultural place, and the diversity of Latino realities they imply, should be at the forefront of the conceptualization of Latino and Latin American identifying experiences in the United States.

Furthermore, the already variegated labels used to refer to those of Latin American descent in the United States could serve as a warning sign to the Latino/a archivist that any attempt to translate, document, or record these populations without taking into account multiplicity could be treacherous. For when faced with a human phenomenon that is the site of rampant syncretisms, hybridizations, and cultural and racial mixing, sometimes before it even reaches North American shores, the Latino/a archivist would do well to engage with the radically empirical nature of the Latino populace, rather than resort to a documenting model that fulfills some honorific trope of “saving community history” that rejects and obscures narrative deviations for positive representations. Although current terms such as “Latino” and “Hispanic” function both as forms of self-identification and also to mark Latin American populations in the United States as recognizable civic bodies, these terms, in their current popular manifestations, not only “refer to different dimensions of collective social experience,” (Flores, 2000, p. 194) but moreover remain bankrupt in the face of the category-defying movements of refugees, exiles, and legal and illegal immigrants, who unsettle attempts at readily defining the derivations and orientations of Latino communities. In addition to identifying with various national locales, these individuals often have differing relationships to established communities in the United States and to the self-imposed identifications that they use to organize their sensibilities and affiliations, contradicting assumptions that they can so readily identify with and be included within these communities.

This ability of Latino and Latin American populations to be located historically and geographically within several national designations and border zones is in reality nothing new. From border populations in Texas whose cultural and racial/ethnic identifications traverse the boundaries between Mexican and

American, to Caribbean populations in New York who travel constantly between the mainland and their island homes—maintaining their national identifications while negotiating their transformation on U.S. shores—Latin American populations residing in the United States have always manifested a transnational history that speaks to their experiences both here and abroad. Indeed, in one of the few pieces of archival literature explicitly written on a Latino population to be published in the *American Archivist*, Kreneck (1985) discusses the extent to which the documentation of the Mexican-American population of Houston demanded that attention be paid to the community's relationship to the Mexico/Texas border. Neither completely Mexican nor completely American(ized), the Mexican-American population of Houston manifested itself as an interstitial people that reflected a syncretism between Mexican and North American traditions. This population demonstrated a history of fluid topographical, cultural, and identificatory boundaries, supporting Flores' assertion that the phenomena of *latinidad* is not just a product of "postmodern aesthetic indeterminacy," but is rather based on the lived migratory movements and syncretic demonstrations of deterritorialized Latin Americans (de la Campa, 2000).

Moreover, as noted above, the history, cultural expression, and racial/ethnic identity of Latin American populations already defies categorization before they even reach the boundaries of any U.S. city. Themselves products of transnational migrations, racial mixture, and cultural syncretism, Latin American nations reside at the interstices of the indigenous, African, and European; at the borders of the Baroque, modernist, and folkloric; and at the primal scene of bricolage. Defying "any sense of ethnic, linguistic or cultural whole" (de la Campa, 2000, p. xv), Latin American nations and their resident populations resist any attempt at their homogenization, legibility, and easy recognition, instead affirming the frequently uneasy negotiation of heightened intermixture. Unfortunately, the radical implications of this state of being have often been undermined by Latin America's historically problematic relationship to the United States. As de la Campa suggests, "Latin America is often forced into a conceptual or political unity as hemispheric or civilizational 'other' to the United States" (p. xv), a unity that contradicts the internal complexities and differences that in reality already define the Latin American every day. Once transplanted to the United States itself, the populations of Latin America, now interpellated as "Latino" and/or "Hispanic," encounter a similar fate insofar as they are posited as a singular group defined by its linguistic, cultural, and racial/ethnic difference from an equally reductive White North American standard. The "Latino/Hispanic" monolith in this dichotomous equation is then forever defined by its difference and opposition to a perceived U.S. normativity, and not given the license to differ within itself. Subsequently, Latino communities themselves risk

constructing self-definitions that replicate this reductive pattern of oppositionality and of suppressing internal differences in the reach for a unity defined against their exclusion from North American standards of being.

