

Past Presidents Conversation 2019: “Buried Archives of the West(ern)”

Past Presidents Emily Lutenski and Michael Johnson

Introduction by Michael Johnson: “Our panel today on ‘Buried Archives of the West(ern)’ will be comprised of Michael Johnson, Emily Lutenski, Christine Bold, Susan Nance, and Kirby Brown. Emily and I are the Past Presidents of the panel title. Traditionally, the past president or co-presidents of the previous year offer an address or participate in a specially designated event at the next year’s conference. The original idea for this panel came from Christine and Susan, and Emily and I thought that a conversation on archival work might make for an interesting past presidential alternative to an address, and so here we are for a conversation about uncovering and working with western archives. Each of us will address a particular archive of difference, from the perspectives of African American studies, Native American studies, and animal studies. Each panelist will discuss a light-bulb moment—it blew my mind!—in the archive that profoundly changed our thinking or methodology.”

PANEL PARTICIPANTS:

Christine Bold is a professor of English and Killam Research Fellow at the University of Guelph, which resides on Treaty 3 lands and territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. She has just been elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. She is also Fulbright Canada Visiting Research Scholar and Smithsonian Fellow at the Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian, DC, and the National Museum of American History 2021-22. She has written numerous articles and book chapters and authored and edited six books—two of them multiple-award winners.

Kirby Brown is an associate professor of Native American Literatures in the Department of English at the University of Oregon and an enrolled citizen of the Cherokee Nation. His research interests include Native American literary, intellectual, and cultural production from the late eighteenth century to the present, Indigenous critical theory, sovereignty/self-determination studies, nationhood/nationalism studies, and genre studies. His recently published book, *Stoking the Fire: Nationhood in Cherokee Writing, 1907–1970* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2018), examines how four Cherokee writers variously remembered, imagined, and enacted Cherokee nationhood in the period between Oklahoma statehood in 1907 and tribal reorganization in the early 1970s.

Michael Johnson teaches at the University of Maine Farmington. Recent courses include African American Literature and Culture, Popular Genres, The Splendid Drunken Twenties, and Contemporary Native American Literature and Film. His publications include *Black Masculinity and the Frontier Myth in American Literature* and *Hoo-Doo Cowboys and Bronze Buckaroos: Conceptions of the African American West*. He is also the author of a biography of African American singer Taylor Gordon, *Can't Stand Still: Taylor Gordon and the Harlem Renaissance*.

Emily Lutenski is an associate professor in American Studies at Saint Louis University and the author of *West of Harlem: African American Writers and the Borderlands*. She served as WLA co-president in 2018 and is currently a fellow at the National Humanities Center.

Susan Nance is a historian of animals and entertainment at the University of Guelph and affiliated faculty with the Campbell Centre for the Study of Animal Welfare there. Her latest book, *Rodeo: An Animal History*, will be published with the University of Oklahoma Press in the spring (of 2020).

Michael Johnson, Past President:

I want to talk about my archival work related to my biography of Montana-born singer and writer Taylor Gordon, *Can't Stand Still: Taylor Gordon and the Harlem Renaissance*, and how this research on a once well-known celebrity has also lead to the uncovering of the stories of several other African American western lives. Taylor Gordon was born in 1893 in White Sulphur Springs, Montana. In 1910, he made his way East, and eventually started studying voice with two major African American performers and composers, Will Marion Smith, and J. Rosamond Johnson. In 1919, he joined Rosamond Johnson's vaudeville group, The Inimitable Five, and performed as singer, banjo player, and dancer through 1924. In 1925, Johnson published the first volume of a collection of African American spirituals, which he arranged for piano and voice, and, in part to publicize the book, he and Taylor Gordon started performing concerts devoted to spirituals, with Taylor as the featured tenor singer, and Johnson at the piano. They created a sensation with those concerts that carried them to Carnegie Hall, and on a nationwide coast-to-coast tour that became international when they traveled to France and England to offer the first concerts devoted to African American spirituals in those countries. In 1929, Taylor Gordon published a best-selling celebrity biography, *Born to Be*, signed a contract with CBS as a featured singer on a nationally broadcast radio program, and seemed to be on top of the world before the onset of mental illness that resulted in a series of institutionalizations and his disappearance from the world of performance and, really, from the history of the 1920s. Part of what makes Gordon's story part of a buried archive is that his story was, in a sense buried, by accounts that misrepresented that story, but, also, by neglect.

