Archiving at a Crossroads: Cultural Contact and Rapid Change in Los Herederos' *Documenting as Resistance* Collection

by Daltin Danser

Introduction

In fall 2024, as part of the Eugene Lang College's Social Science Fellowship, I interned in the curatorial department at the Museum of the City of New York. One of my responsibilities involved sourcing archival images for the *Urban Stomp: Social Dance in New York City* exhibition. When tasked with locating images of immigrants dancing in the city between 1865 and 1910, finding cheerful representations of immigrant life proved difficult. Archival records from the period depicted immigrants in somber contexts: crowded tenements, grueling labor. Iconic photographers like Jacob Riis even staged such scenes to emphasize hardship and elicit sympathy, a strategy that contributed to late 19th-century urban reform but simultaneously reinforced reductive and paternalistic narratives about immigrants (Yochelson and Czitrom 2014).

About the photo: Los Herederos Executive Director Naomi Sturm-Wijesinghe interviews Mr. John Park of 4 Seasons Uniforms in the Los Herederos Community Space for an episode of *Documenting as Resistance* on LH Radio circa 2024. Photo by Mauricio Bayona. All photos courtesy of the Los Herederos Community Archives.

When dance appeared at all, its presentation often rendered immigrants as unruly or exotic, reinforcing reductive narratives more than offering depictions of cultural life. Since the historical record reflects the biases and inequalities of the time, curators trying to represent more diverse histories must work creatively to recover the under-documented histories of marginalized communities.

The following spring, I began interning with Los Herederos, a much smaller organization based in Jackson Heights, Queens, that explicitly seeks to counter such archival gaps. Dedicated to "inheriting culture in the digital age," Los Herederos (The Inheritors) is a media arts nonprofit founded in 2015 by Queens-based immigrant and lifelong New Yorker media artists and folklorists. The organization fosters community connection and collaboration through public exhibitions, neighborhood programs, community radio, and an online journal—all of which contribute to and draw from their own archive. Los Herederos' creative team builds this archive using a variety of methods, including soundscape recordings, individual oral histories (audio and video), and photography. Rather than serving as a passive storage space for materials no longer in use, the Los Herederos archive is the heart of the organization's programming. Los Herederos doesn't only document cultural life for the sake of the archive—the archive serves the organization's mission of keeping this cultural life alive and valued within the community.

During my internship, I worked closely with *Documenting as Resistance*, a collection within the Los Herederos archive that centers on Diversity Plaza, a public space in Jackson Heights named for its place in a neighborhood described by major news outlets such as the *New York Times* and the BBC as one of the most diverse places on the planet.[1] The collection is composed of interviews, soundscapes, and photographs produced between February 27, 2023, and January 27, 2024, that capture everyday life and oral history in the Plaza and surrounding streets. This area is important for small businesses, cuisine, public gathering, and transit. As materials were recorded, thematic series to organize them took shape: Transportation, Ramadan, People of the Plaza, Businesses, Food Vendors, and a Day in the Life of the Plaza.

Neighborhood resident and member of the Elmhurst Historical Society, James McMenamin, being interviewed for *Documenting as Resistance* in Diversity Plaza. 2023. Photo by Mauricio Bayona.

Documenting as Resistance forms part of a larger, evolving Los Herederos archive but stands out as what the Founding Co-Director Naomi Sturm-Wijesinghe describes as a "gourmet" version of their ongoing archiving practices. A $50,000 Community Collection Grant from the Library of Congress's American Folklife Center enabled this work and ensures that materials will be preserved in the Library. These grants support efforts to document the cultures and traditions of Black, Indigenous, and other historically marginalized communities in the United States.

Reflecting Los Herederos' commitment to making archival documentation accessible and community-centered, part of the process involved hosting public events in Diversity Plaza known as Community Archiving Days. Each event was organized around a theme, such as food or music, and invited community members to engage with the Sonicycle, Los Herederos' mobile DJ booth and recording studio, to share stories, be interviewed, and play music. The Sonicycle helps open up conversations about music and everyday life, creating an interactive, community-led documentation method. Many interviews in the collection were recorded at these community archiving days.

DJ Rekha on the Los Herederos Sonicycle during a Documenting as Resistance Community Archiving Day called "Sounds of the Neighborhood." Mural by Zeehan Wazed mural is pictured in the background. August 2023. Photo by Mauricio Bayona.

While today's digital world has democratized documentation to some extent, with smartphones and social media enabling more people to record and share their stories, flattened, exoticized representation in the depictions of immigrant life in the 19th century continues in the present. Several local commentators have noted that media depictions of Jackson Heights have generally emphasized a few buzzwords like "diversity" and "authentic," while reducing neighborhood life

to the appeal of its cuisine and traditions to outsiders.[2] In this context, Los Herederos' archive offers a grassroots alternative: A collaborative, reflective record shaped by the people who live there. The archive is not meant to serve solely as a record for future researchers or outside observers, but first and foremost as an active resource through which the community can represent itself.

Throughout the collection are moments when the interviewer and interviewee reflect on the significance of this grassroots documentation of the neighborhood. At the end of one interview, Nadia Q. Ahmad, a Bangladeshi American poet from Queens, reflects on the importance of the project, "I appreciate the work that Los Herederos is doing to document these really specific stories, because otherwise we'll all just be stereotypes. We don't want that." Sturm-Wijesinghe, the interviewer, confirms that part of the mission of the archive is to "to tell stories from the roots up, to not be stereotypes, and to show that things are layered." In this way, the archive aims, like other community archives, to counter symbolic annihilation—the erasure or misrepresentation of marginalized communities that reinforce broader social inequalities (Caswell et al. 2017).

