

Abstract

This paper will present an overview of my original and ongoing research on the journalistic life of Herbert H. Denton Jr. (1943-89), one of the first African Americans to report and edit for the *Washington Post*. Denton was a crucial yet understated player in Ben Bradlee and the Graham family's iconic news operation, who faded from public consciousness after his untimely death from the AIDS epidemic. The first half of Denton's career—taking place in the decade-long aftermath of the civil unrest that had erupted in the nation's capital after Martin Luther King's assassination in 1968—was devoted to the Post's Metropolitan coverage and culminated with his four-year stint (1976-80) as the paper's first African-American city editor, an achievement made especially significant by DC's then-70% Black population and its peculiar struggle for self-determination in the shadow of congressional governance. In the 1980s, Denton distinguished himself as a National correspondent during the early Reagan years and then as *Washington Post* bureau chief in Beirut, where he covered pivotal and harrowing events in the Lebanese civil war during 1983-84. He spent his final four years as the newspaper's first Canadian bureau chief in Toronto, where in addition to his signature political journalism he branched out into first-rate coverage of both sports and the arts. There is evidence to suggest that if he had lived longer, he may well have become the *Post*'s first executive editor of color.

In 2010, at age 17, I received a generous college scholarship that was established in Denton's memory after his death. In 2015, after completing my B.A. in American Studies and M.A. in Oral History, I was struck by the desire to investigate and write the biography of this figure that was still basically unknown to me. I began conducting interviews with Denton's colleagues, friends, and schoolmates. More than 150 interviews, a dozen archive visits, and countless secondary readings later, I know an immense amount about Denton's life, times, and professional context, yet continue to struggle with how best to tell the story. I would like to discuss certain core dimensions of this process in my conference paper.

Like most figures (I imagine) who will be discussed in this conference, Herb Denton is *not* a forgotten journalist to the others that he worked with and mentored. He had a special eye for talent in need of cultivation, both Black and otherwise, that significantly influenced both the *Washington Post* after Watergate and the larger news profession beyond that. And yet, on the long shelf of *Washington Post* memoirs and studies, there are only a few scant mentions of Denton where I now know there could easily be more. I would like to discuss my work's subsequent reliance upon oral history methodology through the lens of this tension, reflecting on the means by which this project has made me not only a biographer of one life but also a historian of an entire journalistic generation whose ostensibly well-known collective story drastically changes when lesser-known members are placed in the center of its frame.

Bio

Benji de la Piedra is a Visiting Fellow in the John W. Kluge Center at the Library of Congress. In 2014, he graduated from Columbia University with a B.A. in American Studies. He obtained his M.A. in Oral History from Columbia in 2016 and received that year's Jeffrey H. Brodsky Oral History Thesis Prize. Benji consults on oral history projects and teaches oral history methodology across the United States. He is a devoted member of the Oral History Association, serving on its Diversity Committee, Equity Audit Task Force, and Indigenous Caucus, and co-chaired the OHA's 2022 symposium on "Race & Power in Oral History" and 2023 annual meeting on "Oral History As/And Education."