

Collecting and Connecting: Archiving Filipino American Music in Los Angeles

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Biography

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Abstract

Scholars have recently reconceptualized the archive not only as a repository of knowledge, but also as an active producer and arbiter of knowledge. The study of archives, from this perspective, must attend to processes as well as products. This paper examines UCLA's Archiving Filipino American Music in Los Angeles (AFAMILA) project as a case study of collaborative archiving, from the perspective that both methodology, the strategies and practices of collecting, and musical content, the sounds collected, determine the meaning of music archives. Furthermore, the study seeks to demonstrate how the collaborative approach, with its emphasis on dialogue and exchange, subverts the discourses of power that have historically shaped music archiving.

Introduction

Scholars from a variety of fields have reconceptualized the archive not only as a source of knowledge, but also as a site where knowledge is produced and negotiated. From this perspective, archives are seen as dynamic places, where memory is created, contested, recovered, and reinterpreted. [2](#) Ann Laura Stoler, for example, in her study of the colonial archive, argues for a focus on "archiving as a process rather than...archives as things" and examines the ways in which discourses of power shape the form and content of archives (2002:83). And Daniel Reed (2004) suggests that archives embody not only cultural and family memories, but also "disciplinary memories—the methodological and intellectual histories of ethnographic disciplines." Thus, the study of archives requires attention not only to the objects collected, but also to the methods of collection and the discourses that speak through the collection.

Archiving Filipino American Music in Los Angeles (AFAMILA), a project developed by the [UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive](#) [1] in partnership with [Kayamanan Ng Lahi Philippine Folk Arts \(KNL\)](#) [2], was implemented in 2003 with the goal of documenting a year in the musical life of Filipino Americans in Los Angeles. Through this effort, the Archive sought both to expand its collection and to bridge the gap between the university and the wider Los Angeles community. This paper examines the AFAMILA project as a case study of collaborative archiving, from the perspective that both methodology, the strategies and practices of collecting, and musical content, the sounds collected, determine the meaning of archival collections. The study begins with an examination of the problems of technological mediation and the historical development of music archives, with attention to the discourses of power that have shaped them. I then review the AFAMILA project and its collection with an eye toward what was documented and how it was collected, as well as its expansion into the online environment. Furthermore, this paper seeks to demonstrate how the collaborative approach, with its focus on "mutuality and reciprocity" (Sheriff, et al. 2002), subverts the discourses of power that have historically shaped music archiving.

Technology, power, and social responsibility

The history of ethnomusicology, as Rene Lysloff (1997:209) points out, is closely tied to the history of sound recording. Underpinning this parallel development are three related discourses of power: technological superiority, intellectual authority, and scientific objectivity. With its early focus on the science and salvage of music, ethnomusicology relied heavily on the extraction of sounds from sources as it was made possible by recording technology. Lysloff argues that such practices of objectification are linked to Western assumptions of technological privilege, and that the separation of sound from source and the alienation of the researched from the researcher are exercises of power enabled by technology:

We might say that technology privileges researchers, distancing them from the object of research—whether musical or human—and allowing them to control it. Indeed, the sound document becomes a true object: isolated from the noisy chaos of real life in the field it becomes analyzable, frameable, manipulable, and ultimately...exploitable. (1997:209)

Furthermore, it is the assumptions of technological and intellectual superiority that “invest ethnomusicology with the authority to validate a given music” (ibid.:210). Lysloff suggests that while the criteria of authenticity are often debated in academic circles, the discussion rarely involves those who are the objects of study. The music archive, then, whether conceived of as a scientific laboratory, a repository for field research, or a sanctuary for endangered music, is a space in which researchers exercise the power to represent culture.

There is another story that archives tell, however. As Anthony Seeger has suggested, archives can also be seen as storehouses of valuable cultural knowledge, preserving marginalized and forgotten voices and cultural practices. Seeger recounts, for example, how Fox Indians used the Indiana University Archives of Traditional Music as a resource for the revival of forgotten songs. For communities that live by oral tradition, then, archives can be sources of empowerment and resources for knowledge building. Understanding that “communities engaged in changing themselves often look to the past as a model through which to create a coherent future...archives become a resource for the recovery of history and the establishment or reestablishment of a degree of cultural autonomy” (Seeger 2001).

