

The World Humanities Report

The Beauty of Liberatory Memory Work Is in the Ceremony

Jarrett Martin Drake in conversation with
María del Rosario Acosta López



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The Beauty of Liberatory Memory Work Is in the Ceremony

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María del Rosario Acosta López: Thank you so much for your time and for being here. When I started envisioning how these interviews were going to look, I thought about you as a very essential piece of the puzzle, if I can say it in that way, because for me, the work you do connects a lot of the dots that I wanted to show as intertwined in the context of liberatory memory work and memory-building initiatives. It shows ways in which the kind of work that we do in Colombia for memory work—and what we call “historical memory”—is connected to other initiatives around the United States and, specifically, to showing that in the United States there *is* state violence that is not explicitly recognized as such. That fight is ongoing, and the kind of work you do helps to show that side of memory work in the context of the United States. Also, I came in contact with you because of María Emma Wills, who does memory work in Colombia. So it is a very interesting way of seeing how all these sites of the work connect and are intertwined. I am also, of course, interested in showing the very specific differences, given the contexts that we are all in. And you also participated, very generously, I must say, in the project at the Chicago Torture Justice Center and the liberatory memory workshops we organized there with survivors, their families, and other memory activists. That was a really interesting way of getting to know what you do and seeing you “in action.” I was in awe, I have to say. Such a privilege to get to see you work; I learned a lot from it. So thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this.

Jarrett Martin Drake: Thank you so much. And I will reciprocate the awe, and I was just so happy to have been in community with you on multiple occasions in Chicago and really excited to be in community with you here today as well.

* All interviews included in this project took place in June–July 2021. To keep their original nature and tone, they were not significantly updated and therefore might contain information, references, or comments that have become outdated by the time of publication.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Thank you, Jarrett. So let me start by just asking you to briefly recount, from where you are now, your trajectory. What took you to do the kind of work you're doing now in connection to what you call "liberatory memory work," which I will also describe, if you allow me, as a "counter-archival" kind of practice, because you started off as an archivist, right? It's a very interesting trajectory. Can you recount briefly how you see it from today's perspective?

Jarrett Martin Drake: I don't think of the work I do in terms of timelines or trajectories, but I know that they are helpful. So for that reason, I guess I will start by saying that when I was an undergraduate studying history, I did a senior thesis project on the Tulsa massacre of 1921. Now, we're recording this in late July 2021. This year marks the one hundredth anniversary of the Tulsa massacre, which occurred on May 31, 1921. A lot of people in the US and around the world were introduced to this event for the first time this year, but I was introduced to it as an undergraduate back in 2008. For those who have not heard about it, it was the deadliest and bloodiest massacre in US history. At least three dozen Black people were massacred. That's the official number of the bodies that were, in fact, identified. Dozens more Black people were massacred that day in Tulsa, Oklahoma. These Black people were massacred simply for the fact that they responded to the racism of the day by uniting together and establishing systems of cooperative economics. This area of the city of Tulsa had earned the nickname "Black Wall Street." Now, with the anti-capitalist politics that I practice, I look at that name with a bit more reticence than I did back in 2008, but suffice it to say, this was a relatively prosperous Black neighborhood, and it was burnt to the ground and the people who suffered the most were never able to get reparation for the harms that they had endured. People left the city never to return. They lost loved ones. They lost everything they had. And, in addition to all of those facts, there was an imposed forgetting by the state and local government about this incident. More than eighty years passed until the state of Oklahoma commissioned an official inquest into the events of May 31, 1921.

So I was twenty or twenty-one years old when I was doing research for this topic, and it just blew my mind that something so devastating happened in US history and that there was such an effort to prevent people from knowing about it. Teachers in Oklahoma were punished if they tried to bring it into the school curriculum. You could be blackballed and blacklisted if you tried to have any kind of public recognition about this. So at that time in my life, I had no idea

really what an archivist was or what memory work was. I came at it from the vantage point of a researcher, and after I finished the thesis, it really impressed upon me that it is really important that there are people who are fighting to recover hidden truths and people who are fighting for access to historical information that would unsettle some of the larger narratives and myths that the United States or any other kind of government wants to tell about itself. So I always go back to that when people ask me about how I got started in liberatory memory work: it's the Tulsa massacre and the resilience of the survivors and their descendants. When I was doing my research, few people who had survived the massacre were still alive. They were in their late nineties and early hundreds. I got to meet one of those survivors. I had always been interested in history, and I had always taken a liking to it, but after meeting one of those survivors, Otis Clark, that interest became an imperative. It wasn't just about learning for the sake of learning, although that's important. It was about learning to right (not to write). And that led me through a circuitous route to becoming a professional archivist.