By analyzing the testimonies in the archive, the questions asked by Los Herederos, and the language they use to describe the project, this paper explores how *Documenting as Resistance* is conceived as an immediate resource for the community and a lasting record of cultural life. Two major themes run throughout the collection's materials, which I will refer to as Cultures in Contact and Rapid Change. Both themes contribute to how Los Herederos frames the value of documenting Diversity Plaza.

Cultures in Contact pays attention to how various ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups interact and coexist in and around Diversity Plaza. The *Documenting as Resistance* collection includes interviews with people born in, or to parents from, India, Ecuador, Colombia, Tibet, Burma/Myanmar, South Korea, Mexico, Pakistan, and, most prominently, Bangladesh. Interviewees often refer to the diversity of Queens as something they appreciate about where they live. Many interviews mention instances of interaction between different cultural groups, offering a nuanced picture of this shared public space. Kasinitz et al. wrote in *Becoming New Yorkers* (2004) that "…the children of immigrants are creating a new kind of multiculturalism—not of balkanized groups huddled within their own enclaves but of hybrid and fluid exchanges across group boundaries." *Documenting as Resistance* demonstrates instances of this fluid exchange and mutual awareness, not only among the children of immigrants, but among immigrants themselves. It depicts a neighborhood where a cohesive sense of place is formed out of eclectic and distinct cultural elements, a counterpoint to predatory developers' framing of such neighborhoods as lacking unity, or its people as lacking a particular connection to place.

Rapid Change addresses thematically how the collection frames its documentation as urgent in the context of a neighborhood experiencing several processes of transformation. First, as an immigrant neighborhood, it has had several waves of ethnic succession, represented in the archive by long-standing businesses owned by people from ethnic groups no longer predominantly exemplified in local commercial spaces. Second, ongoing gentrification concerns many residents and business owners who hope to remain in the neighborhood. As Sturm-Wijesinghe notes in the interview with Ahmad, "It's a community archiving project where we're thinking: This place is changing very

rapidly. Of course, we want to see Diversity Plaza here for generations to come. But what if it's not?"

In this way, the collection documents for coming generations the sensory experience, traditions, and personal voices of a community whose future is full of uncertainties. However, Los Herederos also sees "documenting community gathering space as an act of resistance against displacement and cultural erasure."[3] While it takes the threat of displacement seriously, the message is not that the neighborhood is doomed to be erased, but that representing the neighborhood in a publicly accessible archive can be a tool for keeping cultural life in place. The collection offers community members—residents, artists, educators, and organizers—a resource to stake a claim on this neighborhood and resist symbolic annihilation and physical displacement. The archive's materials are intended to support the continuation of cultural life against the threat of predatory development. Ultimately, I situate the *Documenting as Resistance* collection within broader debates in community archive theory, considering how locally driven archives like this one open ways of both representing and sustaining the diversity of cultural life in the U.S.


Portrait of Yangchen Yichoe of the Himalaya Qupi Store in Diversity Plaza. 2023 (left). Mr. John Park in his store, 4 Seasons Uniforms, one of the longest standing businesses in Diversity Plaza. 2023 (Right). Photos by Mauricio Bayona.

Methodology

Beginning February 24, 2025, I drafted public-facing labels for the *Documenting as Resistance* archive, which I accessed through a hard drive, along with accompanying metadata shared through Google Sheets. These labels expanded on descriptions originally created for the Library of Congress by adopting a more narrative tone. My goal was to clearly highlight key ideas, avoid technical language, and craft accessible descriptions to engage audiences unfamiliar with archival research and invite them to interact with the collection. This curatorial work required a close reading of 62 "objects," largely audio interviews with transcripts, but also video interviews, soundscapes, photographs, and "visualscapes" (B-roll).

My position as an outsider shaped a dual approach to the collection: writing texts intended for the public and taking notes on archival materials as a researcher interested in the practice of community archiving. I coded recurring themes across interviews, ranging from in-depth, 40-minute conversations with community leaders and business owners to brief, under-four-minute exchanges with food vendors and commuters.

Diversity Plaza is a unique cultural crossroads and a lifeline for underserved cultural groups in what is a rapidly gentrifying neighborhood. It is a place that matters for many different reasons to many different people. Video by Nate Lavey.

I also interviewed Naomi Sturm-Wijesinghe and had multiple informal discussions with Mauricio Bayona, Co-Directors and founders of Los Herederos. These interactions provided valuable insight into the organization's mission, reflective practices, and internal questions, complementing my analysis of grant narratives and archival items. Throughout, I draw from and quote both personal correspondence and grant proposals to understand how Los Herederos frames the purpose of its documentation.