Using the history of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv as a measure, it appears that the model of the music archive as a private academic research center was relatively short lived. An outgrowth of Carl Stumpf’s Psychological Institute at Berlin University, the Phonogramm-Archiv was founded in 1900. With the arrival of Erich M. von Hornbostel the following year, it soon became a major center for musical research, importing sound recordings from missionaries, ethnologists, and other colonial travelers. By the end of World War I, however, the archive was already reaching out to a broader audience with its “Demonstration Collection” and a commercially distributed record series. And by the 1950s, the archive became not only a repository for research, but also a resource for “popular education.” The post-colonial era saw the establishment of national and regional archives all over the world, and the start of collaborative programs of exchange and repatriation (Christensen 2002:19-31). Reflecting on the legacy of the Phonogramm-Archiv, Dieter Christensen writes:

Hornbostel’s archive has grown not only in size but, more importantly, in scope and social significance, and it is well positioned to enter its second century, serving the cultural memory of the world, international music research, and the popular needs of an ever-changing society. (2002:31)

While, as Seeger (1986:266) notes, ethnomusicology and archives are undeniably implicated in the history of colonialism, it is clear from the history of the Phonogramm-Archiv that a concern with socially responsible ends also defines the character of archives.

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Collaborative archiving

The UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive follows in this tradition, proactively developing, preserving, and promoting access to its collections, with the goal of increasing the relevance of its work to both the academy and the wider Los Angeles community. Archiving Filipino American Music in Los Angeles (AFAMILA), a partnership between the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive and Kayamanan Ng Lahi Philippine Folk Arts (KNL), is a result of this effort, and a good example of what might be called “collaborative archiving.” Following from the conception of archives as active producers and arbiters of knowledge, and the understanding that archival collections reflect the relations of production (Gray 2002:48), collaborative archiving involves careful methods of collection development and dissemination, treating the process as seriously the product.

Indeed, for collectors and communities involved in field documentation and archiving, the product is often inseparable from the process. Reflecting on his collaboration with the Bosavi people of Papua New Guinea, Steven Feld (2002) suggests that the sound recording carries multiple layers of meaning—evoking both cultural memory and the memory of the relationships involved in its production (see also Reed 2004). From the Bosavi perspective,

the sound recording is more than a cultural document; it is a product of collaborative effort, and thus a social contract of sorts:

Sound recordings index the coming together of different kinds of labor. As such they are bound by the same codes of obligation and reciprocity as other kinds of collaborative work and relationship. Objects stand as persons; as such they are subject to the general rule of social relationships. Namely, a relationship must grow through the work of exchange that keeps it in process. (Feld 2002:64-65)

In his important work on repatriation, Robert Lancefield (1993) expresses a similar view, arguing that sound recordings ought not be treated as mere objects, but as extensions of cultural life and sentiment. Sound archiving, then, must be done with “care and responsibility” because it not only implicates the relationships between collectors and communities, but also impacts wider histories of intercultural relations (Lancefield 1993:408-409).

The consciousness of sound archiving as a process reflects a shift in the ethnographic disciplines from the idea of fieldwork as the excavation of a “found world” toward an understanding of ethnography as a “made world”—that is, a result of the complex relationships between researchers and informants (Titon 1995:290). As Jeff Titon writes: “we have replaced the sense that what we are doing is collecting information with the idea that we are involved with our informants in the intersubjective and dialogical coproduction of texts, contexts, processes, performances, interpretations, and understandings” (Ibid.). And, as Lancefield (1993:403-410) suggests, it is through such dialogic and collaborative work that archives can begin to address power inequalities, resolve cultural misunderstandings, and realign the interests of communities and archives. Likewise, Kay Kaufman Shelemay affirms the value of relationship-centered field methods, arguing that collaboration “helps to reduce power asymmetries and assures greater congruency between ethnographic goals and the sensitivities of individuals and communities” (1997:201). Such an approach points towards an “ethnography that acknowledges a reality of sharing and interaction, one predicated on negotiated relationships” (Ibid.:201-202). Thus, if the colonial model of archiving implies a relationship of alienation and exploitation, collaborative archiving implies a relationship founded on mutuality and reciprocity.

