



Notes From the Archive

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Researcher Highlights

Jennifer Tuttle, Raúl Coronado, and John Smith enthusiastically share their researching ventures.

Jennifer S. Tuttle

Reading Archival Absences

I enjoyed two glorious days exploring the Seaver Center's holdings, but what I most hoped to locate was nowhere to be found.

I am in the midst of recovering the life and work of Los Angeles writer, journalist, and screenwriter Dora L. Mitchell (1891-1970), a Black woman who is almost entirely invisible in the historical record. She used myriad appellations and pen names throughout her life and self-concealed through racial passing; at the time of her death, she was going by the name Dolores Michel and identifying herself as white.

In 1914, writing as Dolores L. Michel, she placed two stories in the *Los Angeles Times Illustrated Weekly Magazine*, "Tony's Dilemma" (5 and 6 Sept., p. 11) and "The Patriots and Rose O'Rell" (3 and 4 Oct., p. 9), and it is these items that I fruitlessly sought at the Seaver Center. Archival repositories and personal collections are the only place, I suspect, where copies of these stories may reside. In the early twentieth century, the *Times* magazines were bound separately and were not included when the newspaper was microfilmed in the 1940s. This means they are absent, as well, from online newspaper databases that rely on that microfilm. Beyond the *Weekly*, Mitchell wrote for venues such as Black newspapers, pulp magazines, and silent film, all notoriously ephemeral media. Researching her is an exercise in reading archival absences and making creative use of what remains.



In the process of searching for Mitchell's *Weekly* stories, I excavated the Seaver Center's large pile of other issues from that general time period. I wanted to be able to talk about the *Weekly* as a venue where I know she did publish and to think through what it meant that she placed her work there. "Californian in tone and color; Southwestern in scope and character," the magazine advocated the California boosterism that in the early 20th century still retained much of the settler-colonial, Anglocentric ethos of earlier decades. Because Mitchell's stories cannot currently be read, they embody for me the relative invisibility of African Americans, especially women, in L.A.'s early literary history. In my view, Mitchell's nimble, protean authorship as an L.A.-born Black woman passing for white provocatively undermines the story the *Weekly* sought to tell about Southern California.

I would like ask readers in hopes that someone might have these *Weekly* issues and be willing to share Mitchell's stories with me. Learn more about her in my forthcoming article, "Legacy Profile: Dora Mitchell/Dolores Michel," in *Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers*, 39.2, due out in late 2023. This piece includes a reprint of a story called "The Shadowed Witness" published (writing as Black and under her birth name) in the *California Eagle* newspaper in 1923.



Jennifer S. Tuttle is Dorothy M. Healy Professor of Literature and Health at the University of New England in Maine and director of the Maine Women Writers Collection. She has published three books on Charlotte Perkins Gilman and writes about the U.S. West, archival studies, and health humanities. Her most recent work, a chapter called "Writing the Rails in Edith Eaton's West," appeared in the *Routledge Companion to Gender and the American West*, ed. Susan Bernardin (Routledge, 2022). Her continuing work on Dora Mitchell will be part of her current book in process, with the working title "Unsettled Empire: American Nervousness in California Women's Writing."

Raúl Coronado

Searching for Private 19th-Century Latinx Writing

I've spent the last one and a half years searching for private Latinx writing from the nineteenth century: correspondence between loved ones, diaries, notebooks, commonplace books. Along with this, I've also been tracking what they read: books, newspapers, and other printed documents.

Whether we call them Latinx or Spanish American or something else does not matter to me as much as what they wrote. They've been described as *Californios*, *Tejanos*, *Nuevo Mexicanos*, *hispanos*, Spanish American, Mexican, and the list goes on.

So, focusing on identity is not as interesting to me as why and what they wrote. Turning to their private writing gives us a small window into their thoughts and imagination. How, I've long wondered, can we turn to their private, intimate writing as a way to see how they left traces of their souls? How can we see these fragments of writing as a way to track their dreams, desires, aspirations, frustrations? This is what I'm most interested in. I'm looking for evidence that would allow me to write a history of the Latinx self with all of its complexity and contradictions.