So I enrolled at the University of Michigan's School of Information, which is one of fifteen or twenty schools in the US that prepare people for a career as an archivist. I initially wanted to find a job in a public library or museum

When people ask me about how I got started in liberatory memory work: it's the Tulsa massacre and the resilience of the survivors and their descendants.

that would allow me to have more of an opportunity to interact with the public and do more direct programming and exhibition type of activity. That's what I wanted to do, but the job openings said something else. My only job offer out of graduate school was working as an archivist at Princeton University in the university archives. I started that job in 2013 and in it learned a lot about the so-called professional management of archives and information, and, in particular, I learned that everything about archives is bound by context. The context there was that Princeton University is an almost three-hundred-year-old institution with billions of dollars in an endowment and alumni who have done many things after graduation, some good, some not so good, such as Ted Cruz and Jeff Bezos, among others. The purpose of the archives is to tell the history of the university, and although that's not what I signed up to do in library school, that's what I found a job doing. So all the while in that job, I never really felt like I was doing the type of work that I wanted. When I talk about meeting Otis

Clark and things changing from an interest to an imperative, I just never felt that imperative when I was working at Princeton.

But one of the things that happened at Princeton to help me see that imperative was when I was preparing to go to the annual conference of the Society of American Archivists in 2015. This is the largest meeting of professional archivists in North America, and that year the meeting was set to take place in Cleveland, Ohio. At that time, and I would presume right now, Cleveland was an epicenter of police brutality and police violence in the US—and really in the world. People might remember the story of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, who was killed on a playground outside of a recreation center in Cleveland. A few months before the meeting, it really dawned on me how archivists have the ability to bring forward truths about the past that different segments of society do not want to be brought forward. So I reached out to some colleagues via social media and talked with them about figuring out how we could use our training as archivists in service of the people who were organizing resistance to policing in the city of Cleveland. That initial outreach via social media probably changed my life from that point on, because people responded affirmatively, and we were able to connect with organizers in Cleveland. Oftentimes, when a conference happens in a city, it is just an extractive relationship, and we didn't want to replicate those same dynamics. So we collaborated, and the result of that collaboration ended up being a project that's known as A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland.¹ It is an online archive of stories, interviews, and accounts of people who survived police violence in Cleveland or family members of those killed by police in Cleveland.

That experience really transformed everything. I remember going back to my day job at Princeton and nothing really was the same. After being so deeply involved in that project, I needed to find a way to do more work like that. I was looking around for other jobs, and no jobs actually really caught my attention. At the same time, I was also teaching writing classes at prisons in New Jersey in the evenings as a volunteer. From the disconnect that I was increasingly feeling about the archival profession and from the experiences I was having in the classroom in the evening teaching in prisons, I thought that maybe I should do a PhD, which, in hindsight, I probably would have advised myself against. So I started my doctoral studies in the fall of 2017, and in that time, I've actually been able to do a lot more of the type of work similar to what I had been a part

¹ <https://www.archivingpoliceviolence.org/>. See also Drake's account of the work related to the project, coauthored with Stacie M. Williams, in "Power to the People: Documenting Police Violence in Cleveland," *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v1i2.33>.

of doing: doing workshops with organizers not only in Chicago but also in Portland, Los Angeles, and Detroit. I've done, in the midst of this pandemic, other trainings online and shared spaces online.

