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9. Documenting the Haitian Diaspora: Fringe and Fugitive Voices

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The Special Collections Department at the University of Miami Libraries serves as the repository for over five hundred manuscript and archival collections. A number of the collections are regionally based with an emphasis on Florida, Latin America, and the Caribbean. As articulated in our collection development plan, we continue to expand our holdings in these areas in support of university curriculum, student and faculty research, and as a documentation strategy that seeks to reflect the cultural contributions inherent to the region. South Florida is home to the largest population of Haitian immigrants in the United States.

Our most recent outreach efforts have focused on documenting the Haitian diaspora whose cultural traces were noticeably absent from our archival collections in spite of a significant presence as a South Florida immigrant group. The 2009 U.S. census report on populations with Haitian ancestry revealed that two-thirds lived in two states: Florida and New York, with 376,000 and 191,000, respectively (Buchanan, Albert, and Beaulieu 2010, 1). Already in 2005, a Brookings Institution report states that Haitian immigrants in South Florida represented the largest non-English-speaking ethnic group after Hispanics. In addition, ten years ago, Haitians residing in Miami had already been identified as the second largest immigrant group after Cubans (Sohmer et al. 2005).

Signs and instructions from government agencies in South Florida frequently display messages in English, Spanish, and Creole (Creole and French are the two official languages of the Republic of Haiti). Nevertheless, the history of this community was conspicuously absent in archives in spite of the steady stream of American journalistic coverage on the thirty-year dictatorship, the ensuing struggles to establish democratically based governance, and the resulting immigration to the United States. From the 1980s onward, news reports alternated between “boat people” landing on Florida shores and the Haitian political crisis. The same 2005 Brookings Institution report on the growing Haitian community in Miami-Dade explains that in addition to the standard legal and economic issues related to immigration, this portion of the
population faced some specific challenges, which could help explain its fragmentary presence within South Florida institutional archives:

Unlike many Hispanic immigrants, who benefited from the enclave economy and political networks established by earlier cohorts of middle-class refugees—Haitian immigrants entered South Florida as unwanted immigrants, black minorities, and members of an ethnolinguistic group that was isolated from both the English-speaking and Spanish-speaking community. (Sohmer et al. 2005, 2)

The research thus suggested that any collecting activities within the Haitian community would occur in a context of marginalization and advocacy for human rights.

The erasure from archival memory was not complete. As exemplified by the Michael L. Carlebach Photography Collection—now curated by the University of Miami Special Collections—there had been meaningful attempts to provide visibility from other sectors of society that focus on the retrieval and dissemination of information. The University of Miami Libraries was fortunate to acquire Professor Carlebach’s complete archives, which included a series on immigrants and the incarceration of Haitian children classified as “unaccompanied minors” within the Krome Detention Center in Miami, Florida (Carlebach 1982).

In addition to standard journalistic reporting, the Haitian community was made visible through the literature produced by activists groups. While many of the members of the new Miami immigrant community were forced to function in the undocumented margins of the larger society, their presence and stories were reified through the literature of local activists groups. The nature of the advocacy work is reflected in the ephemeral and fugitive nature of the literature itself depicting sound bites such as “Equal Treatment for Haitians” bumper stickers. Other examples of ephemeral documents, such as petition cards to President Bush from the American dancer Katherine Dunham, who fasted in support of immigrant detainees, articulate not only ideological positions on the plight of a particular group, but are also indicative of the larger societal and world issues pertaining to the migration of people across national borders and their inherent human rights. Furthermore, the materials carrying these ideas testify to the discourse of advocacy, and they are also indicative of the type of evidence that is in danger of disappearing because of its ephemeral nature. These groups were comprised not only of established activist organizations in the United States, but also of a growing number of proactive Haitian Americans and new immigrants living in the states.

Since 2009, Special Collections’ outreach activities have concentrated on the archives of community activists such as the Haitian Women of Miami, who are explicitly focused on the social, economic, and political interests of the diaspora.
Marleine Bastien, founder and executive director of Haitian Women of Miami, explains that she “decided to develop an organization that would advocate for the rights of women refugees and their families, and facilitate their adjustment to life in South Florida” (Miles and Charles 2004). Ms. Bastien touches upon the need to provide “social, political and economic empowerment” and identifies a period of transition from the activism of exiles preoccupied with the politics of the home country to advocacy for a new “self-defined group of immigrants” and their human rights.

As an archivist and Haitian American, I was able to establish points of contact in the community and explain the importance of providing documentary evidence of the Haitian diaspora’s presence and contributions to the history of the region. These activities involved introductions by community members; conversations with faculty who research and teach on Haitian issues; and finally, public events such as “Archiving the Fringe,” where Haitian American activist Max Rameau was invited to speak on the issues of social marginalization, gentrification, homelessness, and the current mortgage crisis. These topics were pertinent to Haitians as well as the larger South Florida community. Mr. Rameau’s papers and speech address this shift in the Haitian diaspora vis-à-vis “native” groups. Haitian immigrants, as a growing middle class, were no longer “fringe.” The “Take Back the Land” movement, as articulated in the Rameau papers, is a national and global social phenomenon. The documents from the collection address the problems of land tenure and gentrification within the Haitian community, the larger African diaspora in Liberty City, Florida, and around the globe. Mr. Rameau’s statements during the “Archiving the Fringe” event took issue with institutional classifications of “fringe elements,” especially within dialogic frameworks of civil society (Rameau 2011).

Establishing these collections to meet the growing teaching and research needs of the university as well as the general public was a great opportunity to bring forth undocumented instances of immigrant history in South Florida. Nevertheless, the very nature of the enterprise presented some obvious barriers. How does one find evidence of a people forced to function outside of institutional frameworks? How does one work to capture the fugitive literature generated within conditions of social and economic insecurity? Our collection methodology involved making initial contact with community leaders to explain the collection development project and its relevance to the community at large. These initial meetings so far have resulted in (a) donations of collections, (b) referrals to other collections, and (c) donors who are now advocates of the archives.

The circle of connections was further expanded and enriched through collaborative work with university groups such as the Haiti Research Group from the University of Miami Center for Latin American Studies and thematic class presentations on the use of primary source materials. The combination of
public events, outreach visits, and class presentations provided momentum and more visibility to the documentation project and led to new mediums of documentation that would connect with student research. In spring 2011, Special Collections hired Kevin Mason, a graduate student in musicology, to conduct oral histories.

The addition of oral histories enhances collection development in several ways. Oral history fills content gaps, provides a trace for the intangible aspects of orality within the culture, and opens the door for additional contacts and future archives from interviewees. Furthermore, the University of Miami Libraries 2010–2012 strategic plan for its Special Collections states the intent to “develop the Libraries oral history program to provide services and preservation of oral histories from the surrounding communities, the Caribbean and Latin America (Action Item, 2.2).” Finally, within the archival documentary initiative, projects like oral histories provide a space for the expression of free speech and creative performance. In the case of people whose freedom of expression was curtailed by dictatorial regimes, oral history is an opportunity for direct testimony of a lived experience.

In conclusion, our collecting activities at the University of Miami Special Collections have captured primary source materials and established archives that provide evidence of the social, economic, and political life of Haitian immigrants in the United States and in South Florida in particular. This documentation project was accomplished by focusing on the archives of Haitian activists, collecting ephemeral and fugitive literature, and by starting an oral history project on art and activism, which also met the research needs of graduate students.

NOTES

1. The photography collection is available at http://merrick.library.miami.edu/u/?asm0530 and http://scholar.library.miami.edu/miamiCivilRights/.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


