

Live from the Archive: Film, Folders, and Mina Loy

Sasha Colby

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, much of the talk around ideas of re-animation centred on the great archaeological expeditions where place names stood for sites of unimaginable recovery: Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece, Pompeii. A body of literature arose around this reclamation, often imaginatively reconstituting the historical from its material remains. The unprecedented unearthing of the past also led to questions: how could material relics at once be past yet at the same time exist in the present; give rise to fantasies of reconnection; disorient the line between then and now? Writers from Pater to Nietzsche were preoccupied by these questions and also by the perceived dangers of being consumed by history—as well as the delusion of being able to reclaim it.

Intriguingly, in our own moment, new versions of these debates have been taken up by Performance Studies scholars, on many counts an unlikely group of inheritors. Yet questions about the power of the object in the archive, its ability to summon the past, its place in the present, its relation to performance modalities, and the archiving of performance itself, in many ways bear the traces of these earlier discussions. Indeed, Mike Pearson and Michael Shanks' *Theatre/Archaeology* (2001) situates itself at this border precisely in order to unpack the conceptual similarities of theatrical and archaeological projects, all of which gesture, as Rebecca Schneider (2011) has shown, to reenactment as a kind of end-point for rediscovery.

When I put away my first book, *Stratified Modernism* (2009), about the relationship between archaeology and modernist writing, in order to start the second, *Staging Modernist Lives*, I thought—as we so often do—that I was putting one thing aside in order to start something entirely new: in this case, a treatise on the usefulness of biographical performance for modernist scholarship that includes three of my own plays about writers H. D., Mina Loy, and Nancy Cunard alongside performed digital excerpts. This hunger for the new propelled the project, the idea that I was getting away from old thinking and old obsessions. Yet, like the new relationship with someone “entirely different,” there are inevitable moments of recognition, horror even, when—in the end—he has a similarly complicated relationship with his mother; he, too, can't take dance lessons because of an old sports injury; his dog is also named after a Woody Allen character. In studying the fascination of archaeology for modernist writers, the animation of remains and historical vertigo were recurring themes, concerns that would also press their way to the surface in the creative processes of generating biographical performances from archival documents. Moving between archive and stage is, ultimately, an uneasy exercise in time, in making the duration of the past live again in whatever sense this can be accomplished, and as such there is a strangeness about it which manifests itself primarily in the realm of sensation. In describing the processes involved in shaping Mina Loy's archival materials into a filmed performance excerpt for *Staging Modernist Lives*, I am essentially interested—as ever, it would seem, though perhaps in still more concentrated form—in this uncanny element.

Undoubtedly, much of the enduring sense of presence in talking about Loy stems from the eclecticism of her talent, the force of her intelligence, and her particular knack for proximity that

Sasha Colby is Director of Graduate Liberal Studies at Simon Fraser University and the author of *Stratified Modernism: The Poetics of Excavation from Gautier to Olson* (2009). Her current book project, *Staging Modernist Lives*, is under university press review.

allowed her to riff on the major movements of her time: futurism, Dadaism, high modernism. Poet, painter, collage artist, lampshade designer, her archival records, held at Yale's Beinecke Library, are a mishmash of drafts, notes and sketches, which occupy 4.25 linear feet (8 boxes) under the call number YCAL MSS 6. The varied nature of the archival documents is reflective of an idiosyncratic body of thought. Loy's social agenda, in so far as it can be ascertained, anticipated greater liberties for women, though her candour and utter lack of sentimentality in talking about love and sex are perhaps a-temporal, certainly unrealized in any broad sense, then or now. "Women if you want to realize yourselves," Loy writes in her *Feminist Manifesto*, "you are on the eve of devastating psychological upheaval—all your pet illusions must be unmasked—the lies of centuries have got to go—are you prepared for the Wrench—?" (1996 [1914], 153). There is a crackle to some of Loy's poetry which one might expect to travel across time like sound across a wire, illustrated both in archival drafts, but also in the published version of the controversial "Songs to Johannes": "Spawn of Fantasies / Silting the appraisable / Pig Cupid his rosy snout / Rooting erotic garbage" (1996 [1915-1917], 53). And in compiling materials for *The Mina Loy Interviews* (Colby 2014), a multi-media biographical performance, which in its final form, and in so far as permission can be secured, will include bridged excerpts from her manifestos, poetry and autobiographical prose interwoven with Loy's two major interviews—one with the *Evening Sun* in 1917 and one in Aspen in 1965—I found a certain irresistible story emerging: a Victorian childhood marked by the tensions between a Jewish-Hungarian father and an English Protestant Mother; the pursuit of art and writing in Germany, France and Italy; the movement from the domestic to the artistic sphere through early contact with futurism; the concentration of this impulse in New York as the acerbic belle of Dada's Blind Man's balls; the magnetism (and unlikely romance) of Loy's relationship with poet-boxer Arthur Cravan; Cravan's disappearance in a sailboat off the Mexican Coast; Loy's return to Paris and artistic contributions to life between the wars; years of eccentric montage production in New York's Bowery district; and, eventually, a life with her daughters in Aspen, with a wry and knowing eye on their plans to create a recreational and cultural Utopia. So yes, I chose Loy's life and work because it "cuts through." But this is not the same as being prepared for the Wrench.