The ramifications of this latter gesture are readily felt in the process of archival documentation insofar as the potential exists to craft a historical narrative that supports these exclusions through the collection of ideologically circumscribed materials, which read “Latino” and/or “Hispanic” reductively. As Hamilton, Harris, and Reid note in their introduction to *Refiguring the Archive*, “Collections compiled in opposition to a particular hegemonic discourse are equally shaped by the kind of material collected...as well as by what is excluded from an alternative recording of history” (2002, pp. 11-12). Accordingly, an investment in a purely oppositional collection policy and practice can be detrimental to the effective documentation of the variability evident in the activities and lives of historically marginalized groups. For if an archivist’s and/or archive’s intent is to collect and document simply in order to contradict the lack of historical evidence of under-documented groups, they risk crafting a historical picture that overemphasizes uniform and overly positive representations. Therefore, the Latino/a archivist should look towards the larger cross-section of cultural expressions, identities, and political and social commitments for documentation that more fully demonstrates the range of Latino/a identifications. By also reaching outside the national parameters of the United States, and resisting the imperative to document strictly within the confines of static notions of “Latino” and/or “Hispanic,” subject positions that speak only to U.S.-based communal developments, the Latino/a archivist could more actively document the fervent artifactual phenomena which manifest themselves in our transnational communities. For if the *modus vivendi* of Latinos and Latin Americans is predicated on the fluidity and constant refiguring of their ways of being, the archival record should demonstrate the enactment of these multiple identities and their subsequent development. In turn, constructing a historical record based on the ramifications of difference, rather than on the static reading and monumentalization of identities and actions.

By its very nature, this recognition of the contingency of identity brings into question the form and function of the archive and puts into relief the need for its reconfiguration. Rather than look towards traditional archival models, which tend to posit an archival space whose *métier* is derived from its attempts to make whole and cohesive disparate strains of personal, communal, and national history, one might instead take into account a model that challenges communal self-perception and encourages the reading of difference. As Foucault (1972) notes, the radical potential of the archive lies in the fact that it “deprives us of our continuities; it dissipates that temporal identity in which we are pleased to look at ourselves when we wish to exorcise the discontinuities of history; it breaks the

thread of transcendental teleologies” (p. 131). Difference rather than a mocked-up unity, discontinuity rather than historical linearity, function to record more fully the experiences of a population and to account for the many discursive spaces and identities that it occupies. Encompassing the entirety of a system of statements, the archive, rather than representing a static space of cultural or documentary accumulation, is the site of the enunciation of a multiplicity of historical, cultural, and political statements that function to defy the configuration of a singular vision of history. “Far from being that which unifies everything that has been said in the great confused murmur of a discourse, far from being only that which ensures that we exist in the midst of preserved discourse, [the archive] is that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existences” and makes distinct their narrative manifestations (p. 129). Moreover, Foucault specifies that, although the archive might serve as both constitutive system of the enunciability and functioning of the discursive statement, it nevertheless does not guarantee the ostensible stability of that archival space. Neither does the archive ensure our ability to completely determine its content, as a result leaving it open to the presence and accumulation of differing formative historical statements.

Foucault’s emphasis on the relationship of the archive to a differentiation of historical discourse emerged in the midst of theory of the archive as fragmentary, incapable of fully elucidating historical phenomena because it attests not to institutional conceptualizations of archives or identity, but to those phenomena that take place outside the configuration of historical events as traditionally understood. Indeed, Foucault claimed that his notion of the archive did not refer to the institutions or socio-cultural gestures which seek to accumulate archival documents for the purpose of reifying a continuing identity or evidentiary past. Rather, he viewed the archive as the product of a set of discursive relations that allow for the consideration of archiving as an activity that takes into account the differing relational factors which contribute to the construction of history and identity. Instead of deploying the archive as the mechanism for the codification of the multiple historical influences that an individual and/or community may experience, Foucault’s theoretical suggestion would seem to propose an archive that takes these various influences as the substance of historical phenomena, and, in turn, suggests a historical picture that reveals its own fissures, disturbances, and aberrations.

This shift in thinking corresponds quite readily with current conceptualizations of *latinidad* as the “domain of discursive formations” that provides for a “flexible category that relates to a plurality of ideologies of identification, cultural expressions, and political and social agendas” (Laó-Montes, 2001, p. 8). Moreover, this affinity for the intersection of multiple discursive formations that enable different subjects and identities is sympathetic with Foucault’s theoretical prospects for the archive insofar as they speak to the

formation of archival identities that question set teleological paths and produce an array of historical narratives. Although I am not interested in making concrete determinations of the correct model to follow for the identification of the Latin American population in the United States, theoretical concepts such as *latinidad* and *latinismo*, and their relationship to a re-conceptualized archival space, are worthy of consideration. For if we as Latino/a archivists are to avoid the pitfall of codifying identities in our communities and of providing reductive translations of their histories, we must challenge our own conceptualizations of what constitutes identity, communal belonging, Latino and/or Hispanicness, and what these represent for how we think of ourselves historically. Kaplan (2000) points out that “if we as archivists have been slow to question our profession’s long held view of archives and archival records as sites of historical truth, we have been equally as slow to question assumptions about group and individual identity as representations of truth and reality” (p. 144). Therefore, concrete teleological derivations of what it means to be “Hispanic” or “Latino” cannot be extracted from or contribute to the constitution of an archive and/or its collection policies. Rather, the archive should act as a space that challenges this normative tendency and seeks to alter the tools of its practice in order to reconstruct its intentions.