The research that I'm doing now as a doctoral student builds on a lot of those different experiences that I have talked about here. I'm at the beginning stages of my dissertation research, which largely is a study of the different ways by which people who are imprisoned in the state of Louisiana maintain family and other types of intimate relationships. I'm interested in the historical memory piece of this because I'm interested in how those ways of maintaining kinship ties relate to the history of enslavement. Like many states in the southern US, the biggest state prison in Louisiana is the site of a former or—depending on who you are talking to—a current slave plantation. So I'm interested in the relation between enslavement and imprisonment, and I'm interested mostly in the ways that Black people have forged new ways of relating to each other within these regimes that have sought to separate us. I keep telling myself that I'm done with the past and thinking about things that have happened in the past, but every new project finds a way back there because I don't think that there is a way to disentangle this thing called the past from this thing called the present or the future.

So that's kind of the trajectory. I tell people that as of today I think of myself as “unaffiliated.” I do what I want to do. And that doesn't always result in the most economic stability or security in the world, but, again, I'm following my imperative that I felt was communicated to me from meeting 106-year-old Otis Clark, talking about surviving the Tulsa massacre. So that's a timeline of sorts.

María del Rosario Acosta López: It is. It is a timeline, and it also tells the story of what you call an imperative, this ethical side of history and memory that becomes a framework within which you actually do your work, and all the different sides of that work, which I think is what I want to explore slowly with you. If you don't mind, I would like to go back step-by-step through that trajectory and ask for more details regarding each one of these, let's say, aspects of the work you're doing, because, on the one hand, you have, as an archivist, the experience of producing a people's archive, as you call it, in the case of the Cleveland archive for police violence. And that goes together, I guess, with what you call elsewhere “the archive of the oppressed,” using Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* as a reference.² So I would like to hear a little bit more first about not only how you envision this possibility of dismantling what you call “the

² See Jarrett M. Drake, “Diversity's Discontents: In Search of an Archive of the Oppressed,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 47, no. 2 (2019): 270–79.

White supremacy of archives” to abolish the structures that allow for archival work to be ultimately complicit with that history. And what are the other ways in which archival work can become precisely emancipatory, liberatory work? How do you connect that explicitly to the concrete experience of the Cleveland People’s Archive? So maybe this will be my first question, and then we’ll go into details about other moments of the trajectory that you just shared with us, if that is OK.

Jarrett Martin Drake: Yes, as long as I’m answering the right questions. The question is about emancipatory, liberatory memory work?

María del Rosario Acosta López: Yes, and also I was referring explicitly in my question to that lecture you gave at the 2017 conference of the Australian Society of Archivists in Melbourne, “Diversity Discontents.”³ I think you did not have enough time there to develop what you call the “archive of the oppressed.” But I thought it was very interesting how you, on the one hand, denounce ways in which we may still be complicit with the power of history and archives to silence, and then, on the other hand, develop what strategies could help us think of the archive not as a complicity strategy but actually as disrupting, dismantling those structures that are in place to make valid only certain forms of truth and, therefore, silencing others. And I am interested in thinking through that in connection to the concrete experience of how you envision, together with others and together with local community resistance movements, liberatory memory work.

Jarrett Martin Drake: That essay was something that I delivered at the annual meeting of archivists in Australia. It was interesting because it was the first time that I addressed a group of archivists since leaving the archival profession. That address allowed me to start to think through the numerous ways that conversations about diversity, equality, and inclusion end up flattening a lot of the texture of lived experience. What I mean by that is that by obsessively or singularly focusing on one axis of aggression, one misses out and doesn’t consider other axes. This occlusion of other axes of oppression was better articulated by people like the Combahee River Collective who talked about intersecting oppressions. Also, Kimberlé Crenshaw talks about intersectionality, about race and gender and class, right? Or to go back even further, someone like the communist think-

³ See the published version, Jarrett M. Drake, “Diversity’s Discontents: In Search of an Archive of the Oppressed,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 47, no. 2 (2019): 270–79.

er and writer Claudia Jones, and what she called “triple oppression.” So one of the things I was in search of when leaving the archival profession was to better connect with Black thinkers, writers, and organizers whose work allows for a greater understanding of that texture. Since that 2017 address about the archive of the oppressed, I actually wrote a significant revision a year or so later for a journal, and part of the revision process was focused around reading the works of Black feminist organizers and thinkers. It allowed me to make sure that the work I was doing was not reproducing some of the blind spots and some of the erasures I was attempting to denounce there.