The first, rather vague, apprehension of some kind of historical overlay in preparing for filming the digital excerpt from *The Mina Loy Interviews* was the names. The actor's name was Gina Stockdale. Mina Loy had written of herself as "Gina" in the 1915 poem "The Effectual Marriage"—a poem Ezra Pound would later dub "The Ineffectual Marriage." In it Loy writes about the constrictions of her relationship with the Italian futurist philosopher, Giovanni Papini:

In the evening they looked out of their two windows
 Miovanni out of his library window
 Gina from the kitchen window
 From among his pots and pans
 Where he so kindly kept her
 Where she so wisely busied herself
 Pots and Pans she cooked in them
 All sorts of sialagogues
 Some say that happy women are immaterial (1996 [1915], 36)

Gina and Mina shared a British birth as well as a laconic sense of irony that characterizes this—and indeed most—of Loy's poems. Yet despite Loy's reputation she is often now (and still, despite a mid-1990's renaissance of her work) confused with Myrna Loy, the black-and-white film star, a

resonance that made itself felt as we went about the project of setting up cameras and filming a scene from Loy's life.

There were other flickers, too, dim historical signals that something was hovering nearby. The eighteen-minute scene we were filming is based on a 1965 tape-recorded interview and reading made by younger poets Robert Vas Dias and Paul Blackburn, who had made the trek to see the eighty-two-year-old Loy in Aspen, which was the site of a writers' conference in August of that year. The tone of the taped interview, which is housed in the UC San Diego Archive for New Poetry, is deferential. "No, no," Blackburn says at one point, reassuring Loy about her poetry. "You're wonderful. You're beautiful." Similarly, in the days before filming, a rehearsal found two undergraduate students, aspiring actors in Simon Fraser University's Contemporary Arts Theatre program, sitting across the table from Gina, a veteran film and theatre professional. "Is acting the only thing you can imagine doing?" Gina asked the two younger performers at one point. "Because if it isn't, you should find something else. But if it is, then it's done." But the historical electricity was most pronounced on the day of filming. Gina made up to look like Mina. The young actor playing Blackburn, Carmine Santavenere, in a sixties-style plaid shirt and granny glasses. The veteran/initiate dynamic fully at play, transposed to the realm of re-creation. In a very particular sense, the mirroring was all conscious, all deliberate. The mark of a successful performance would be the extent to which audiences believed that the past was indivisible from the present, that Gina was Mina and Mina was here.



Mina Loy, 1957. Photographed by Jonathan Williams. From the Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Collection. Reproduced by permission of Thomas Meyer



Gina Stockdale, 2014. Photographed by Julian Giordano. Reproduced by permission of Julian Giordano.

All of which is to say, it was essentially an exercise in the impossible. Intellectually, we know that the past is not the present and to fall into these ideas is at best deluded and at worst a dangerous misrepresentation. In one of the clearest expressions of the gap between past and present, archaeologist Larry Zimmerman (1992) breaks down our relationship with the past into three simple

points: “the past is something we create, it is a product of our present, and it contains power.” Moving into a performance context, Diana Taylor suggests that performance tells us less about another culture (and, by implication, another time) so much as it tells us about our *desire* to access it (2003, 8). Peggy Phelan takes this one step further when, in an earlier text, she famously argues that not only is the past always disappearing, but so is the performance when one attempts to hold on to it: “Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations; once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter into the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance” (1993, 145).

The themes threading through the quoted theorists—and, it must be said, *The Mina Loy Interviews*—are essentially of absence. But what I would like to try and get at here is not the nostalgia of the archive but some kind of historical voltage which manifested itself in encountering Loy’s archival materials and continued through the writing of the play and the filmed representation of her work. Here, Rebecca Schneider is helpful in thinking about how, and in contrast with Phelan, performance might be less about disappearance and more about a charged full-presence, whereby the “footprint” of the past exists as an outline re-constituted by the performative act (2011, 113). Schneider’s views on this point are conditioned by her preoccupation not only with time but also with its malleability: “Many have claimed temporality itself as theatre’s primary medium, where any material, composed in if not contaminated by repetition, is spatially encountered both in time and of time. However, this fundamental temporality is volatile, easily swerved. It is not straightforward” (2011, 89). The fact that, according to Schneider, performative time is non-linear (and here Schneider stresses that “live theatre *and* recorded media are both unreal time” [2011, 93]) is accentuated by her receptiveness to unacknowledged presences. In a graduate seminar at Simon Fraser University in 2014, she mentioned the difficulties of citing a visiting ghost—which is to say that her sense of history is that it’s permeable (Schneider 2014). The porousness of this equation accentuates the electrical possibilities of the archival/theatrical encounter or, as Schneider writes in talking about Richard Schechner: the “‘actual’ and its access in performance gains in complexity—grows haunted (and surprisingly, perhaps, filmic). For restored behavior is, also, actualization” (2011, 126).