However, there is an actual physical archive related to Taylor Gordon that exists, and part of the reason that Gordon's story has not remained buried is because that archive is catalogued and well-maintained, located at the Montana Historical Society in Helena, The Emmanuel Taylor Gordon Family Collection. Gordon moved back to White Sulphur Springs at the end of his life and worked with the Meagher County Historical Society on a number of projects, which perhaps inspired him to donate his papers. I came across the collection because of Robert Hemenway, who put out a 1975 edition of *Born to Be* with University of Washington Press, which included an introduction that drew on unpublished materials from the collection to sketch out the story of Gordon's life after 1929.

So, I have two light bulb moments that I want to mention, or perhaps, it's the same revelation, but it came in two ways. Going in to look at the collection, my expectations were shaped by the conventional wisdom about the archives of the African American West in a couple of areas, and the moments for me were the ones that revealed that the conventional wisdom was wrong, or if not wrong exactly, incomplete.

Glenda Riley comments that African American women have "suffered near-invisibility in western history" in part because many "archivists [have] neglected to collect these women's

source materials, and most historians [have] disregarded their stories.”¹ So, one thing I was not expecting to find in Taylor Gordon’s manuscript collection was anything of interest about African American women. The other area of conventional wisdom had to do with the newspaper archive. Gayle Berardi and Thomas Segady observe that western newspapers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, by focusing primarily on local and regional news, “provided a basis for a sense of community in a population that consisted largely of individuals who had recently migrated to the area.”² The communities represented in the newspapers, however, “tended to be highly selective, reflecting racial and ethnic biases within the rapidly growing towns.”³ In general, western newspapers repeated a familiar pattern when it came to news about African American citizens, emphasizing stories “reflecting negative characteristics” (fighting, drinking, etc.).⁴ They “found newsworthy only the notorious incidents in the black community; a violent crime by a black or a humorous anecdote demonstrating the purportedly low intelligence of Afro-Americans merited news space.”⁵ So, I was not expecting to find anything of interest in the newspaper record of White Sulphur Springs. Actually delving into these archives proved illuminating.

Light Bulb #1: So, I knew Taylor Gordon had a sister, Rose B. Gordon, because he mentions “Sis” briefly in *Born to Be*. I did not expect that most of the material in the Gordon collection would be related to Rose. I did not know that Rose Gordon was a writer, in addition to being a small business owner, former candidate for mayor, and lifelong resident of White Sulphur Springs. The light bulb moment was the discovery in her scrapbook of a clipping from the Meagher County News of an article that she published in 1955: “My Mother Was a Slave.” This was the story of her family’s journey out of slavery and into western history, of her mother and father’s post-emancipation migration to Montana Territory, where her father worked as a chef in a series of gold-mining camps—the camp in Barker becoming the place of Rose’s birth. To my knowledge, this is the only published first person account of African American migration to Montana. And that was just the beginning of my investigation of a large archive of material related to the history of African American Women in the West, that, if not exactly buried, had not been extensively explored.

Lightbulb #2: Because there were clippings from the White Sulphur newspapers, I decided that I should look at the newspapers from Taylor and Rose’s childhood. Again, I did not expect to find much, but there were hundreds of items related to the Gordon family, mostly in the “Items of Interest” section of the paper, some no more than a sentence long. I can tell you that at the town’s 1898 Memorial Day event, Rose Gordon took part in a ceremony that began with a march

¹ Glenda Riley, “African American Women in Western History: Past and Prospect,” *African American Women Confront the West*, ed. Quintard Taylor and Shirley Ann Wilson Moore. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2003. 22-7. 22.

² Gayle K Berardi and Thomas W. Segady, “The Development of African American Newspapers in the American West, 1880-1914.” *African Americans on the Western Frontier*. 217-30. 225.

³ Berardi, 225.

