

# Museum Scholarship and Material Culture Certificate Reflection Paper

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It is perhaps not a surprise that my first semester in graduate school was excruciatingly difficult. I was drowning in questions as I attempted to make sense of the theories and methods I was learning on a daily basis. However, I *knew* museums and found comfort in pursuing a certificate in a Museum Scholarship and Material Culture because I was relatively familiar in the field—or so I thought. My coursework within the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture certificate guided me to think not only about museums, but also archives in new ways.

In Fall 2018, when I enrolled in the Introduction to Museum Scholarship facilitated by Ricky Punzalan, I began to learn about museums from a different angle. Up until then, my scathing critique of museums came from my experiences within them. I had receipts of elitist, racist, and sexist practices occurring within local museums and ideas on how to improve them. Dr. Punzalan's reading assignments, however, made me realize a lot of my critiques were not new. I was, in actuality, a part of a choir of critics that were attempting to hold museums accountable. Growing up in the suburbs of Washington, DC, one of my most persistent critiques was the lack of local representation in the Smithsonian institutions. I was particularly concerned with the lack of publicly displayed information on Central Americans in the region and questioned how the museum was serving its local publics. I recall Dr. Punzalan challenging my critique on the lack of representation by stating, if you are not in the exhibits, you are most likely in the archives or deep in collections storage.

Dr. Punzalan was right. Over the years, the Smithsonian had made efforts to include diverse local narratives in exhibitions and initiatives like the *Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington, DC, Gateways/Portales*, and *A Right to the City*, as well as the Latino DC History Project. Although the display of such important artifacts and records are temporary, some of them remain stored in archives and collections. Yet, as curator Ariana Curtis argues, museums tend to value the extraordinary.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, the leaders, the activists, the firsts. However, in doing such, museum professionals often exclude the everyday and the ordinary.

Knowing this, I became preoccupied with the quotidian and how we get to know ordinary people's lives more intimately. Psyche Williams-Forsson guided me in a directed reading entitled *Material Culture of Race, Memory, and Everyday Life* in Fall 2019, where we focused on the variety of interdisciplinary methods used to make sense of the quotidian lives of marginalized peoples. Together, we examined how speech, the visual, clothing, food, space and place, and the archive can be used simultaneously in the study of material culture. I very much appreciated how Dr. Williams-Forsson uses multiple theories methods to understand the experiences of Black women. Under her tutelage, I learned that an artifact can be used to begin inquiry into a subject matter, but it is also important to utilize multiple methodologies to get at the deeper significance of an artifact within a given community.

At the same time, I began performance studies coursework with Melissa Blanco Borelli and became fascinated by her focus on the body.<sup>2</sup> Not only was Dr. Blanco Borelli thinking about the bodies of the women she studied in the archives, but also her own embodied

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<sup>1</sup> *Museums Should Honor the Everyday, Not Just the Extraordinary* | Ariana Curtis - YouTube, YouTube (TED, 2019), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDvw9vWSgt4>.

<sup>2</sup> Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She Is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199968169.001.0001>.

experiences throughout her archival research and writing. This line of inquiry between the body and the archive intersected with questions I had about my father's archive. How did he create it? Why? How did he use it? Why did this matter? What do I make of the gaps in his archive? How am I now engaging with it? I found that performance methodologies as exemplified by Dr. Blanco Borelli, as well as Robyn Bernstein, Saidiya Hartman, and Tina Campt were particularly useful in thinking about my father's archive.<sup>3</sup>

In particular, Saidiya Hartman's critique of the archive as it relates to Black women was salient in Quint Gregory's Museum Research Seminar. In Spring 2020, Dr. Gregory tasked our class with conceptualizing and designing an exhibit. As a class, we valued the process.<sup>4</sup> We thought carefully and slowly about what the subject of the exhibit would be, how we would go about displaying the subject matter, and our overall limitations. Ultimately, we decided to cover Black student activism at the University of Maryland. Namely, we focused on the student takeover of Marie Mount Hall in October of 1968, which was in part incited by four Black women students who were rejected from a nutrition study on account of their race.

I became rather obsessed with who these women were, especially amidst the murder of Breonna Taylor around the same time period. The four Black women remained unnamed in the archival record. I even reached out to the university's Department of Nutrition and Food Science in hopes that they had some sort of record. Unsurprisingly, they never responded. On the contrary, the leader of the Black Student Union at the time was named several times in the student newspaper. Here, I continued to think about the limitations of the archive and who falls

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<sup>3</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route*, 1. ed (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007); Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, First edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019); Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (2009): 67–94; Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> See our notes on process, <http://bsuatumd.artinterp.org/omeka/processnotes>.

to the wayside. How do we as archival actors resuscitate the lives of those lost in the archival record? Or, as university archivist Lae'l Hughes-Watkins would ask: how do we build a reparative archive?<sup>5</sup>

By the time I was ready to begin my museum practicum, these questions around the archive, performance, and social justice were brewing. I was interested in how I could use performance theories to better understand my father's archive or more broadly, undocumented Central American archives. However, my thinking remained quite theoretical and honestly quite selfish because I wanted to develop a methodology for my dissertation research. With the help of Mary Sies and Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, I was encouraged to ground my work in practice. The practical elements of my project were further realized when there was hotly debated conversation on Central American Twitter regarding the ethics of archiving the war and migration traumas of Salvadorans in Los Angeles. I then realized that I needed to, yet again, focus on the process. This time, I was speaking to those archiving Central American experiences in traditional and untraditional repositories, as well as those working with the personal archives of Central Americans.

In this sense, my museum practicum did take a slight turn. Whereas I initially wanted to develop a methodology for myself, I in turn created a more outward facing project for those interested in archiving undocumented Central Americans. In many ways, this shift in the project made it clear how much context matters: I was prompted to respond to a conversation being held online as Central American studies becomes more institutionalized.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, I wonder how

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<sup>5</sup> Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, "Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices," *Journal of Contemporary Archival Science* 5, no. 6 (2018): 1–19.

<sup>6</sup> The expanding institutionalization of Central American studies is demarcated by the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) renaming one of its departments as the Chicana/o and Central American Studies Department. It

much my project was also shaped by my own hesitations about whether my father's archive was significant enough to examine. Ultimately, I believe that it was a little bit of everything. The call to ground my practicum in praxis, the Central American Twitter debate, and a desire to ethically examine the personal archives of undocumented Central American pushed me to write "Archiving Undocumented Central Americans: A Series of Considerations for Archival Actors."

Throughout my professional career in museums, I have given a lot of thought to museum operations that face the public. That is to say, I've spent a lot of time thinking about how to make museums better through exhibitions and public programs. The Museum Scholarship and Material Culture certificate, however, has helped me think about that which is not seen by the public. Dr. Punzalan encouraged me to think about the archives and collections, Dr. Williams-Forson helped me get at the significance of the quotidian, while Dr. Gregory, Dr. Sies, Dr. Blanco Borelli, and Lae'l Hughes-Watkins pushed me to think about practical processes. It is not until now that I am realizing how the certificate program has informed my museum and archives praxis, but also my dissertation research as well. In short, the Museum Scholarship and Material Culture certificate has taught me to peel back the layers of museums and archives and mind the processes they enact and facilitate among their audiences.

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sequentially became the second Central American studies program in the country, joining the program at California State University, Northridge.