

History in Focus

4. The Blackivists

Wednesday, May 4, 2022

Pair with June 2022 Issue of the AHR

“Your Love” by Frankie Knuckles builds in volume, then fades into the background as Daniel speaks.

Daniel Story (0:20)

I'm Daniel Story. This is *History in Focus*. And you're listening to the sweet sounds of Frankie Knuckles, a foundational figure in the emergence of house music in Chicago in the early 1980s. That early house music scene is just one aspect of Chicago's Black cultural heritage that a group called the Blackivists are working to preserve. The Blackivists are a collective of trained Black archivists, hailing from a variety of Chicago institutions, who have come together to lend their expertise and support to individuals and groups in the Chicago community interested in preserving the city's Black history and memory. The Blackivists teamed up with UT Austin historian Ashley Farmer to produce an in-depth look at their work and their vision for a reparative approach to archives and archiving. Their piece, "Toward an Archival Reckoning," appears in the History Lab section of the June 2022 issue of the AHR. That piece also serves as the kickoff for a longer arc of projects for the lab over the next few issues that pursue the theme of "engaged history." We'll get to my conversation with Ashley in just a moment. But to set the scene for this broader series, I checked in with one of its architects, University of Chicago political scientist and AHR collaborator, Adom Getachew.

Adom, thanks very much for speaking with me. As a former resident of Chicago myself, I feel obliged to ask you about the weather. Does it yet feel like spring in Chicago?

Adom Getachew (2:02)

The answer is not really. It is in the 50s and kind of gray out here. So, not sunny and warm as I imagine it is in California.

Daniel Story (2:13)

I'm sorry to hear that and I'm sorry I brought it up.

Adom laughs.

You've been working to bring together an arc of projects for the AHR History Lab, an arc we're referring to as "Engaged History." And I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about that group of projects, maybe starting with what we mean by "engaged history."

Adom Getachew (2:36)

So this project came together in the fall of 2020, after a, kind of, summer of protests, of mobilizations, spurred primarily by the murder of George Floyd and police killings of many other African Americans.

A protest is heard in the background, punctuated by chants.

Newscaster (2:53)

Tonight, in city after city, calls for justice continue to fill the streets.

Adom Getachew (2:58)

It felt to us that there was also a kind of growing crescendo of debates about the uses and representations of history. In these protests, you will remember that, kind of, canonic monuments became one site of mobilization and resistance.

Newscaster 2 (3:16)

A towering crane today, plucking Confederate General Robert E. Lee's statue from its pedestal in downtown Charlottesville.

A construction crane operates, while a crowd is heard cheering.

The monument many Americans believe glorify slavery and white supremacy, hauled off to cheers and applause.

Adom Getachew (3:32)

And that was happening in the United States, but also happening across the world. So, for us, in various ways, we wanted to think about how academic historians in collaboration with community activists, with curators, with artists, kind of think about the uses and mobilizations of history in public debate, in politics, and protests. And that's largely what we mean by "engaged history." It's an invitation, really, to the historical profession, to participate in a kind of debate that's already happening about how history is represented and mobilized for a variety of political, aesthetic, and cultural ends.

Daniel Story (4:21)

So, kicking this off in the June issue, is a feature on the Blackivists, a collective of Black archivists working with Chicago communities to preserve Black cultural heritage, as well as challenge the inequality of archival structures, labor access. How did this specific collaboration with the lab come about?

Adom Getachew (4:42)

Yeah, so one of the first things I did was convene a group of historians broadly under the rubric of confronting the present past: monuments, museums, and reparations. And we were trying to think about, you know, historians working on a wider array of geographic areas, time periods. So, we had scholars who work on African American history like Ashley, who work on East Asian history, who work in Eastern Europe, on Indigenous Studies, so really a wide array of historians, and asked them basically to think about what kinds of emblematic or exemplary projects really stick out to them under this rubric of thinking about engaged history. The Blackivists, to us, were a really exciting project, and we're grateful to Ashley for having suggested them as our kind of kickoff project, because it's an opportunity, I think, to think about the archive, which is this, you know, of course rarefied object for academics as, as a different kind of formation. As a collaborative formation, as a, as a community formation. And to think about, also, to model, I guess, different ways of engaging archives and thinking about archival practice. So we were really excited about the kind of community-based character of the project. We were also excited about Chicago as the site. I think this is a city where there's so many really interesting projects happening at the, at this intersection of kind of engaged history. So we're really glad to have kicked off with this particular project.

