Of Cassette Tape “Letters” and Basement Refrigerators:
Housing the Archive of the Caribbean Diaspora

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Potluck Thanksgiving Dinner

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Graduate Colloquium Event
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Comparative Literature Seminar Room

In Silencing the Past, Michelle-Rolph Trouillot attests to the “unthinkable history” of the Haitian Revolution, reminding readers that, “In history, power begins at the source” (29). Building from Trouillot’s analysis of the role of archival power in the making and recording of colonial (Francophone) Caribbean history, my colloquium presentation turns to examine the crossing of power and the historical record by means of the archive in the context of the post 1970s Francophone and Hispanic Caribbean and their diasporas. Directing this analysis is my concern for the source of the archive, which is to say the place of the archives of the Caribbean diaspora. By interrogating the place of the diasporic archive, I ask two derivative questions: where do we physically locate the archive; but also what social, cultural or political roles does the archive occupy for the transnational communities of the Caribbean diaspora?

In an attempt to answer these questions, my presentation extends to a comparative close reading of two diasporic Caribbean literary texts, which include: Guadeloupean-born Simone Schwarz-Bart’s play Your Handsome Captain (1987, first English translation published in 1996) and Dominican-born Junot Díaz’s novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao (2007). Of significance here is how the literary texts in question place or house their respective (re)imaginings of the modern archive inside the domestic space of the diasporic Caribbean home.

In Schwartz-Bart’s play, viewers encounter an archive of cassette tape “letters” that Wilnor and his wife have produced while communicating across Haiti and Guadeloupe respectively, while in Díaz’s novel one reads of an archive in the form of four basement refrigerators within which Junior stores the late Oscar’s personal belongings.

My paper presentation argues that the contents of Your Handsome Captain and The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao attest to the domestic archival practices and mediums of the subaltern, diasporic communities of the French and Hispanic Caribbean diaspora. In this manner, Schwarz-Bart and Díaz’s texts acknowledge local forms and functions of archives of the Caribbean diaspora as ones that are imagined, produced, and practiced alongside, between, and within the sociopolitical framework of the modern nation state. In their capacity to exist in these varied positions relative to the nation state, the traveling archives of the Caribbean diaspora destabilize the dichotomy by which modern history is located exclusively within or outside of the nation. The transnational scope of the diasporic Caribbean texts that I analyze (and the literary representations of the domestic, traveling archives of the Caribbean diaspora that these texts depict) therefore contest standing conceptualizations of the archive, which oftentimes presuppose, if not impose, the politics of national independence and sovereignty.