During a visit to Los Herederos' headquarters in the Jackson Heights subway station, I participated in a deep listening exercise—a core method behind *Documenting as Resistance*. For this exercise, Sturm-Wijesinghe handed me the handheld, omnidirectional mic that the Los Herederos team used to record soundscapes for the collection. These soundscapes invite listeners to focus closely on the Plaza's audio environment: conversations in English, Urdu, Spanish, Bengali, and other languages; the rumble of the 7 train; the sound of shopkeepers rolling up steel doors as they open for business. I had previously listened to these recordings, but being in the Plaza as I listened to the audio picked up by the microphone gave me a fuller appreciation of this method and its importance to the creation of *Diversity as Resistance*. Deep listening reflects Los Herederos' commitment to documenting the neighborhood through its sensory textures. By slowing down and focusing on a single sense, the listener gains a more intimate, specific understanding of the Plaza, complementing the collection's oral histories by giving voice to the Plaza itself.

As I went through the collection to draft labels, I took notes on its recurring motifs. Through this coding, I identified the two overarching themes—Cultures in Contact and Rapid Change—which structure my analysis. These themes reflect Los Herederos' intentions for the *Documenting as Resistance* archive to be a community record on everyday intercultural interactions that shape life in Jackson Heights as well as a form of resistance, as the title suggests, to the erasure and

displacement of the small businesses, community organizing, and cultural diversity that characterize the neighborhood.

Literature Review

Los Herederos refers to their archive as a "*community* archive," a term without a singular, universally agreed-upon definition, but widely used in grassroots documentation. As the archivists Mary Stevens, Andrew Flinn, and Elizabeth Shepard note, the term generally refers to collections gathered in collaboration with members of a given community and over which that community exercises some level of control, whether fully autonomous or in partnership with formal institutions (Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd 2009). Likewise, Los Herederos' archive is conceived not simply as a repository for inactive materials, but also as a core part of the organization's mission to help sustain cultural life in Queens. From the outset, an integral aim of the *Documenting as Resistance* project, and the archive as a whole, has been to create a resource that is, in the words of Sturm-Wijesinghe, "functional" for the broader community, including those who may not typically engage with archives. These commitments align Los Herederos' work closely with descriptions of community archives found in the literature, such as Gilliland and Flinn's *Community Archives: What Are We Really Talking About?* (2013, 3).

It is important to note that the *Documenting as Resistance* collection is exclusively digital, a form that has become especially popular among community and postcolonial archives because of its accessibility and flexibility. As Ward and Wisnicki note, digital archives do more than simply preserve material, they offer new ways for communities to interact with memory (Ward and Wisnicki 2019). Los Herederos, through its radio station, public programming, and art exhibitions, encourages the public to reflect on, engage with, and contribute to its documentation. This process is referred to by Los Herederos, and the broader literature, as "activating" the archive (Paalman, Fossati, and Masson 2021). In their interviews with community archivists, Cifor et al. (2018) found that they are "conceptualizing themselves as active agents in, and their community archives as means of, promoting social change and justice to benefit their communities and wider society through history-making activities" (Cifor et al. 2018). This aligns closely with Los Herederos'

The Los Herederos Community Space inside the 74th Street-Roosevelt Ave-Jackson Heights subway station on the lower mezzanine. 2025. Photo by Mauricio Bayona.

description of their archive in one grant proposal as "a powerful and lasting community-owned resource that can be used to advocate for sites such as Diversity Plaza, local businesses/venues, and the work of community groups." Thus, *Documenting as Resistance* must be analyzed as an active agent in the community, not only a repository of information.

Since community archives generally conceive of their work as a potential tool of social advocacy, directly affected by and affecting the community, questions of identity and representation are central. To understand the particularities of Los Herederos' project documenting Diversity Plaza, an exceptionally diverse, rapidly changing, and contested space, works on ethnicity and immigration in community archives are especially relevant. Challenging traditional paradigms of archival neutrality, Kaplan (2000) emphasizes that archives do not simply reflect social reality but also play a critical role in constructing it. Documenting across ethnic communities in Queens means the *Documenting as Resistance* archive exemplifies the "dynamic and relational process" of ethnicity and culture that Daniel calls for archives to represent instead of "naturalizing archival categories" (Daniel 2010, 30). Placing this broader scholarship in conversation with the wealth of local stories represented in this collection demonstrates how Los Herederos creates a functional community archive for a neighborhood that, in terms of language, national origin, and religion, contains multiple communities.

Cultures in Contact

How the Collection Represents Diversity and Intercultural Interaction

When Los Herederos was first being organized by a collective of largely Colombian artists, documentarians, and folklorists in New York City, an early question was whether it would be a Colombian community organization or pursue a more intersectional approach. Ultimately, it was decided that the nonprofit would collaborate with and connect a diverse range of communities and cultural groups, with a mission to sustain the folk cultural life of Queens.

Since the name of the organization, Los Herederos, is Spanish, and they do extensive work with Latin American communities, it is often mistaken as specifically serving Latin Americans. However, during the documentation process for *Documenting as Resistance*, Bayona and Sturm-Wijesinghe noted that this association often proved advantageous when reaching out to the neighborhood's South Asian community, who were frequently interested in building connections with a Latin American organization.