Daniel Story (6:53)

Ashley, you're a historian of Black women's history, intellectual history, radical politics. For this History Lab piece, you're zeroing in on archival practice in a way, quite frankly, that historians don't often do. And I wonder what led you to engage in this way, in a broader sense around archives, and particularly with the work of the Blackivists.

Ashley Farmer (7:17)

Yes, so, um, throughout the course of my work, I've really been thinking about what it means to find Black people in the archive, but also to be a Black person entering into the archive. And this has come to mind, particularly as I study Black woman intellectuals who are often, you know, left out of the archive or hard to find. And also my experiences trying to search for them and going in what we consider to kind of be "the archive" or, kind of, formal archival spaces. And I talked about some of this in an article called "Archiving while Black," where I talked

about, you know, the struggles I find sometimes with people being familiar with the kind of research that I do, and kind of the treatment of me as a Black person and as a woman as I enter into the actual kind of architecture of the archive, and how that's perceived, and how I interact with those in the archival profession. So I've been thinking about those ideas for a while. And then in the process of that, and also in the process of the 2020 uprisings, I became made aware of the Blackivists as a group that was thinking about "how do we ethically document Black people's lives in the present?" The more I learned about their work, about their ethics behind using their professional affiliations and training to properly restore and kind of think about community archiving, the more I wanted to learn about them. So I reached out to ask them if they'd be interested in sharing more about how the collective came together and what kinds of work the collective does, because I think, far too often, the conversations being had with the two stakeholders, between archivists and historians, is separate conversations. And then we almost always exclude race from those conversations altogether. The actual print feature has three parts. It has an interview between me and the Blackivists, which is a collective of Black archivists who work in various archival ways; some, you know, within public universities, some within private universities, some with more kind of foundational settings, but all trained in the archival profession. So, they talk to me about, you know, what it means to be a Black person doing archival work, how they got into it, and what the Blackivist Collective does. We also have a piece that talks about their work in action, which is a case study that they did between a group that is located in Chicago named Honey Pot Performance and how they worked with that community group to make sure that their archives were ethically collected, and how they did that. And then finally, we kind of talked about what it meant to move forward with an ethic of repair. What would it be like to repair the relationships that we know have been severed between archivists and historians? Some of the repair that takes place when we chronicle these kinds of communities as historians and maybe aren't as ethical as we should be in, in terms of preserving their artifacts. And also what does it mean to treat archivists themselves with an ethic of care? So, the final piece is kind of a call to action, for historians looking to, you know, move a little bit further in, in engaging in the archival profession and thinking about how we can support them,

Daniel Story (10:23)

And you were actually able to catch up with one of them, Stacie Williams, to talk a little more about some of the issues and initiatives that show up in the piece.

Ashley Farmer (10:42)

Okay, hey girl, first of all.

Ashley and Stacie laugh.

Stacie Williams (10:46)

Happy Monday!

Ashley Farmer (10:47)

Happy Monday! Thanks for doing this in the midst of what I know is a long day. Well, maybe you could start by introducing yourself, and then telling us how the Blackivists collective came together.

Stacie Williams (11:00)

Hi, my name is Stacie Williams, and I'm the Division Chief for Archives and Special Collections at the Chicago Public Library and a member of the Blackivists collective. The group got started, I'd say, unofficially, 2018 was when we had kind of our first get-together, an unofficial get-together. And then by 2018 in the fall, we had started doing events together in a volunteer way. And by 2019, we had said, "This could be a thing," a thing by which we meant, you know, we could be helping people figure out their archiving questions or their community archiving questions. And let's do it in an organized and collective way.