Based on my experience with AFAMILA and reading of other case studies (e.g. Sheriff, et al. 2002:291-95), I would argue that there are five ways in which collaborative archiving addresses real and perceived power inequalities and re-imagines archival production in terms of mutuality and reciprocity. First and foremost, collaborative archiving requires a proactive stance by the archive in assessing its holdings, the needs of the academy and community, and the potential impact of the project (Vallier interview). Second is dialogue, which involves establishing rapport and building trust through the open exchange of ideas and the mediation of conflict. Third, collaborative archiving requires open and reciprocal flows of resources, such as people, equipment, money, and knowledge in its various forms. Fourth, and related to resource sharing, is access to archival holdings. And fifth is sustainability, which involves not only nourishing the networks between institutions, but also equipping the community for autonomous documentation and research projects. These five principles—pro-action, dialogue, resource sharing, access, and sustainability—together point to the underlying goal of mutuality and reciprocity.

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Archiving Filipino American Music in Los Angeles

UCLA archivist John Vallier conceived AFAMILA in 2003. According to Vallier, the impetus for the project was both practical and philosophical. First was the availability of a community-partnership grant, part of the “UCLA in LA” initiative, designed to encourage sustainable research projects that benefit both community and academic interests. Second was his interest in “generating more of a profile for the archive.” This would involve countering the negative images of archives as “arcane” and “out of touch” with a project that brings academic and community interests together in the process of archival development. Furthermore, the project would involve a proactive approach to the documentation of contemporary music-cultures in Los Angeles (Vallier interview).

The archive’s decision to work with the Filipino American community was a three-step process. First, Kayamanan Ng Lahi, a well-respected presenter of Philippine dance and music, was identified as a potential community partner. Second, the archive assessed its holdings of Filipino music and determined that it was in dire need of expansion. And finally, demographic research was carried out to determine the potential impact of the project. It should also be noted that student interest in Filipino music was an important catalyst for AFAMILA.

With the community partnership established, the AFAMILA project was designed to meet three goals. First was collection development through new documentation and deposits of existing materials. Second was the improvement of access to collections through digital preservation, cataloguing, and the development of an online interface. In addition, copies of documented material were made available to participating artists. And third was sustainability through the provision of equipment and training for the community partner. A UCLA graduate student researcher (or GSR) served as the project administrator and de facto community liaison. The GSR, along with recordists from the UCLA and Filipino American communities, traveled around the city documenting events, networking, and educating Filipino American artists about the archiving project. Thus we see, in conception and practice, a re-imagining of archival production as a mutually beneficial partnership and a means of breaking down the walls between the academy and the community.

By the end of the 2003-2004 academic year, AFAMILA had amassed about 200 hours of audio recordings of Filipino and Filipino American music. Close to forty events were documented that year, and several small deposits were made of commercial and personal recordings. I asked several Filipino American project participants to evaluate the collection and they agreed that the material collected was, for the most part, a good representation of the community's diverse musical activities. The documentation, carried out in public and private settings, includes traditional forms such as kulintang, rondalla, and choral music, as well as Filipino pop, spoken word, rock, rhythm n' blues, and hip-hop. While I recognize that a complete analysis of an archival collection must attend to exclusions as well as inclusions (Harris 2002; Stoler 2002), I was unable to ascertain from participants what might have been left out of the AFAMILA collection.

Video collage of AFAMILA documentation

(Courtesy of the UCLA Ethnomusicology Archive)

Noting the diversity of expressive forms and young people's affinity for American popular music, I inquired whether there might be any concern within the community about the representation of Filipino American culture in the UCLA archive. One participant explained that the community is so diverse in terms of age, culture, and interests that diversity of expression is generally accepted. Another community member stated that young Filipino Americans, especially those who did not grow up in the Philippines, often combine their taste for popular music with an interest in folk and traditional forms as a means of reconnecting with their roots. A performance by the spoken word collective 8th Wonder, for example, documented by AFAMILA at the 2003 Festival of Philippine Arts and Culture in Los Angeles, reveals a distinctly Filipino poetic consciousness—replete with references to Philippine language, culture, and history—animated by a hip-hop performance aesthetic. The continuity between traditional and popular forms points to the importance of documenting and archiving contemporary urban music, which is something that has historically been “written out” of archives (Vallier 2004). The awareness that tradition lives in and through hybrid popular forms challenges us to expand our notions of preservation and to rethink the conception of archives as sanctuaries for “pure” and endangered traditional musics. And in the spirit of making archives more relevant to, and reflective of, local communities, it is worth, in Reed's (2004) words, “reconsidering archives as an extension of the living traditions from which our collections come.”