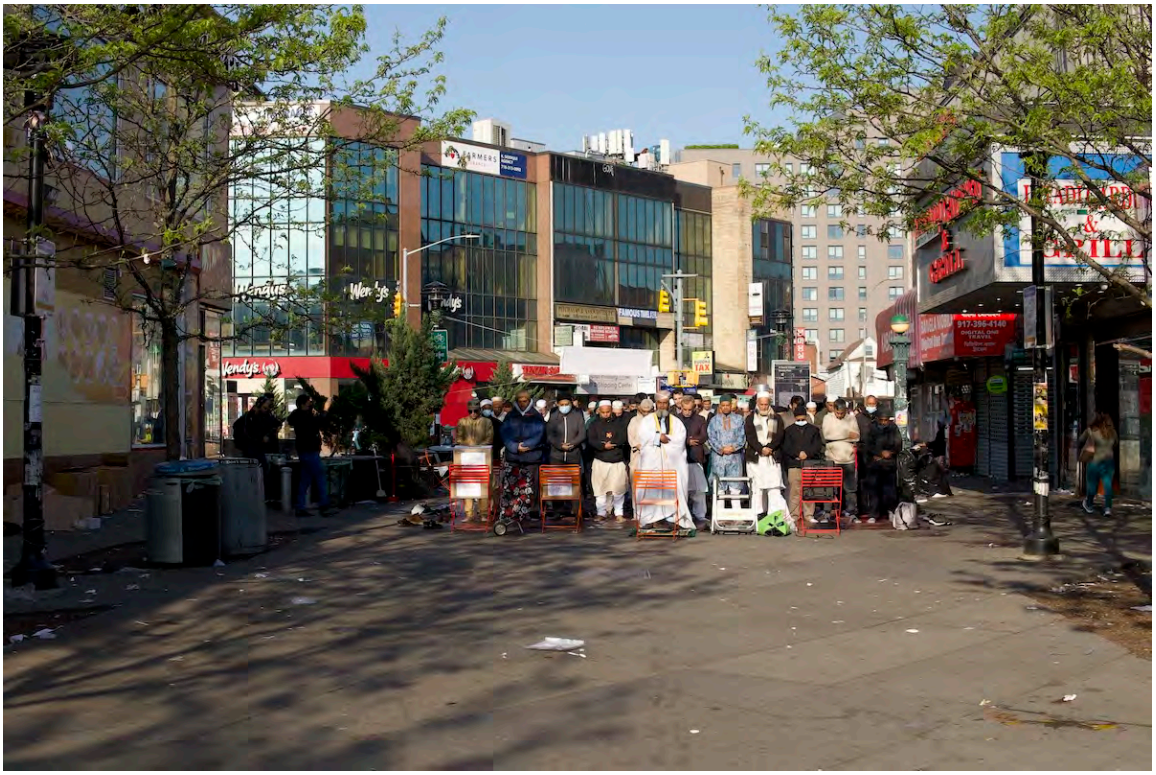
Queens' diversity is often described through the lens of ethnic enclaves, yet these boundaries are increasingly less clear-cut and more intertwined than labels like "Little India" or "Little Colombia" may suggest (McGovern and Frazier 2015). The area around Diversity Plaza, described by Tonnelat and Kornblum (2017, 36) as the place where "Latin America meets South Asia," is an example of close proximity between different ethnic communities in Queens.

The Plaza was originally created in 2011 through the closure of two blocks of 37th Road to prevent traffic congestion. This paved, pedestrian-only space has been regarded by community members as both a site for gathering and community-building and a neglected area that raises concerns about public safety.[4] A major renovation in 2017, which introduced trees, planters, bike racks, and movable furniture, further formalized the space. It was then that it was named Diversity Plaza, a gesture that emphasized its pluralistic potential over affiliation with any particular group (Office

of the Mayor 2017). Writing in 1998, well before Diversity Plaza, Kasinitz et al. (1998, 175) observed, "Despite physical proximity, the different groups in Jackson Heights have little day-to-day interaction.... Members of different ethnic groups are rarely close friends. Yet in a multiethnic neighborhood in a cosmopolitan city it may be more important that groups have the physical, institutional, and cultural spaces in which they can interact and, in so doing, come to constitute a public." *Documenting as Resistance* centers on Diversity Plaza as a site that demonstrates how the neighborhood's different people and communities interact with one another and conceive their shared space.

The sociologist Mike Owen Benediktsson writes that Diversity Plaza "emerged as a space that served a purpose distinct from these demographically specific commercial corridors—a gathering place that is not symbolically dominated by any one social constituency, but rather offers a sort of crossroads, where the neighborhood's diversity is foregrounded and celebrated" (Benediktsson 2022, 83). The Plaza's symbolic potency as a site of cross-cultural interaction is in part because it is one of the few open spaces in a neighborhood where public parks and plazas are scarce. Jackson Heights has only 0.16 acres of open space per 1,000 residents—far below the city's standard of 2.5 acres per 1,000 (New Yorkers for Parks 2023). The Plaza stands out as a central point for protest, prayer, festivities, public health events, and other forms of community organizing.

Selecting Diversity Plaza as the subject of the collection enables *Documenting as Resistance* to capture a range of examples of cultures in contact that may not be as evident in the adjacent ethnic corridors. This makes it an apt site for Los Herederos' intersectional mission as an organization that facilitates inter-community conversations among the various ethnic communities in Queens.



Communal Eid prayer in Diversity Plaza. April 2023. Photo by Mauricio Bayona.