Ashley Farmer (11:42)

Can you tell us just maybe really briefly what, kind of the scope of activities of the Blackivists? Just for those who are being introduced to it for the first time,

Stacie Williams (11:51)

So we are a collective of professionally-trained black archivists in the Chicagoland area. So, of some of the things that we have done for folks, our work started really early on, it would be volunteer projects, we might go out on site and one project, for instance, that was the HoneyPot Performance project. We were helping with the digitization project. And the organization had gotten all of the tech on their own. They had scanners, they had laptops, and they, they had all of the support and infrastructure. And we were really just there helping out with best practices around scanning and making sure the quality control was, was there and, like, getting the naming conventions straight for, for the folks. But then that branched out. So we worked on projects around creating like an archival processing plan for folks who are looking to pull together their materials. We pull together digital infrastructure projects, we've consulted on issues around metadata, people will ask us a lot to help them out with things around reparative metadata, or reparative description in archival processing and cataloging. We've also done, you know, maybe smaller community workshops for nonprofits specifically, or

organizations specifically, that are focused around preserving Black history locally in Chicago. So that kind of advice or consultation or thought work can touch on a number of different areas in practice.

Daniel Story (13:23)

One of the key projects that illustrates the look of this work, and the project highlighted in the lab piece itself, is The Blackivists' collaboration with a Chicago group called Honey Pot Performance around that group's work to preserve the memory of the early house music scene in Chicago. And I wondered, for starters, for those of us who might be less familiar with it, what is house music's connection to Chicago?

Ashley Farmer (13:51)

Yes, so house music came about in Chicago as disco was kind of on its way out in the late 70s and early 80s. And there's different origin stories as to where house music originated. If it was Chicago, if it was New York, and even where in Chicago it originated. But there's a couple of clear connections. First is that DJs were trying to think about making a new sound that took some of the old sounds of disco and pairing them with the new sounds coming out from the underground of the 1980s.

Sounds of a club playing house music can be heard in the background.

Newscaster 3 (14:23)

So-called "house music" was first made in the creator's houses, but it was also performed at clubs called the Warehouse and Power House.

Ashley Farmer (14:31)

And that one of the places they did this was at a club called the Warehouse, hence the term "house music."

Newscaster 3 (14:36)

However it got its name, it's one of the hottest things going.

Ashley Farmer (14:39)

Depending on who you talk to, they pinpoint the origins in Chicago and different places.

A house music beat reverberates through a club, as a snippet of an interview begins to play.

Interviewee (14:44)

You know, house music is a new trend in Chicago. It, you know, it sort of reminds me of the Motown era. You know, a small record label, you know, a small sound coming from one particular place and evolving into, you know, into the United States.

Interviewer (14:59)

How hot is house music now?

Interviewee 2 (15:02)

On a scale of 1 to 10? It's twelve.

Ashley Farmer (15:07)

What is clear is that the House sound emanates from Chicago, that it emanates from Black, Brown, and Queer communities. And then it really does combine elements of disco but also R&B, jazz, hip-hop, in an effort to kind of preserve and extend Black culture and Black musical traditions.

One of the things that we feature in the print part of the project is the Blackivists' work with Honey Pot. Can you just tell me maybe a little bit about, you know, why this project was important for the Blackivists to do and how you think, you know, maybe it showed the Blackivists' ideals or kind of core values in the process of working together?

Stacie Williams (15:46)

So Honey Pot Performance, that is a group of individuals here locally and we've become connected through one of our Blackivists members, Skyla Hearn. She's been working with the group on—essentially it is a digital humanities project, wherein the members were creating a social map and they would digitize materials. And those materials documented the—the growth and development and movement of house music across the city. House music, pure, pure Chicago art form like many other art forms, but house music is Chicago-based, so I think there was, there was just a really immediate connection with the source material on our part where like, I would say, we all love house music and there are, there's some definite house heads in the Collective. So I think that the idea of being able to work with an organization that was documenting this, you know, this, this thing that we loved, and that we all felt like we had taken part in in these really immediate and tangible ways. Like, you could, you could remember straight up going to Funky Buddha Lounge, you know, or Green Dolphin Street, and it's like for house music night.