⁴ Berardi, 226

⁵ Lang, 199.

down Main Street, and which included another African American resident of the Springs, Joseph Meeks, who in the Civil War had served in the 54th Infantry out of Massachusetts, the segregated union regiment most famously depicted in the film *Glory*. For the Memorial Day parade, Meeks served as the standard bearer for the small group of Springs' veterans. Following the singing of the "Star Spangled Banner," Rose contributed a recitation of a patriotic poem.⁶⁵ I can tell you that Taylor "Mannie" Gordon "won first prize" in the 1907 July 4 "potato sack race."⁶⁶ Although the newspaper record doesn't tell the whole story of race relations in White Sulphur Springs, it does suggest that the Gordons and other African Americans were fairly well integrated into the town's public life. With the exception of using the word "colored" in parentheses after an individual's name, a practice that is used less frequently with well-known individuals like Joseph Meeks and the Gordons, there's little to distinguish the newspapers' reports on the town's African American citizens from those of its white citizens. And, also in contrast to the usual pattern of local western newspapers, those African American citizens are a visible presence in the town's newspapers.

To borrow Eric Gardner's phrase from his book *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth Century African American Literature*, there are "multiple reasons" "why so many black literary locations are still thought of as 'unexpected'" (21). The illumination for me, really, was the realization that just because you know something isn't there, that doesn't mean you shouldn't look anyway. That in some cases, the buried archive isn't really buried at all, so much as it just hasn't been looked for. Certainly, there's been a lot more looking for the African American West over the past decade, particularly in the field of history, and, in the field of Black women's biography, I would also point out Polly Bugros McLean's *Remembering Lucille: A Virginia Family's Rise from Slavery and Legacy Forged a Mile High* for a Colorado-related example. And I'm hoping that the American West is becoming the expected place for African American archival research.

⁵ *Rocky Mountain Husbandman* 2 June 1898.

⁶ *Meagher Republican* 5 July 1907.

Emily Lutenski, Past President:

SLIDE 1 (TITLE)

“The Most Enthusiastic Antiquarian”: On the Political Uses of Black Western Archives

SLIDE 2 (SCHOMBURG)

In 1925, Afro-Puerto Rican bibliophile Arturo Schomburg published his now-famous essay on the making of Black archives, titled “The Negro Digs Up His Past.” In it, Schomburg contends, “The American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future.” For Black people in the United States, he suggests, “group tradition must supply compensation for persecution . . . History must restore what slavery took away.” As a result, he writes, “we find the Negro [is] apt . . . to become the most enthusiastic antiquarian of them all.”¹

In the age of the Movement for Black Lives, the archive as a mode of Black political resistance remains as crucial—and as central—as it was when Schomburg made this announcement. Yet the notion of the “archive” has expanded to include a range of contemporary African American preservation practices—from the construction of public monuments to the use of samples in hip-hop. These, I argue, have created a “memory moment” in African American culture—one prompted by the increasingly compromised position of African American space due to forces as varied as immigration and gentrification, especially in western cities like Los Angeles, which I will use as my example.

SLIDE 3 (SOUTH LA)

Contemporary Black artists and activists in LA have grappled with—and sought to provide counterpoints to—historical erasure. In 2003 the LA City Council renamed the region previously known as South Central; it became South LA in an effort to “erase a stigma that . . . dogged” the historically Black section of the city, painting it as “depressed and crime-ridden” since the uprisings in Watts, the crack epidemic of the 1980s, and the rebellion of 1992, which contextualize the conditions depicted widely in film and gangster rap, which both critiqued the racial order and activated the prurient imaginations of white consumers.²

SLIDE 4 (1990s POP CULTURE)

In the wake of such representations, some Black Angelenos welcomed investment in South Central. Others saw the new nomenclature of “South LA” as a signal of the coming threat of

¹ Arthur A. Schomburg, “The Negro Digs Up His Past,” *Survey Graphic* no. 31 (1925): 670.

² Matea Gold and Greg Brazton, “Considering South-Central by Another Name,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/apr/10/local/me-socentral10>.

gentrification.³ Indeed, by the time South LA was born in 2003, the region had many features that appealed to middle-class homebuyers, often white, who were themselves priced out of LA's increasingly affluent neighborhoods, such as public transit lines, historic housing stock, and the University of Southern California.

In 2006, *LA Weekly* published an article titled "Welcome to Gentrification City," which announced even stigmatized South LA had seen a "surge in real estate values" as some of its neighborhoods became popular among, in the words of one real estate agent, "mixed-ethnic, liberal-democrat, social-justice urbanists"—and fewer African Americans.⁴

By 2018, white property ownership in LA neighborhoods that were recently predominantly Black was common enough to become the premise of a network sitcom, CBS's *The Neighborhood*.⁵

Although South LA remains mostly populated by people of color and houses some of the city's poorest communities, the demographics of the region have changed significantly—not only due to gentrification, but also due to a very different force: immigration.