Documenting the neighborhood more than two decades after Kasinitz et al. (1998) observed that different ethnic groups don't often directly interact, Los Herederos' collection captures this ambivalence, but also many examples of cultural exchange and social interaction between members of different immigrant communities. At least one interviewee, Edward Beglane, owner of an Irish pub that has been in the neighborhood for decades and today sits next to a mosque, notes, "There wasn't as much mingling, I guess, among different backgrounds, as there is now. Now it's really, I mean, you just have people from radically different backgrounds who all know each other and are all friends, and it's nice to see that." For Sturm-Wijesinghe, one of the original ideas of *Documenting as Resistance* was "to show how to live with difference at a time when we are struggling with that at a global level." Community archiving, as practiced by Los Herederos, emerged from the social movements of the 1960s and 70s, following a growing call among archivists and historians to make the historic record more inclusive of marginalized voices, particularly from immigrant ethnic communities (Bastian and Alexander 2009). Since then, many community archives have taken up this challenge, often focusing on preserving the histories of specific ethnic groups tied to particular migration narratives or community-building efforts. The archivist Dominique Daniel (2010, 30) writes that "archivists interested in documenting immigrant experiences should not consider ethnicity a fixed sociocultural identifier but a dynamic and relational process [....] Cultural traits are not either preserved or lost; they adapt, evolve, and transform through interaction with the receiving society and other cultures."

Documenting as Resistance draws from the tradition of community archiving rooted in in-group identity, as it represents communities that sustain their own distinct traditions, but it takes cultural contact and coexistence as its primary subject matter rather than any singular ethnic experience. While interviews are primarily in English, there are also interviews in Spanish and Bengali. A longstanding challenge for immigrant archiving lies in the additional resources and time required for translation and multilingual communication, raising persistent questions of access and representation (Daniel 2010, 87). While Spanish and English serve as the organization's working languages, broader linguistic inclusivity required intentional staffing. Additional team members and contractors provided access in Hindi, Bengali, Urdu, Nepali, Tibetan, and Mandarin, while Bahasa Indonesia and Burmese remained on the wish list. Still, in a neighborhood where some languages may only be spoken by a small population, achieving full coverage is ultimately impossible. Some interviewees express themselves in English as a non-native language. In her interview, K Moe, owner of Mo Mo Salon, speaks English as she feels comfortable, while her son translates from or to Burmese for her as necessary. While perhaps some people may have chosen to be interviewed in their mother tongue if given the chance, communicating in a second language or through translation of a family member are not only functional for the interview, but also representative of everyday intercultural communication in Queens.

Throughout interviews, people share a variety of stories about the specific ways they connect with those outside their ethnic background. John Park, a shop owner who immigrated from South Korea in 1980, demonstrates that he knows some Spanish to interact with his Latin American clientele and employees. Reynaldo Carvajal, owner of Gury's Colombian Bakery, says that he offers vegetarian versions of a pork-heavy cuisine to better serve customers with religious dietary restrictions.

Sturm-Wijesinghe often homes in on *who* is shopping at the businesses she documents, with questions such as, "What about the people that work with you here, your employees? Do you have people from different backgrounds in the neighborhood?," and "And what have been some of the reactions of your non-Colombian clients?" This line of questioning about *who* the customers and employees are leads to anecdotes of intercultural adaptation. Across many interviews with business owners and employees, participants express pride in the cross-cultural appeal of their goods. Firooz Ahmed of Merit Kebab Restaurant, for example, remarks, "So many, not even Muslim people, they enjoy this food." Likewise, Yanchie Llamo of Himalaya Qupi Store says, "[I hope] more people are coming to see how Tibetan traditional clothes are." Such reflections portray cross-cultural appeal and interaction not merely as happenstance of demographic diversity, but also as a form of social capital for some community members, particularly business owners seeking to expand their clientele. In this way, businesses emerge as perhaps the most salient sites of intercultural exchange in the neighborhood, shaped by customer-vendor and employee-employer relationships that extend beyond the typically more bounded and internally oriented spaces of religious and familial life.

Another way intercultural learning happens organically around the Plaza is during cultural celebrations, exemplified in the collection by the month of Ramadan and especially Chaand Raat. The archive captures, in photography and soundscapes, prayer in the entirely public space of the Plaza as well as in the Jackson Heights Islamic Center. Access to the intimate space of the Islamic Center was provided by Los Herederos collaborator Saadat Taaseen, who regularly attends prayer at the mosque and can be seen participating in prayer in several of the collection's photos. This more intimate space can be contrasted with the documentation of Chaand Raat, a South Asian celebration marking the eve of Eid al-Fitr, when communities gather in public spaces for shopping, socializing, and applying mehndi (henna) in preparation for the holiday. Los Herederos describes this celebration in a Library of Congress annotation as "one of those special moments when individuals from various backgrounds living in the neighborhood/Queens come together to share cross-culturally and learn about South Asian Muslim traditions." Several people in the archive note that the celebration has grown over the years to become the bustling event it is today.

In some interviews, Sturm-Wijesinghe, who grew up in NYC/Queens and is of Ashkenazi Jewish descent, briefly shares her own identity and experiences. At times, she foregrounds her familiarity with traditions not her own, shaped by growing up in a multicultural environment. For example, when speaking with Marwan Said, a waiter at Merit Kebab Restaurant, he says that non-Muslims also enjoy the food being sold for Ramadan. Sturm-Wijesinghe affirms his point by saying, "That's like me, right? I'm Jewish, but I want to try it, so I'm also trying it out." Likewise, during an interview with Sadia Tasnim, a Bangladeshi henna artist participating in a Chaand Raat celebration in Jackson Heights, Sturm-Wijesinghe notes the similarity in the Muslim and Jewish prohibition on tattoos.