Frankie Knuckles' "The Whistle Song" plays briefly with house club sounds in the background.

So, helping them felt like a very sort of immediate connection to the culture. But then it was also the fact that house music as an art form, you're really documenting the—also migration and movement of queer Black and Brown youth, across the city of Chicago. House music started on the—started on the South Side in actual, like, people's homes, you'd have a party at an apartment, and it moved into actual spaces. And you had the juice bar vibe, and so folks were in there, but they weren't selling liquor at the house music parties. Then it became, you know, this much bigger, bigger thing. And it kind of kept moving up north, which also made sense, because you had a community of visibly established queer folks. It's not to say that there weren't established communities of queer folks, queer Black and Brown folks on the south and west sides of town. But to the extent that, like, the neighborhoods up north, there were—there was infrastructure up there around that kind of social life. So house music just—it kept moving. So when you're looking at the map through the lens of the Honey Pot Performance organization, it's that it's really documenting on these two different levels. It's the music, yes, and how that develops, and house became this big international, you know, mainstream art form, but you're also documenting the lives of young, queer Black and Brown youth in the city of Chicago.

Ashley Farmer (18:33)

So one of the things that I loved about learning about your work with Honey Pot are, like, the ways in which you just really came and introduced yourselves to the community, sat down, and got to work. You rolled up your sleeves and said, you know, "We're here. We're trying to help document these things. But we also want to make sure that you have your archive for yourself." So maybe can you share with us a little bit what it was like to actually go to the performances and what you were actually doing, you know, as you met community members?

Sounds from a Honey Pot Performance house music event play in the background.

Stacie Williams (19:01)

Yeah. So on our end, the very first events that we showed up at, it was, it was set up like a full day of workshops. And I think what was really impressive to us on our end was that Honey Pot Performances organizes—they had set up the whole day, but it was, like, they had provided food, they had—I think they were really, really intentional about how they built those workshops and the people who they invited to come and, like, take part in the event and talk about the history of house music. Here in the city of Chicago, it was like they, they really did pick people who were like there at Ground Zero: the moment of conception and creation. So it

was, it was that it was this very intentionally-designed event that really sought to bring people in. So I think we, we felt like we wanted to be a part of that or it aligned with how we, you know, saw ourselves as being able to do the work. But the other thing that we also thought was really great in terms of the framework they'd used to approach the project was that they said everyone could keep their, their original files. And I think that was just a piece that they had, that it felt very much in alignment with maybe more recent theories around archival collection, or acquisition more specifically, like the post-custodial models. So, so saying that it's not just about a repository coming in and taking the stuff. And you know, "Thanks. We'll see you later. And we'll put it up online." But really saying, "We're here to just help make this available in an additional way. The material is still your material and you bet, and we're here to help make sure that you can do that. But we're not trying to take anything. This is your story. This is your community's story." And we just want to make sure that we're, that we're helping, basically. So I think that being their practice also being in alignment with how we saw ourselves trying to do the work, or trying to talk about the work in our own institutions, it just seemed like a really great—it was, it was just like a really great partnership. But I'll say that very first day, we sat there for many hours before anyone came to us with things to digitize. HoneyPot had tech set up for folks who wanted to digitize cassettes, with the—you could digitize VHS tapes, like, HoneyPot had serious digitization equipment for that event. And we were there for many hours. And about 30 minutes before the very end of that first event, a gentleman came with, like, there was, there were a number of flyers, maybe like 60 or 70. So, Steven [Booth] and myself, we've worked on digitization—of members in the collective, he and I have worked on a lot of digitization projects together. So, so yeah, we worked, we worked with that particular guy that very first time, that was the first one. And then what happened at the subsequent events was that, what we realized about the workflow was that people would see us but maybe not engage with us until way late at the end. And then we'd always find out that they were like, "Oh, I could have brought my stuff." But they didn't—they didn't know early on. So the organizers switched around the programming and put us in the middle of the workshop for us to be able to talk to the folks about archiving. So then at the subsequent session, more people came with their actual materials. And it felt very intentional, was that they heard it, they saw the messaging and had listened to it, to be able to talk during the middle of the events before. And then they started bringing more material later.