Harris (2002) noted that it is often very easy for archivists to assume the language of meta-narratives when it comes to the explication of under-recognized historical phenomena, simultaneously silencing sub-narratives and counter-narratives which could potentially undermine the honorable stories we tell ourselves. Past efforts to record the contributive efforts of Latinos have indeed suffered from this tendency to exclude potentially challenging historical content for the sake of proscribing and projecting a positive historical narrative. In turn, the Latino/a archivist must be wary of contributing to a discursive and artifactual practice that does not emphasize and support distinct readings of Latino/a histories and which shelters and manufactures historical fictions. For to conceptualize the archive as the site of a fundamental historical truth is inherently more dangerous in a Latino context, where the pervading tendency is for marginalization and simplistic evaluations of history, emphasizing the need to continually question the mechanisms of our practice even if they already seem to contradict current practices of exclusion.

If, as Booms (1987) states, the archivist “performs the constitutive act by which societal data are converted into ‘historical sources’” (p. 76), how does the Latino/a archivist become a conduit for Latino difference and then transform this into the stuff of historical resource? How does he or she construct a practice based on the presupposition that the archive’s collective subject matter exists on an ever-shifting cultural, racial, and socio-political terrain? This radical praxis must first take into account that there is very little precedent for the consideration of an archival practice outside of the bounds of tradition that takes its subject focus as

permeable, changing, and indeterminate. For at issue in the endeavor to document Latinos and/or Hispanics is the fact, quite evident again in the multiple labels used to address and/or name them, that what falls under the historical moniker of “Latino” and/or “Hispanic” today might not be regarded as such in the future. Just as these identifying locators are temporally based, so are the recording of their history and its resultant archival holdings. Rather than cultivating artifacts that somehow attest to the historical vigilance of an individual, community, etc., which often render history immobile and static, the Latino/a archivist would do well to seek those items that document their variability, difference, and dissonance. If theoretical concepts such as *latinidad* and *latinismo* assert that Latinos are not a homogenous group that is ready-made for recording and definition, then their archives should attest to this resistance to codification and, moreover, emphasize how this resistance and commitment to difference speaks to Latino and Latin American struggles against, among other things, racism and colonization. Indeed, according to Laó-Montes, the “archives” of *latinidad* are structured and constituted around the history of “mass migrations, political exiles, conquest of peoples and territories, and processes of uneven development and unequal exchange that characterize the relations between Anglos and Latino/Americans both within and beyond the territorial boundaries of the United States” (2001, p. 7). Accordingly, Latino and/or Latin American difference is at the heart of the constitution of Latino histories, the continuous struggles of our communities, and the definition and role of the Latino archive. To forego this relationship would be to deny the extent to which all of these factors contribute to the formulation of Latino/a identities, and the ways in which they develop and enunciate themselves.

Recognizing the challenge of documenting the complexity of Latino life, the New York State Archives’ Latino Documentation Project presents a potential development in the process of archiving the history-making activities of Latinos that speaks to some of the theoretical concerns raised in this paper. Established in 2000 as a division of the New York Heritage Documentation Project (NYHDP) and funded by the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC), the Latino Documentation Project’s intent has been to identify existing documentation about Latino and/or Hispanic communities, and to create a documentation plan and set of guidelines that would enable the collection of materials pertaining to Latinos in New York State. This set of guidelines, published as *A Guide to Documenting Latino/Hispanic History & Culture in New York State* in January 2002, includes documentation priorities, collection methodologies, and funding sources. It is distinct in its attempt to contend with the variability and level of differences that are explicit in Latino and Latin American populations, and with the challenges posed by the structuring of a collection policy intended to document this difference. Seemingly in direct