So those are some of the things that I’ve been trying to think through and work through over the last few years. I didn’t feel that staying in the day-to-day work of archives I would have gotten that type of perspective, I don’t know that I ever would have challenged myself to go that deep. Four years ago, I didn’t even know who Claudia Jones was. I’m not saying that I wouldn’t have otherwise encountered her work, but that’s just an example of the ways to really envision liberatory futures that are not predicated on emphasizing one particular form of oppression over other. Oppression is so deeply woven into the world that we live in. I can’t remember if I use this analogy in the essay or not, but it’s almost like trying to take up one root of a tree. You can do that, but you still got a whole forest there, like, it’s just going to grow back. Those are the types of thoughts that in the last four years since leaving the archival profession I’ve been sitting with and looking for ways to incorporate into the workshops that I’ve been doing and the different projects that I’ve been a part of. I hope that answers the question, but if it doesn’t, I am happy to continue.

María del Rosario Acosta López: It does, on one side, at least for now, which is enough, because my question was huge. It does explain where you are coming from in asking all these questions in the context of the archive. It also shows something that you point to in another of your writings, which is that the work of memory is not just one of collecting and recalling and that if we really want memory to be a tool for liberation, we need to put it together with a form of healing and repairing that involves *dismantling*. This is precisely the way survivors describe it in the context of the Chicago Torture Justice Center.⁴

⁴ <http://chicagotorturejustice.org/>. See also Elizabeth Deligio, “Memory Work Needs to Be Infused with the Power of Imagination,” interview by María del Rosario Acosta López, in *Memory Work in Colombia: Past and Present Experiences, Legacies for the Future*, ed. María del Rosario Acosta López (World Humanities Report, CHCI, 2023), and Elizabeth Deligio and Troy Harden, “Politicized Healing: Addressing the Impact of State Sponsored Violence,” *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice* 12, no. 2 (2021): 1–12.

This is the way the survivors themselves wanted to define the work that they do as liberatory workers. This dismantling, of course, requires something that you describe as justice in the present and imagining more just futures, because we need to remind ourselves that these interlocking forms of violence, as you put it, are ongoing forms of violence. In Colombia, for instance, in the context of historical memory work, we talk about the difficulties of doing this kind of work in the middle of something that still looks like an armed conflict. In the United States, I think what you're pointing to is this: what does it mean to do archival memory work or counter-archival and counter-memory work—if we think about how the state mostly controls these narratives—in the middle of an ongoing violence? And what are the particular challenges of doing that in this context and also of calling, therefore, for the need to dismantle the structures that make them possible? How to subvert the criteria that define what deserves to be heard, to be visible, to be audible, and what does not? In this context, I would like you to tell us what strategies concretely you envision in order to do this dismantling, how optimistic you are in connection to these possibilities of dismantling today in the United States, in connection to the work you do and what is happening right now, among others, with Black Lives Matter, for instance—and with other forms of producing memory. If I understand you correctly, in your dissertation you are showing how this work has always been done by communities, how they have developed strategies to resist what otherwise is, of course, an attempt to completely erase the validity of their lives.

Jarrett Martin Drake: I'll start with whether I'm optimistic. Yes and no. I am not inherently optimistic about much, especially these days now in a pandemic, living in a country where people (without good reason, by and large) refuse something that could save their lives and the lives of other people. There's a real gloom about the state of the Earth, the amount of suffering that is happening, that could be eliminated almost immediately. I remember reading last year that as the pandemic was ongoing, unhoused people were being placed in hotel rooms. It made me so sad because that could have been happening before. So all that is to say, I am inherently not optimistic about much.

The yes part of that is: "hope is a discipline," and this is a reference I make to Mariame Kaba, who is just a brilliant, consistent-in-principle organizer based in Chicago and New York, and who has literally changed the world. She always talks about the fact that if you are an organizer, you can't afford to be pessimistic. So I am optimistic that there are people who are willing and able to know right from wrong and who are willing to speak out when they have to. And I

am encouraged by the sacrifices people are willing to make putting their bodies on the line. One of the main things over the past few years since leaving the archival profession that I've put an emphasis on, with my own soul, is that it is not enough, as you mentioned, only to present this information and say: "OK, here's this information." No, there's a requirement that we change something in light of this information. And part of the ways that we're going to have to change some of these systems is by getting very uncomfortable and by making other people uncomfortable. I don't know a single thing that's been changed meaningfully by Black and oppressed people in the history of the world that didn't involve making other Black people uncomfortable, but especially making lots of White people uncomfortable. One aspect of reparation involves asking for something to be returned, and there's another aspect of reparation that is demanding and taking active steps toward repossessing, in a sense, what was taken. I can't remember the exact example, but I just read something about an abandoned jail or detention center somewhere in the US that a group had reclaimed as a mutual aid network. I was really encouraged by that.