Honey Pot event sounds rise and then fade out.

Ashley Farmer (22:38)

So I love this process. And this is, like, as someone that, you know, teaches about Black communities and organizing, this is the way I wish things went down.

Stacie chuckles.

But unfortunately, the archives that I look at are rarely collected in such a fashion. So I wanted to just ask you about what you feel the Collective's relationship is to the historical profession? And, like, what are the challenges and possibilities here? Because the process you're describing is not at all, right, the process that many of us who do history find our way to collected materials.

Stacie Williams (23:14)

I think that's a really great question. So there's the very, like, concrete way. We do this work so that we can catalog the materials we have, so that users, some of whom happen to be historians, can come in and use the materials and then do whatever they're going to do with them. So on the one hand, there is that, like, concrete thing: we're processing collections and teaching other people how to process collections, so that it can be described and can be known. You know, I think some of the work that we also hope to do, or a way that connects with the historical professions is, is it's almost an interventional point. So we hope that with this work, we are providing maybe a point of intervention or a point of reparation, where we could say, "Okay, here's potentially an idea or a model or a way that we can get this work done, maybe in a more collective or collaborative way."

I think with regards to historical professions and how they work in academia, it's, it's the idea around, "Okay, I have, I have an idea or there's a research question I'd love to answer. Here's the collection that might help me answer this research question." But what if instead of, you know, a granting agency looking at a hundred separate applications from folks at a given institution who are trying to answer a given research question using a collection—what about looking at the state of collections that are being asked for in general? And maybe look to fund that work outside of funding the research question, because then when you have the content work taken care of, researchers can do whatever they need to do ideally. Then it's there for them. And, and yeah, we've, we've created access to things that did not have access before. And I think especially on our end, yeah, thinking through what it means to try to think through having reparative relationships with communities. You know, does a research project or has a research project in the past really responsibly engaged those, those non-academic or non-affiliated communities in ways that are actually meaningful, and that give back to them? You know, can we think about how we're describing things, can we think about how we are relating to folks, and ultimately, what we are asking them to do, or asking of them. You know, you may have collections come into an institution that were, you know, it was like, in part

facilitated maybe by a—by a researcher's interest or faculty person's interest. But the idea that, you know, I think or, or I hope, what we are really working to do, is provide different examples and different frameworks of how we can basically just help save and help preserve the aspects of our, of our history, our shared history that are really important. We say, you know, that we're focused on collecting and preserving Black—well, not even collecting. We're focused on preserving Black Chicago history. So we do that in a number of ways. You know, Black Chicago history is—that's Chicago history, that's American history. So that's our focus, but it's simply because we recognize it as a corrective to areas or repositories in which that wasn't a focus, that wasn't a topic, it might have been under resourced, et cetera.

Ashley Farmer (27:01)

One of the things that I really liked about the, the print piece is that, a lot of times we as historians know that we have a lot of problems with collections, we know we have a complicated relationship with those who actually do the labor of collecting. But sometimes, we're not always in conversation about what we can do differently going forward. So that kind of call to action that we included, really gives people concrete steps for thinking about, you know, how to be purposeful in what we're using and how we're using it, but also how we treat the people that do that labor of collecting and fund, right—

Ashley and Stacie chuckle.

—that labor of collecting, as you mentioned, so I hope that people will, will take a look at that. As just a final question. What's next for the collective? What new and exciting things would you like to share with us that maybe folks that are listening will, you know, be interested in supporting or following along with?