AFAMILA appears to have been successful in forging a meaningful connection between the UCLA archive and the local Filipino American community. I judge this in part by the rapid and enthusiastic responses I received to my interview requests, as well as by the largely positive assessment of the partnership and its outcome. KNL director Joel Jacinto indicates that the project raised awareness within the community about the “need and opportunity” to formally document cultural work, and to view it as a positive and useful practice. Documentation is of value to the Filipino American community, he argues, to the extent that it serves community interests in “research and education,” artistic development, and the generation of “cultural prosperity.” And with the equipment purchased for the project, KNL plans to assist artists with such documentation efforts:

We did a really good job; it was a very good project. Because we received the equipment [from AFAMILA]... we're going to continue. We've encouraged Philippine dance groups who get technical assistance from our group to document our sessions with them, so that they are documenting learning. And again it's not archival for the sake of the 'pure research,' but it's for application, it's for knowledge building, it's for resource sharing. So there's a much more practical use that we are trying to encourage when you

document. (Jacinto interview)

AFAMILA, then, has served the interests of both the academy and the community—enabling the UCLA archive to expand its collection while providing the community with the resources it needs to document for “knowledge building” and “resource sharing.”

Community partnerships, like all archiving projects, are not without their challenges. While archives remain committed to the long-term preservation and dissemination of their collections, the scope of the work is often limited by financial and institutional constraints. And community organizations, in attempting to balance a range of local needs and interests, may find little incentive for ongoing engagement with academic archives. In addition, competition among community groups for access to university resources may exacerbate conflict within a community over claims to cultural authority. Nonetheless, the positive connections resulting from collaboration have the potential to endure far beyond the politics of the moment. Recent advances in digital preservation and dissemination may increase the possibility of such beneficial long-term relationships.

While the UCLA archive, as a physical space, has been of limited use to the Filipino American community, the participants with whom I spoke all agreed that an online interface would increase the community’s access to, and use of, the AFAMILA collection. The expansion of collaborative archiving into the online environment is, as Jacinto suggests, a natural and necessary development that further narrows the power differential between the academy and community by democratizing knowledge and de-privileging academic space. While collaborative archiving builds bridges between the university and community on the physical level through “cross-boundary travel,” the online environment creates a more democratic “virtual space,” in which “information, knowledge, and resources” are equally accessible (Jacinto interview). Such an environment would give the community a greater sense of ownership and “encourage wider participation” in formal and informal documentation work. The archive’s online presence, he suggests, would allow the community to become “active stakeholders” in the documentation process and would facilitate the ongoing relationships and engagement with the archive necessary for sustainable, growth-oriented collaborative projects (Ibid.). Thus we see in the online extension of collaborative archiving, an inversion of the modernist discourse of technology. Rather than being a force of domination and resource extraction, it is reconceptualized as a democratizing force and a means of knowledge building and resource sharing.

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Conclusion

In his analysis of Derrida’s Archive Fever, Verne Harris writes that archiving is “an open-ended process of remembering, forgetting, and imagining” (2002:75). The archive, he suggests, is not an exact reflection of reality; rather, it is the product of an “imaginative” or interpretive act. In other words, archiving is an act of selective remembering and forgetting, which can also be viewed as an exercise of power (e.g. Stoler 2002:87, 89). The power to interpret and represent reality, however, does not reside solely in the collector; it is exercised from multiple positions. As Erika Brady (1999) suggests in her study of the phonograph, archiving has historically involved complex negotiations between collectors and performers, as well as the institutions and communities they represent. Furthermore, she argues, the “meanings and uses” of archival objects can change significantly over time (Brady 1999:123). The archive, then, is best viewed not as a “found world” (Titon 1995:290), but as a potential world, constantly made and re-made, interpreted and re-interpreted, shaped by processes of contestation and collaboration.

Notes

1. I presented an earlier version of this paper, “Archiving Filipino American Music in Los Angeles (AFAMILA): A Case Study of Collaborative Archiving,” at the UCLA Ethnomusicology Graduate Students Organization Fourth Annual Spring Conference, April 10, 2005, Los Angeles.

2. See especially Seeger 2001; Stoler 2002. This literature was brought to my attention by John Vallier (2004) in a conference paper entitled “Ethnomusicology Archives in the 21st Century: Ennui or Fever” presented at the annual meeting of The Society for Ethnomusicology, Tucson, Arizona.

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