So those are the things that I try to lean into, that I can be optimistic about. The strategy takeaway for me is thinking of ways that historical memory or liberatory memory work can actually be connected to meeting people's direct needs. I'm thinking about the legacy obviously of the Black Panther Party, of many other groups, mostly led by women, that provided direct material assistance to people and didn't necessarily ask for or mandate anything in return. I've been envisioning different sites and ceremonies of memory that involve just giving people what they need. So much suffering in the world could immediately be alleviated through regular access to food and regular access to clean water. We're talking about memory surviving, but those counter-memories cannot survive if the people themselves don't survive, because the stories live within the people. The way of doing archives or memory work is understood sometimes as this very rigid, almost cold and calculated relationship to the past and to records and things that are cut-and-dried, but the work that I'm trying to do is messy. Someone once said that when people are talking about revolution, everybody wants to be a teacher, but nobody wants to be the farmer. That really sat with me. Yes, more people are willing to talk about doing Memory Work, capital *M* and capital *W*, without thinking about the work of keeping people alive. You know what I mean? So where's the line? Those things don't have to be separate; the idea that we need to separate the people who do the work of keeping memory from the people who do the work of keeping a house or keeping the community or keeping a neighborhood—that's a false separation. One of

my favorite things to pay attention to are different good cooperatives and urban farms happening in different parts of the world. Those people are doing different types of memory. They're finding sustainable ways to feed themselves in the neighborhoods. They're finding ways to preserve recipes and traditions of food

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preparation. That's one of the most, to me, immediate and useful ways we can think about memory and the work of it.

That's very far afield from what I was trained in, but one of the things that I've been heartened by is that by abandoning a large part of that training, I've been able to find more of the ways that ordinary folks have been keeping memory all along and figuring out ways I could actually learn from them. I always framed the different workshops I've been a part of as a whole learning space, a co-constructing space. I'm not going to "teach" people stuff that they don't know already. But you probably remember me saying this in Chicago: "I'm not here to teach. I'm here to facilitate a way for us to bring forward what was already within us." So that's a long way of saying that the beauty of liberatory memory work is in the ceremony. That ceremony, if you do it right, really transforms us and allows us to transform our circumstances. To bring back Paulo Freire, the way he talked about education and the actual transformation of consciousness is something that I took a lot of inspiration from.

María del Rosario Acosta López: And it's great because your answer shows all the levels in which we need to think of what it means to do memory work. So as you say, it's not just the work that we call "memory work" with capital *M* and capital *W*; it's also about providing the material conditions for making it even possible and sustainable. But it also involves a critical kind of work: attending to who is handling the information, organizing it, making it available, since all of this also determines what kind of memory can be produced or not. So considering all those different levels, from local organizations and initiatives, and ways of resisting erasure that have always been there, to the strategies of organizing and getting different strengths together to make it happen and make it more

powerful, to the critical work or denouncing and subverting the criteria that erase and make all of these efforts inaudible . . . And here I would like to ask you the question I said I was eventually going to ask, which is the question regarding the humanities broadly understood, because, in your case, we have someone who was trained as a historian, as an undergraduate, right? Then as an archivist. And now you are in, let's say, the discipline of anthropology, being trained in that discipline, doing work within that framework. All of this comes together in your ways of critically addressing the question of how to do memory work. So I would like to ask you how you see this connection. It's interdisciplinary, but it's also transdisciplinary, and it also requires us to be "indisciplined" in connection to the ways we have been trained, as you mentioned before. How do you see all this in relation to your own trajectory and the kinds of disciplines you have been trained in and had to relate to in order to do the work you want to do?