I spent most of this time as the Ritchie Distinguished Fellow in Early American History at the Huntington Library and then as a Guggenheim Memorial Fellow which allowed me to New Mexico. I also conducted research at Loyola Marymount University and at the Seaver Center, and then to Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos in the summer of 2022. I had already done my research on Texas for my first book *A World Not to Come: A History of Latino Writing and Print Culture*.

The Seaver Center is truly a gem. There are more than half a dozen collections of *Californio* family papers comprising more than fourteen linear feet with an additional and just as impressive collection of photographs. The core of the *Californio* collection is that of Antonio F. Coronel. The finding aid alone is 138 pages long!

One could easily write several books using the Coronel collection. He was truly a prolific collector, and the printed material reveals many worlds. Using the newspapers and other printed documents, we can map out the network of circulation throughout the Pacific and Atlantic worlds. We find pamphlets, pedagogical books, histories, religious texts, mostly in Spanish, some in English, others in French, that were printed throughout the Americas, the east coast, and southern Europe. There are stacks of almanacs in pristine condition in English and Spanish. Also here, according

to the finding aid, is the first type brought to California.

One of the items that I found throughout these collections—at the Seaver, LMU, Huntington, and in New Mexico were gorgeous hand-stitched novenas, religious pamphlets designed to assist lay people in their prayers. I was taken aback by how carefully these were handled. They selected gorgeously woven fabric as covers, and adorned them with lace, some had flaps that secured close with a button.

To make sense of this world will require that I—we—see their Catholic religious world not through our own biased lens of living in a secular world. To see so much religiosity might be off putting to the modern reader. We might quickly dismiss them. But the care that went into these precious items demands that we be more patient, that we not be too quick to judge.

And this reminded me of an argument I made in my first book, one that some critics took issue with. I had suggested there that the intellectual world of the nineteenth-century Spanish-Mexican Southwest was profoundly and unequivocally Catholic. When the entire territory became the US Southwest in 1848, the communities did not just experience the shock of conquest. They also would experience the even more jarring effects of the Protestant Reformation, one where the very fabric of their world, their understanding of right and wrong would no longer just be based on Catholic beliefs but on others, some more secular, others more Protestant.

I find myself in the uncanny position of needing to return to the Catholic world. It was one I was born and raised in, a folk Catholic world with many complexities and contradictions. But if I'm going to understand the inner meaning of nineteenth-century Latinx private writing, I will need to become more intimate, more familiar with Catholic ways of understanding the world.

As I learn to feel into the nuances of this world, there is another world I also hope to find more evidence of. And that is of the intimate processes of *mestizaje* and colonization. People on the ground, people in the moment, everyday people don't readily theorize or describe their experiences within larger conceptual frameworks. They live. And so I hope to be able to listen closely and detect the way that religion, gender, class, and race ineluctably shaped their rich, inner and collective lives.



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John P. Smith, Jr.

"Howdy" to Our New Volunteer

I started my association with museums in 1974 when I went to work as a security officer at what is now the Getty Villa, then the Getty Museum. As a security officer I had the opportunity to spend time in all the galleries which was very educational. In 1976, I started studying art history at California State University, Northridge. This was interrupted, but I eventually completed a degree in humanities focusing on art history. I took that degree and my life experiences into a teaching career and taught elementary school for 17 years.

After a few years of retirement, my fiancée suggested that I needed something to do. I took a walk up the hill to the William S. Hart Museum and learned that they had a need for volunteers. I became a tour guide, but we had many other duties including cleaning the museum, educational outreach to schools, and working open houses. I also had the opportunity to come to the Seaver Center to do research going through the boxes of Hart memorabilia. As with all of us, COVID halted my time at the Hart.

I am currently volunteering in the Seaver Center going through a collection of photos from the Mobil Oil Company and entering the information into a database. I have looked at photos of dealer conventions from the 1960s and examples of gas stations including full service stations. The younger readers might not believe this, but back then someone else pumped your

gas, cleaned your windshield, and checked under the hood...brings back memories. I can hardly wait to see what I find next.



John is holding a negative from the Mobil Oil Collection. It shows a view of a gas station island pump display in August, 1964, advertising the sale of a tire for \$29.95



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The collections are a part of the History Department of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County. The Seaver Center opened in 1986 through a generous grant from the Seaver Institute.

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