SLIDE 5 (DEMOGRAPHIC MAPS)

The decades since the unrest in Watts have seen a dramatic uptick in South LA's Latinx population. Areas like Boyle Heights, in the latter part of the twentieth century a predominately Latinx neighborhood, simply no longer had room to accommodate all these new arrivals, who subsequently flowed into nearby South LA. In 1970 South LA was 80 percent Black; by 2010 it was 64 percent Latinx.⁶

Furthermore, some Blacks moved from South LA to suburbs and exurbs in LA County and beyond, which more affordable and had purportedly fewer issues with gangs and crime.⁷ Today South LA remains the cultural heart of the Black Angeleno community and is home to the

³ Steve Lopez, "25 Years After Riots, South L.A. Still Waiting for Its Renaissance," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 2017, <http://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-lopez-esowon-0426-story.html>.

⁴ David Zahniser, "Welcome to Gentrification City," *LA Weekly*, August 23, 2006, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/welcome-to-gentrification-city-214484>.

⁵ *The Neighborhood*, created by Jim Reynolds (CBS, 2018–).

⁶ USC Center for the Study of Immigrant Integration, *Roots/Raíces: Latino Engagement, Place Identities, and Shared Futures in South Los Angeles*, October 2016, http://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/731/docs/RootsRaices_Full_Report_CII_USC_Final2016_Web_Small.pdf, 1.

⁷ "Straight Outta Compton: You Have Heard of White Flight. Now Consider Black Flight," *The Economist*, February 14, 2008, <http://www.economist.com/node/10697106>.

36. Sides, *L.A. City Limits*, 110–11.

region's largest concentration of African Americans, but it is home to a markedly smaller number than it was before—which both appeals to gentrification and elicits resistance to it.⁸

SLIDE 6 (2010s POP CULTURE)

This context has given rise to our current decade's "memory moment": archival thinking as a Black political practice, one that often preserves the much-maligned Black LA of the 1980s and 1990s, wrought by the legacies of racist policies like redlining and restrictive covenants. In Paul Beatty's LA-based *The Sellout*, published in 2015, the Black protagonist resurrects the borders and practices of the Jim Crow past in the present. The same year, the film *Straight Outta Compton* recreated the story of N.W.A. The film *Dope*, also from 2015, centers on teenage nerds of color who lionize and imitate 1990s hip-hop. In HBO's *Insecure*, Issa Dee's Inglewood apartment complex houses a "Thug Yoda," whose commitment to the Bloods is more hilarious than dangerous.⁹

Hip-hop has also taken an archival turn. After *Straight Outta Compton* hit cinemas nationwide, Dr. Dre released his final album, inspired by the film. It opens with a track that recreates the history of Compton in a retro newsreel voiceover. "Compton [was] 'the Black American Dream,'" it narrates, where "with seventy-four percent of the population, Black power is the fact of life."¹⁰ Although this album was released in 2015, the numbers presented more closely resemble the past. The Black population of Compton was approximately 75 percent in 1980; the 2010 Census recorded a Black population of only 33 percent.¹¹

The work of Kendrick Lamar also harks longingly to the 1990s via form. A 2012 song, "Poetic Justice," samples Janet Jackson's 1993 "Any Time, Any Place," which was included on the

⁸ Ruben Vives, "A Community in Flux: Will Boyle Heights Become Ruined by One Coffee Shop?" *Los Angeles Times*, July 18, 2017, <http://latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-boyle-heights-gentrification-coffee-20170621-story.html>; Alexander Nazarayan, "The 'Artwashing' of America: The Battle for the Soul of Los Angeles Against Gentrification," *Newsweek*, May 21, 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/los-angeles-gentrification-california-developers-art-galleries-la-art-scene-608558.html>; Hillel Aron, "Anti-Gentrification Movement Spreads to South L.A. Art Spaces," *L.A. Weekly*, August 5, 2017, <http://www.laweekly.com/news/south-los-angeles-activists-taking-a-page-from-defend-boyle-heights-and-demand-art-galleries-leave-8501859>.