Sturm-Wijesinghe describes a careful, evolving approach to sharing her own identity during ethnographic interviews. While trained in an ethnographic model that discourages inserting oneself too much, she has learned when it may be appropriate to share personal details. She says that, just as inserting yourself too much into an ethnographic interview is inappropriate, withholding all information about yourself, and thus positioning yourself as the cultureless interviewer, can likewise be inappropriate. Casual mention of her Jewishness in interviews with Muslim vendors,

such as relating the similarities between the traditions or underscoring a vendor's point that non-Muslims enjoy his food, positions Sturm-Wijesinghe and the interview itself as a part of the cross-cultural environment being represented to promote general tolerance and understanding between communities. Another Chaand Raat interview in the collection, with Jenna Mirza and Ali Mirza, features a couple who are Jewish American and Pakistani American respectively and who are committed to raising their children with exposure to both their traditions, pairing with Sturm-Wijesinghe's comments in other interviews to represent this interfaith dynamic.

Neighborhood elders seated in Diversity Plaza circa 2023. Photo by Mauricio Bayona.

The South Asian presence is the most prominent in and adjacent to the Plaza, as these few blocks of 74th have, since the mid-70s, become an important commercial hub for the community. Although it has often been referred to as "Little India," the shops and restaurants here try to transcend national identities and form a more unified "Indo-Pak-Bangla" customer base (Khandelwal 1995, 178). Much of the diversity of the Plaza comes from the immense religious and linguistic diversity of the Indian subcontinent. Across several interviews in the collection, participants observe that the area's food and festivals draw South Asians living in nearby areas lacking such a strong presence of their culture. Interviewee Nadia Q. Ahmad notes her own tendency to associate the Plaza primarily with the South Asian community, despite the Latin American populations and others who likewise contribute to the neighborhood's social fabric. For Ahmad, this becomes an open question about the Plaza's future, "We say Diversity Plaza, but are we making sure that it's still fluid?"

The *Documenting as Resistance* collection may be called a boundary object, in the sense first articulated by Star and Griesemer (1999), as it is "both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites.[7] In capturing examples of fluidity, *Documenting as Resistance* not only represents intercultural interaction but also has the potential to facilitate them. It portrays a physical space shared by people of various linguistic, religious, ethnic, and national backgrounds, whose everyday exchanges cannot be reduced to assimilation, self-segregation, or even static notions of multiculturalism. Although Jackson Heights' diversity is sometimes framed as a lack of cohesion, *Documenting as Resistance* illustrates how residents describe diversity as integral to their sense of belonging in the space, or at least as generally unproblematic to their lives.

In her article, "Jackson Heights: Beyond Diversity," co-founder of Queens Pride House Pauline Park critiques common metaphors of diversity. She argues that "the notion of a 'melting pot' is problematic because it is rooted in assimilationism into a white U.S.-born majority," while multiculturalism's "salad bowl" metaphor remains "superficial and static," failing to capture "the dynamics of diversity and the difficult tensions that diversity can pose." In centering the voices of community members, *Documenting as Resistance* provides a representation of Jackson Heights that eschews both these models in favor of something more nuanced and less essentialized. Star and Griesemer write, "The creation and management of boundary objects is key in developing and maintaining coherence across intersecting social worlds" (1989, 393). By representing and calling attention to the realities of cultural life in this space, *Documenting as Resistance* works toward further realizing a vision of Diversity Plaza as a crossroads.

Rapid Change

How the Collection Represents Change and Predatory Development

In 2023, Bangladeshi American artist Zeehan Wazed painted the *Memory of Bangladesh* mural on a wall in Diversity Plaza. Sponsored by the remittance app Taptap Send, the piece depicted a young girl in a boat picking a shapla, Bangladesh's national flower, from water. A nearby plaque explained that the Bangla text in the mural translates to "in one touch, to your relatives," which it says refers "to how easily first-generation immigrants can stay connected to their family" through apps such as Taptap. Celebrated in a Los Herederos Instagram post as a "gorgeous ode to Bangladesh,"[6] the mural was replaced by a wall of restaurant advertisements not even two years after its unveiling.

Diversity Plaza, and the neighborhood surrounding it, are shaped by continual change, both in the short term, as businesses open and close and beautification initiatives come and go, and over the long term, as ongoing immigration has created a community characterized more by demographic flux than a fixed ethnic composition. In the context of an immigrant neighborhood in New York City, the cultures that define a place at any given moment are often disconnected from those that shaped it decades earlier—or that will shape it decades later. Such spaces, although they may bear distinctive marks of particular immigrant groups in specific periods, are ultimately fluid rather than static (Foner 2006).

Jackson Heights was initially developed in 1909 as a planned, low-density garden community intended exclusively for native-born, white, middle-class Protestants looking to escape Manhattan's increasing density and cultural diversity. A confluence of factors in the 21st century

transformed this planned white suburb into today's Jackson Heights. A key turning point was the 1965 Immigration Act, which abolished racially biased quotas and opened pathways for Asian immigration. While the act also imposed the first restrictions on migration from the Western Hemisphere, Latin American immigration nevertheless increased, driven by U.S. labor demand and facilitated by family reunification provisions, and, in many cases, overstays due to limited legal pathways (Massey and Pren 2012, 103-4). During the fiscal crisis of the 1970s, deindustrialization and white middle-class suburbanization led to population decline and falling real estate prices that opened space for a new wave of middle-class immigrants, drawn to the neighborhood's large, affordable apartments, convenient public transit, and vacant storefronts ideal for small businesses (Miyares 2004, 462-83). In 1970, Jackson Heights was 87.4 percent white and 6.1 percent Hispanic, with no Asian population recorded. By 1980, the neighborhood was 57.8 percent white, 30.7 percent Hispanic, and 8.4 percent Asian/Other (Kasinitz, Bazzi, and Doane 1998, 165). In 2022, of the neighborhood's 162,686 residents, 17.6 percent identified as Asian, 5.8 percent as Black, 64.4 percent as Hispanic, and 9.1 percent as white (Furman Center 2025).