Stacie Williams (27:57)

Well, yeah, so next for the collective: we are currently in the middle of administering a Mellon Foundation grant, which we received in 2021, or officially—it was like it officially came through in 2020. But—so, a three-year grant, which we received...the grant was titled "The Diamond in the Back." Diamond—the "Diamond in the Back" project, which we really thought about, really excited about, so the idea that, you know, we're just doing what we had been doing, which was taking some of the information that was in our head, that we use in our professional day-to-day, and help individuals and organizations figure out how they can preserve their own collections and their own stories. So with "Diamond in the Back," we—we chose the title because we also felt like, very, it's very Chicago, yes, absolutely. We wanted to, we wanted a title that kind of fit the ethos. But, but also pointing to this idea that our, our stories, our black

history story, our narratives, those have been, like, the "diamond in the back." It's, it's, it's the thing that you maybe didn't even know was there. And it truly is so precious and it truly is so valuable. And they are so at this point, unfortunately, because they are not necessarily in abundance across cultural heritage repositories, which is also something we're hoping to change simply by making more of this information available. More people know how they can preserve their materials, how they can work together to, to preserve their material. So with, with the "Diamond in the Back" project, and then one of the things that we're very excited about, is that we created a collective of folks to give some grants to in the hopes that their work also aligns and that they will be able to form kind of cross, you know, see some, some cross-partnerships or cross-collaboration for better resource-sharing. It doesn't seem to make sense to have everybody fighting over this same small-ish pot of, of resources. But if we're putting the right people in conversation with each other, maybe then what they're actually pulling together is something really spectacular and deeply meaningful. So I think this, this idea of moving as a collective, you know, we're going to continue to do that, but through the Diamond in the Back grant, and try to show other folks how they too can put their resources together and come up with a collective way of helping preserve this history.

Daniel Story (30:38)

Ashley, as a historian, I wonder what it is you're taking away from this engagement with the Blackivists?

Ashley Farmer (30:46)

Yes, so one of the things that the Blackivists talk about a lot is archiving with an ethic of care. And I've learned what that means, is that means an ethic of care towards, you know, creating the kind of collection and the materials in carrying them into a formal archival space. That means an ethic of care in terms of how you relate to the communities, if you take the materials from the communities—how they have access to materials. But also in terms of those who actually do the labor of archiving. It's often thought about how we talk about the archive in theory a lot. But we don't talk as much about the actual labor of archiving and the work of archiving. So, one of the things that I think that the Blackivists really made clear across all parts of the print piece is that we need to think about the people and the human aspect of what's involved in archiving. From the relationships that are built, to the ways in which we need to repair ones that have been badly damaged, especially between, perhaps, university archives and those in their surrounding communities. But also how we in the historical profession can really think about how to support those that do the labor of archiving that therefore make our labor possible, differently and repair some of those relationships, kind of, across the profession.

Daniel Story (32:04)

Ashley Farmer, thank you very much for your work on all this and for taking the time to speak with me here.

Ashley Farmer (32:10)

Thank you.

Daniel Story (32:17)

That was Ashley Farmer talking with Stacie Williams about the work of the Blackivists, a collective of Black archivists working in Chicago to preserve the city's Black cultural heritage. Ashley worked with the collective to produce the piece "Toward an Archival Reckoning," which appears in the History Lab section of the June issue of the *AHR*. You can learn more about the Blackivists collective, including about their Mellon-funded project, "Diamond in the Back," at theblackivists.com. That piece also marks the beginning of a series of Lab projects spread across upcoming issues that collect around the theme of "engaged history." I spoke at the start of the episode with one of the architects of that series, Adom Getachew, about how the initiative came together. *History in Focus* is a production of the *American Historical Review*, in partnership with the American Historical Association, and the University Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Episode four was produced by Adom Getachew, Ashley Farmer, and me, Daniel Story. Audio engineering assistance came from Myles Ryder-Alexis. Transcription support was by Syrus Jin.

For more on this and other episodes, visit americanhistoricalreview.org. That's it for now. See you next time.

"Diamond in the Back" by Curtis Mayfield begins to play in the background, growing in volume before fading out.