The possibilities of actualization regarding my work on Loy seemed remote three years ago. The experience of working in the Beinecke at a single table in a semi-populated sea of other researchers, all reading silently, on their own, is largely that of boredom and isolation. The pervading sentiment—apart from monotony—as one works through file after file of writings that don’t quite meet expectations, that aren’t quite what was hoped for, is a slightly irritated desperation. The cost of the airfare, the time away, the expectations of a prospective reviewer or publisher all need to be met by whatever one finds here. And all it seems there is to be found is file after file of letters, of minutiae, of writing that is not as good as the books that have been published. Carolyn Steedman, in direct response to Jacques Derrida (1998), writes of this vague, unnerving series of sensations as “archive fever proper,” a feeling which begins “as early as the grey dawn, and a discomfort with the unsavoury hotel bed in which you sleep (or don’t sleep)” and builds into “a grey exhausted day in the record office (you don’t finish), a long journey home, a strange dislocation from all the faces, stations, connections, delays, diversions, road-works you feel you must endure . . . all these are in retrospect the mere signals of the terrible headache that will wake you at two o’clock in the morning” (2002, 19). But there is also a cure for this malaise, or at the very least a treatment. It might be a doodle in the margin of a yellowed typescript. A line of unpublished verse written in the poet’s hand. In the case of working on Loy, it was an unflattering sketch of Loy’s first husband,

Stephen Haweis, wedged beside a folder with one of her intricate inventions, a diagram for a new type of window-washing squeegee. The jolt I received upon discovering the document is the kind that Walter Benjamin describes in his analysis of the poetry of Baudelaire, when the poet, upon seeing a modern woman with ancient bearing in the crowd, receives the type of “shock that can beset a lonely man” (1968, 169).

This sense of sudden presence, which one can feel fleetingly in the archive, is what can be communicated through performance. Sure, the actor is an intermediary. Filming shutters immediacy. Re-creation is not re-existence. But, I would argue, despite these filters, the words of the author come through. One feels oneself nearer to something when Loy’s poetry is read aloud, when we *hear* the movement of the older mind making its way through years of verse and thought and loss that is impossible to achieve in reading a transcript of the interview. When one sees the face of recollection.

Moreover, the coincidences of production, which many would see as analytical irritants, would likely, for Loy, belong to a surrealist logic she was familiar with and by which we might be admitted to “an almost forbidden world of sudden parallels, petrifying coincidences, and reflexes peculiar to the individual, of harmonies struck as though on the piano, flashes of light that would make you see, really *see*, if only they were not so much quicker than all the rest” (Breton 1994 [1924], 19). And it is perhaps here, in modernist world-views, that I see the most persuasive argument for bringing these archival materials into performance contexts. For the modernists themselves, by and large, had malleable ideas about time and representation. Pound writes convincingly that the “souls of all men great / At times pass through us” (1976 [1908], 76). I invited actors into the Loy project because of the perspectives they would bring to literary scholarship—not least of all, in the weeks after finishing, Gina’s comment that “Mina hung around for a while, but I think she’s gone now.” Certainly none of this would be surprising to Loy, who saw much of her own work as the product of “subconscious archives” and was interested in the possibility of the past seeping through. When Loy writes in the first poem of *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* (and reproduced as the last line of the film), “There is no Space or Time / Only intensity” (1996 [1914], 3), she is saying as much.

References

- Benjamin, Walter. 1968. “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire.” In *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, 155–200. New York: Schocken.
- Breton, André. 1994 [1924]. *Nadja*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Grove.
- Colby, Sasha. *Staging Modernist Lives: H. D., Mina Loy, Nancy Cunard*. Manuscript in process.
- . 2009. *Stratified Modernism: The Poetics of Excavation from Gautier to Olson*. London: Peter Lang.
- . (writer and director). 2014. *The Mina Loy Interviews* (video performance). Performed by Gina Stockdale and Carmen Santavenere. Filmed by Julian Giordano. Recorded October 19.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1998. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*. Translated by Eric Prenowitz. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Loy, Mina. 1996 [1915]. “The Effectual Marriage.” In *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover, 36–39. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- . 1996 [1914]. “Feminist Manifesto.” In *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 153.
- . 1996 [1915-1917]. “Songs to Joannes.” In *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 53.
- . 1996 [1914]. “There is no Life or Death.” In *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, 3.
- Pearson, Mike, and Michael Shanks. 2001. *Theatre/Archaeology*. New York: Routledge.
- Phelan, Peggy. 1993. *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. New York: Routledge.

- Pound, Ezra. 1976 [1908]. "Histrion." In *Collected Early Poems of Ezra Pound*, edited by Michael John King, 76. New York: New Directions.
- Schneider, Rebecca. 2014. Graduate Seminar, Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Oct. 21.
- . 2011. *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*. New York: Routledge.
- Steedman, Carolyn. 2002. *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Taylor, Diana. 2003. *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Zimmerman, Larry. 1992. "The Past is a Foreign Country." Harrington Lecture. University of South Dakota. <https://www.usd.edu/arts-and-sciences/upload/Harrington-Lecture-Zimmerman.pdf>.