As immigrant communities have moved in and moved out the past 50 years, memories of past layers of diversity might be invisible altogether where it is not for a few steadfast establishments. John Park, who immigrated from South Korea in 1980 and set up his store in 1984, is one of the voices in *Documenting as Resistance* who has been in the neighborhood the longest, having watched it shift from Queens' first Koreatown, alongside Greek and Irish businesses, to the South Asian and Latino majority of today. His narrative is one of change and adaptation that exemplifies how quickly the neighborhood changes and echoing the urgency of Los Herederos' documentation project. Wishing Sturm-Wijesinghe and her team success, Park says in the interview, "Your job is very important, because immigration change… so you have to follow the change." Through oral histories of especially long-time businesses, the ethnic diversity of the neighborhood's history is remembered. As the historian Alessandro Portelli writes, oral histories "take arms against the threat of time" (1991, 59).

However, the threat of time for *Documenting as Resistance* that gives its documentation a particular urgency and purpose is not the changes of an immigrant neighborhood's ethnic succession or its contested use of limited space. Los Herederos sees the community-driven processes it works to sustain as under threat by encroaching predatory development. As Sharon Zukin observes in relation to parallel dynamics in Brooklyn, the influx of new businesses brought by such development moves "longtime residents outside their comfort zone, gradually shifting the places that support their way of life to life supports for a different cultural community" (Zukin 2010, 21). Interviewee Nadia Ahmad, for example, expresses direct concern about gentrification's displacement of the small businesses. As demonstrated in the collection's interviews with business owners, the mom-and-pop shops are essential parts of the neighborhood's sense of community, both within and between its cultural groups. In its Mellon Foundation Narrative Proposal, Los Herderos states:

> We see the fully accessible web-based version of our archives resulting from this initiative as a means of better sharing cultural documentation, community histories and interpretation of beloved neighborhood spaces at a critical time—when many of our Queens communities/constituents are under threat of deportation, cultural erasure, and gentrification-driven displacement.

While the accessible web-based version is still in development, Los Herederos uses their radio station as a means of activating the archive through the *Documenting as Resistance* radio program, described as a "natural outgrowth of the organization-wide community archiving initiative by the same name" that explores "everyday people and their connection to neighborhood culture."

One example of the collection's mission of using documentation to resist displacement is a March 7, 2025, interview with Freddy Castiblanco, founder and owner of bar and music venue Terraza 7. Castiblanco's bar has been a staple of Jackson Heights' music scene since 2002. Originally from Colombia, Castiblanco conceived the space as a place to counteract the neighborhood's "ethnic self-isolation" through organizing musical exchanges between various genres, from across Latin America and beyond. Currently, Castiblanco is fighting to keep his business, an important cultural institution, alive and in the neighborhood in the face of rising commercial rent.

At the end of the interview segment, Sturm-Wijesinghe says, "We believe that one of the best ways to quantify our existence is to document it. And so, I hope that one of the things that has come out of this past hour and a half is that we have a wonderful foundation of documentation that tells the story of this place."[7] Recording the history of Terraza 7 asserts the importance of such community spaces and counters the cultural erasure that comes with gentrification. Documentation thus becomes a strategy for sustaining these spaces, both symbolically and materially. The segment's archived page links directly to Action Lab's Save Terraza 7 fundraising campaign, connecting the Los Herederos mission of documentation to economic preservation. Once the collection is live on their website, the program will direct people to explore the web page and connect its materials to life in the neighborhood.

In an illustrative, if theoretical, example of how predatory development frames the neighborhood, the California branch of the American Institute of Architects awarded a student honor to Frank Wen Yao's theoretical redesign of Diversity Plaza, which proposed additions such as an "urban water theater," an outdoor library, and a canopy. Wen Yao writes that "Jackson Heights is a vibrant urban area with cultural and ethnic diversity. While diversity is to be celebrated, such dissimilarities can cause social conflict. Thus, finding a correct solution that could benefit all groups equally served as the inception of this project" (AIA California 2023). The jury called it "a very nice project…that feels like it could really happen." Although purely theoretical, Wen Yao's project embodies a development logic that invokes community while disregarding the economic consequences for the very residents it claims to serve. It demonstrates Los Herederos' description that "The very same characteristics that make Jackson Heights one of the City's few surviving global towns—the booming cultural scenes, the polyphony of languages & urban activist movements—attract gentrifiers and developers."[8]

In Chaand Raat, the collection documents an example of what Sturm-Wijesinghe calls a "naturally occurring community festival"—a collective cultural celebration that is not organized by any organization in particular. It represents the kind of community-driven process that would be difficult to continue if the current concentration of residents and businesses that result in this large gathering are displaced.