⁹ Paul Beatty, *The Sellout* (New York: Picador, 2015); *Straight Outta Compton*, directed by F. Gary Gray (Universal Pictures, 2015); *Dope*, directed by Rick Famuyiwa (Open Road Films, 2015); *Insecure*, created by Issa Rae and Larry Wilmore (HBO, 2016–).

¹⁰ Dr. Dre, "Intro (Compton)," *Compton: A Soundtrack by Dr. Dre* (Aftermath, 2015).

¹¹ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1980 Census of the Population: California* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1982), 21; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *2010 Census*, https://factfinder.census.gov/bkmk/table/1.0/en/DEC/10_SF1/QTP3/1600000US0615044.

soundtrack to the film *Poetic Justice*, in which she starred with Tupac Shakur (who is in turn sampled on Lamar's 2015 album).¹²

Lamar's 2012 song "Compton" is an homage to prior place-based gangster rap, with lyrics asserting "Now we can all celebrate . . . the rap artists of N.W.A."¹³ As a call to "celebrate," "Compton" is a commemoration. In an interview, Lamar indicated that the link between memory and place was the defining feature of the album where the song appears: "Going back to the neighborhood," he said, "put me back in that same space where we used to be . . . reminiscing how I was feeling."¹⁴

SLIDE 7 (BRADFORD)

Recent visual art emerging from Black LA also exhibits an archival sensibility. Mark Bradford's 2018 "Deep Blue" is one example. It is an enormous, mixed-media composition; the foundational layer is composed of maps of Watts, upon which paint, caulk, and other materials have been collaged. These were selectively dug back by the artist to expose the street grid. Remaining raised areas "signify properties destroyed during the city's [unrest] in 1965"—in other words, the largest protrusions, the biggest presences, are Black LA sites now absent.¹⁵

SLIDE 8 (HALSEY)

This memory moment has been taken to its conclusion by artist Lauren Halsey in her 2018 "Prototype Column for tha Shaw . . . I & II," monumental carvings that honor the recently murdered Crenshaw rap artist Nipsey Hussle. Halsey's prototypes build on her long-standing interest in archiving Black LA in the face of concern over development and gentrification: "I want to build architecture . . . to . . . hold our narratives, as we are being deleted and shuffled around," she asserted in an interview: "I view history, cultural memory, and the archive . . . as tools that can . . . mobilize people towards liberation."¹⁶

¹² Kendrick Lamar, "Poetic Justice," *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg/Aftermath/Interscope, 2012); Kendrick Lamar, "Mortal Man," *To Pimp a Butterfly* (Top Dawg/Aftermath/Interscope, 2015).

¹³ Kendrick Lamar, "Compton," *good kid, m.A.A.d city* (Top Dawg/Aftermath/Interscope, 2012).

¹⁴ Jayson Rodriguez, "Kendrick Lamar on Aftermath Debut," *XXL*, August 2, 2012, [http://www.xxlmag.com/xxl-magazine/2012/08/kendrick-lamar-on-aftermath-debut-\"this-album-wont-sound-like-section-80-nothing-like-it\"/](http://www.xxlmag.com/xxl-magazine/2012/08/kendrick-lamar-on-aftermath-debut-\).

¹⁵ Claire Selvin, "The Broad Acquires David Hammons 'African-American Flag,' 50-Foot Long Mark Bradford Work," *Art News*, June 14, 2019, <http://www.artnews.com/2019/06/14/the-broad-david-hammons-mark-bradford/>.

¹⁶ Hilarie M. Sheets, "Lauren Halsey Is Making Monuments to South Los Angeles," *New York Times*, May 1, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/arts/lauren-halsey-frieze-award-new-york.html>; Mark Pieterse, "We Built This City: A Conversation with Lauren Halsey," *Art in America*, June 7, 2018, <https://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/built-city-conversation-lauren-halsey/>.

Local conditions have elicited Black LA's memory moment, but it also speaks to national problems. The power of memorialization has been commandeered by white supremacists such as those who, emboldened by the election of Trump, organized 2017's deadly "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville in response to the city's vote to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee. In the face of the contemporary alt-right, Black LA's archival turn offers a powerful counter-discourse, a politics of preservation that uses historical and historicized collection—of samples, maps, images, materials, allusion—to sow collectivity instead of division.