dialogue with current theoretical work on Latino identity, the authors of the guide provide for both an interrogation of the definitional boundaries of terms such as “Latino” and “Hispanic,” and of the use and applicability of these terms in the documentation process. Posing the question “What do we mean by Latino/Hispanic history and culture?” the authors note that there is a tendency within mainstream institutions and governments to “assume a general Latino/a-Hispanic identity for people with Hispanic surnames and ignore the diversity within this broad group,” thereby constructing a heavily circumscribed historical record based on essentialist presuppositions (2002, p. 13). Seeking to contradict this perilous inclination and resisting the temptation to inscribe a set notion of what it means to be Latino or Latin American in New York State, the Latino Documentation Project’s guide determines that the definitional parameters of Latino and/or Hispanic need to be reconfigured to take into account the extensive racial, cultural, and national diversity of the Latino and Latin American populations in New York State. Thus, according to the guide’s collection policy, the terms “Latino” and/or “Hispanic” are to become inclusive of those “migrants, immigrants, and descendents of people from Mexico, Central America, South America, Puerto Rico, and the rest of the Spanish-Speaking Caribbean who live in New York State,” as well as immigrants and descendents of people from Brazil and Spain (2002, p. 13).

Beyond casting a wider multinational and multicultural net, this gesture to open up the categorical boundaries of the terms “Latino” and “Hispanic” reflects the recognition of the transnational, syncretic, and variegated nature of Latino populations in the United States and the need for their consideration in the archival endeavor. Indeed, this forced inclusiveness of terms such as “Latino” and/or “Hispanic” can be perceived not as a homogenizing gesture, but as a way of pointing towards the bankrupt nature of these terms. Though they posit regional collecting initiatives as a way of contending with this as problematic, the authors of the guide nevertheless recognize that any allegiance to or identification with these terms on the part of people of Latin American descent in New York State is strictly contingent, stating that, “individual Latinos may identify strongly with their places of ancestral origin, from the level of village to nation or possession, they may feel a part of a pan-Latino identity, or they may not have a strong sense of Latino identity” (2002, p. 13).

What is promising about the efforts of the Latino Documentation Project is the willingness to assume this multiplicity of identities and communal affiliations as the starting point from which to record the historical contributions of those individuals who are located, if temporarily, under the rubrics of “Latino” or “Hispanic.” Taking into account the instability of these terms and their essentialist tendencies, they then attempt to fashion an archival methodology that prioritizes Latino and Latin American difference, and the importance of

documenting that difference, over and above the construction of a reductive Latino identity that would be easier to negotiate in an archival space. Thus, the Latino Documentation Project provides a potential documentation model that is cognizant of the radically empirical nature of the phenomenon it seeks to record and is in dialogue with current thinking on Latino identity and its multivalent properties, maintaining the need for archivists to not only reconceptualize their thinking on Latino communities in New York State, but also how they apply their archival tools to their documentation.

The task of the Latino/a archivist is fraught with a set of problems not fully articulated in current archival theory or practice. Discourses among archivists about the determination of historical content within archives, and about particular practices such as appraisal and collection development, rarely speak to the problems and challenges involved in the attempt to identify, preserve, and effectively archive the contributions of historically marginalized groups. Archival tools, which are customarily well suited to the constitutive particularities of dominant narratives, have not traditionally been “outfitted” to contend with the multiple factors involved in the evaluation of materials for such a variegated group as Latinos. In the past, archives functioned to codify history and identity in order to create a seamless national and/or communal narrative that could be readily deployed for any number of political and/or cultural purposes. What is problematic about the application of this model to a Latino archive is that it tends to obscure the multiple ways in which identity and community come to be expressed in a diasporic context.

If, according to Derrida (1996), the principle of the archive is the process of “consignation” or gathering together in order to create a single historical corpus, how does the Latino/a archivist reconfigure or utterly disassemble this notion in order to accommodate the empirical challenge of our daily lives? How do we inscribe bricolage into the narrative of the archive so as to create distinct and variable histories that speak to the differing ways in which Latinos constitute and negotiate their identities? Recognizing this challenge, the question becomes not how the Latino or Latina archivist acts to modify or contain the lived phenomena of Latinos and Latin Americans to fit current archival models, but rather, how he or she acts to keep pace with the ever-shifting economy of identities which defines the Latino and Latin American “condition.” Engaging with the fluidity of self connoted by concepts such as *latinidad* in order to construct Latino archival spaces that interrogate the meanings and significations of community and identity, like those suggested by the Latino Documentation Project, should be at the forefront of our archival practice. If we as archivists begin to question how notions such as “Latino” and/or “Hispanic” are conceptualized, we can then proceed to reconsider the types of materials, events, organizations, and/or individuals that we bring into our repositories and designate

as “representative” of ourselves, thereby questioning the very notion of constructing a representative body of historical material. Documenting with this in mind, we can contest our absence in current historical narratives and go about the business of inscribing the lived particularities of Latino experiences.

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