The *Documenting as Resistance* collection captures not only the neighborhood's history and what was, at the moment of recording, the present, but also interviewees' perceptions, concerns, and

hopes for the future. In an interview during Chaand Raat with Saiful Islam Sohel, who works at Ittadi Garden Restaurant, a Bangladeshi restaurant in a former Art Deco movie theater, interviewer Saadat Taaseen asks in Bengali, "If someone comes to Jackson Heights in ten years, what would you tell them is different from now?"

Sohel responds, "In ten years, I'm not sure if things will stay the same. If it is the same, I'd hope it'll be a lot more bustling and celebratory." Such brief reflections on the future capture community members' sense that the defining characteristics of their neighborhood are potentially ephemeral, alongside a hope that traditions of gathering and exchange will have the opportunity to develop. Zukin writes that, in the wake of gentrification's homogenization, "the media either romanticize or form a collective amnesia about who, and what, has been displaced" (Zukin 2010, 238). Los Herederos' documentation mission counters this erasure in two ways: by sharing materials to support the fight against the physical displacement of small businesses and immigrant-centered culture, and by preserving them so that, should Diversity Plaza no longer exist, there remains a record of its lessons on coexistence. In this way, the collection balances a hope that diverse cultural life will endure through community organizing with pragmatic preparation to preserve its legacy should this space one day be erased.

Conclusion

Los Herederos' *Documenting as Resistance* demonstrates how a community archive can fulfill traditional documentary functions while challenging the conventions that shaped them. In the 19th century, ethnography developed as part of a colonial project to document non-European cultures that Euro-American academics framed as destined to disappear. Framing Indigenous societies as doomed to extinction, early anthropologists raced to collect artifacts, record languages, and capture cultural practices as relics of a past world (Redman 2021, 1-21). Today, organizations such as Los Herederos use modified versions of this methodology to document spaces and cultures in some ways similarly threatened by global homogenization and displacement toward a very different purpose—resisting this erasure altogether. If "salvage ethnography" relegates its subjects to the past, Los Herederos' work centers the voices of its participants as agents in shaping the present and future. The organization conceives of cultural life as a process to be sustained, rather than a static object to be captured for analysis.

While the activation and functionality of the archive in resisting physical displacement are of central importance, the more traditional conception of an archive as a repository of the future, as a record of something that may disappear, remains. As Sturm-Wijesinghe says in the same interview that Nadia Ahmad referenced in the introduction of this article, "In neighborhoods all over New York, things change and change and change....People live in a place and they don't know the history of their neighborhood." By being housed both in the Library of Congress and by Los Herederos, and eventually made accessible through the websites of major institutions and a community-centered organization, the *Documenting as Resistance* collection benefits from both the accessibility and relevance of a community archive and the security of an institutional one.

Archivists who advocate for community archives to be culturally specific and shaped by community participation, such as Shilton and Srinivasan (2007), acknowledge that this is an intensive process because of the differing perspectives that must be negotiated. In drafting public-facing descriptions of interviews, soundscapes, and other materials in the archive, I had to consider

how best to present them for a broader audience than the summaries prepared for the Library of Congress. I aimed to craft narrative entries that highlight particularly meaningful details about each speaker's life and invite deeper engagement.

Daltin Danser in the Los Herederos Community Space. 2025. Photo by Naomi Sturm-Wijesinghe.

In Jackson Heights, where Los Herederos is embedded in an exceptional density of religions, cultures, languages, and national origins, this task may be uniquely complex. In writing public-facing descriptions, I could not easily assume what background knowledge the reader would be coming in with. A holiday such as Ramadan, for example, is an essential aspect of life for many residents but it may need to be explained to others. As directors of an organization that serves and collaborates with a wide range of cultures, Sturm-Wijesinghe and Bayona consistently think about their work through multiple perspectives. They do not describe this as a challenge, but as a strength that aligns with their mission to resist the homogenization of the neighborhood's cultural life. The methodology of *Documenting as Resistance*—involving community members in the process, organizing public events and programming, and attending to the neighborhood's specific sensory experience—makes way for an archive that, like the public space it documents, is shared by the people who live, work, and gather in Jackson Heights.

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Endnotes

1. For examples of this, see Modak, *BBC Travel* (2023) and Kimmelman, *New York Times* (2020).
2. For examples of these commentaries, see Sánchez, *Queens Latino* (2020); Dulani, *Asian American Writers' Workshop* (2016); Park, *PaulinePark.com* (2014); Misra, Urban Omnibus (2022).
3. Quote from Los Herederos' Mellon Narrative Proposal First Round, 2025. Throughout the article I pull from how Los Herederos describes its mission in unpublished grant proposals.
4. This can be seen in the interviews within the collection itself, such as the mixed feelings on the Plaza expressed in interviews with long-time residents James McMenamin and Mireya Haering.

5. While Star and Griesemer (1989) coined the term "boundary object," the idea of an archive as a boundary object comes from Eric Ketelaar (2005).
6. Los Herederos Instagram Post about Wazed Mural https://www.instagram.com/p/CscYu8bMuhp.
7. Translation by author. Original Spanish: "Así que creemos que una de las mejores formas de cuantificar nuestra existencia es documentarla. Y así, espero que una de las cosas que haya salido de esta hora y media sea que tenemos un maravilloso base de documentación que nos cuenta la historia de este lugar."
8. Quote from Los Herederos' 2023 Community Collections Grant, unpublished.

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