Jarrett Martin Drake: That's a good question. I have been intentionally fugitive in my approach to navigating the system of higher education because of that, because the essence of the question highlights the need to be fugitive in one's approach to disciplining, because disciplining imposes its own form of silence, its own form of erasure. And to me, humanities, broadly speaking, can give us a sort of basic understanding of the human condition. If the human condition is something that motivates my work in improving human conditions, that means, of course, there's room to benefit from different disciplines. But what makes the humanities powerful by being single disciplines is the relation between them, right? One of the most beautiful things I've been a part of over the last few years is just reading whatever it is that I have felt like reading. It has been so liberating, and what I found is that I actually like to read a lot of different stuff written by literature scholars, by poets, by artists. I like to read interpretations of artists written by great philosophers. As an example, a few months ago I read a book by Angela Davis entitled *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism*. It's a really wonderful book, and it's a critical analysis of the early performers of the blues tradition, specifically looking at Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday. This is a book that, as an example, is such a powerful insight into the human condition, and it's part philosophy, part Black studies, part women and gender studies, part musicology. The most powerful interventions the humanities can make are connected to the ability to go between different traditions you need to use and leave what you don't need to use. I imagine, for instance, how different this world would be if instead of investing billions of dollars per year in STEM education in United States, just half of that was rerouted to the

humanities instead. I'm not at war with science. Scientists like to be really smug about the reliability of science. Well, it surely should be discouraging that the scientific method, for all it's cracked up to be, has resulted in so-called advancements that allow people to bomb others halfway across the world by robots. If that's the advancement that you want to applaud, go ahead, but I'm not going to applaud it. What if instead we spent less money trying to develop new toys and new tools for billionaires to blow themselves up into space? When was the last time a government came with a huge, new and unprecedented investment in producing and supporting new artists and musicians?

It hasn't happened in my lifetime, and, given the direction of things, I don't think it's going to happen anytime soon, but to me, that's where the humanities would allow us to just have a more reflective reflection of ourselves. It would allow artists, painters, dancers, and the scholars who write about them to have more material support for the work that they do. You can assess the state of a society for how much it spends on the so-called sciences, compared to how much it spends on so-called humanities and the arts (for me, arts and humanities go hand in hand). I think of the work that I'm called to do, the work that I try to practice, as being artistic and humanistic. And I know that comes with its own critiques and its own limitations, but I think the change that we are desperately in need of demands a certain type of creativity, imagination that, honestly, is cultivated much more by arts and humanities than by our so-called hard sciences and social sciences.

María del Rosario Acosta López: It allows for that reimagining, rearranging of the present that is ultimately what will, if anything, break the cycles of violence that we are caught in, including the violence to the planet, as you were pointing out at the beginning of one of your answers.

So, Jarrett, let me finish with something I've asked everyone, and you've shared already with us some names that are important for you as references for what you do and what you think. But what are the voices that keep you company? What are the voices you go back to in order to keep yourself going in the work you're doing?

Jarrett Martin Drake: Oh, that's easy. I think of my family members. I think of my ancestors, the ones who I have met in this world and the ones in another world. I think of my grandmothers a lot and my uncles and aunts a lot. I think of the ancestors of mine who survived unimaginable atrocities. I think of those who did not survive. Those who chose the sea, the water as opposed to the

ship. I think of them and listen to them every day. Not a day goes by that I don't take some time and just sit and wait for what my ancestors are calling me to do. Beyond my ancestors, I am constantly reading works of Black radical thinkers and doers. So at present, I'm reading W. E. B. Du Bois's masterful book *Black Reconstruction in America*, and I am just getting over reading about Claudia Jones, which is why she's been on my mind a lot in this conversation. I think about the people close to me, the people I've known; some of those people are still here, some of them no longer here. And I think about people I have not known and their ideas that make me wish I had known them. And it's the constant back and forth between those where I take my direction and my guidance from.

María del Rosario Acosta López: Thank you. Thank you for your time and those answers, and that last one will for sure stay with me for a little while after we hang up.

Jarrett Martin Drake is an educator, ethnographer, and organizer whose labor traverses the fields of liberatory memory work, archives, and anthropology. Currently a doctoral student at Harvard University, Drake was born and raised in Gary, Indiana, where he graduated from the Benjamin Banneker Achievement Center.

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