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American History: From the Ethnicization of Archives to the
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Archival representations of immigration and ethnicity in North American history: From the ethnicization of archives to the archivization of ethnicity

Introduction

“Geschichte wie es eigentlich gewesen.” such is the title that archivist Walter Neutel (1978) chose to introduce his presentation of Canada’s National Ethnic Archives (NEA) in 1978. By quoting Leopold von Ranke, the recognized founder of empiricist history, Neutel identified the NEA as an effort to develop a more accurate and complete understanding of the past through the historical record. The role he attributed to the archive corresponds to the empiricist tradition which developed in Europe in the early 19th century and prevailed among North American historians well into the 20th century (Novick 1988).¹ Empiricists considered that by studying primary sources, checking their authenticity and credibility, the historian could reconstitute what really happened and tell an accurate story of the past. The popularity of the empiricist method led to a radical transformation of archival collecting and preservation activities and to their professionalization in the 19th century. Accompanying this transformation was a belief that documents and artifacts had the power of “capturing” the reality of the past and of giving contemporaries an objective and reliable representation of it. No technology reinforced that belief more than photography with its power to fix reality on paper for the benefit of future generations (Cook 2009, p. 501; Lowenthal 1995, p. 257).

Although historians have long put into question any direct correspondence between past events and the narratives, accounts or interpretations they give of such events, the empiricist conception of the archive has persisted. The conceptual distance between the archival record and the reality of the past has undoubtedly broadened under the influence of the Annales school and thinkers like Michel

¹ In this article I use the term “archive” or “archives” to refer to the documents in archival collections rather than to the buildings or institutions of archives, unless otherwise indicated.

Foucault and Michel de Certeau (Burguière 2009; Hartog 2005, pp. 218–222), but the apparently obvious role of the archive as evidence or clue has contributed to maintaining its direct connection to the past in the eyes of historians, archivists and the public alike (Cook 2009, p. 509). Archivist Elisabeth Kaplan noted in 2000 the persistence of the archival profession’s “fascination with popularized notions of identity – particularly ethnic and gender identity –,” characterized by “a conviction that somewhere out there exists an authenticity to be restored to the archival record, a natural balance to be righted, a bias to be erased, and a ‘real’ identity to be documented” (Kaplan 2000, p. 146). It is only since the late 1990s that the so-called “archival turn” has inspired postmodern theories of the archive and archiving that directly challenge the relation of the archival record to the past.²

Both the empiricist and postmodern approaches have been at work in the development of “ethnic archives” – namely collections that document immigration and ethnic history – in North America. This article will consider the history of ethnic archives maintained by mainstream institutions in the United States and Canada since the 1950s. It will examine their development and evolution in light of changing conceptions of ethnicity and immigration in academia, political culture and public memory.³ I contend that ethnic archives were not only influenced by conceptions of ethnicity embedded in scholarly practice and public memory, but that they also contributed to shaping specific conceptions of ethnicity. If ethnic groups are defined by a sense of a common descent, real or imagined, and of a shared history and experience (Alba 1990, p.

² The term “archival turn” is used to designate the new interest arising in some disciplines for archives as an object of study rather than a place of research, as epistemological inquiry rather than evidence of the past (Stoler 2002, p. 94).

³ This article does not consider ethnic archives constituted by private ethnic individuals or organizations. Both the United States and Canada are included, because although there are many differences between the two countries’ ethnic archives and the contexts in which they operate, there are enough similarities to warrant an inclusive approach for the purpose of this article. Comparing the countries’ specific historical, political and cultural contexts will help measure the importance of contextual factors in the shaping of ethnic collections. It should be noted that there is no consensus on the extent of differences between the Canadian and American histories of immigration and ethnicity. For a representative argument about the specificity of Canada’s situation in North America and the factors that determined Canada’s national identity and conception of ethnicity, see B. Ramirez (1990). On the other hand, sociologists J. Reitz and R. Breton, in *The Illusion of Difference* (1994), argue that similarities far outweigh the differences between Canada and the United States, based on an examination of people’s views on cultural retention, prejudice, and discrimination, and of actual cultural retention among immigrants and their descendents. Palmer (1976) wrote a nuanced article evaluating similarities and differences between the American “melting pot” and the Canadian “mosaic.”

16), then surely the (re-)construction of that history through archives cannot but have an impact on the ethnic groups' identities. Ethnic archives, in short, play an important and complex role in the construction of the very object they are striving to document.

Looking at archives historically is a relatively rare enterprise and histories of archiving processes even more so (Brothman 1993, p. 215; Cook 2009; Cox 2000). Yet, as archivist Terry Cook (2009) and historian Antoinette Burton (2005a) have made clear, to fully understand archival collections – to comprehend their scope as well as their silences and biases – both archivists and historians need to “historicize the production of ... archival collections” (Burton 2005a, p. 6). If the archive is to be seen not simply as the raw material that sustains the production of history, but rather a product of history itself, one needs to go back to the contextual forces that informed its creation and evolution. It is particularly important for a contested aspect of American history like immigration and fluctuating concepts like ethnicity and ethnic identity. Part of a founding myth of the United States, the themes of immigration and ethnicity have long been included in the collections of archives, museums and libraries. But the way these collections were constituted and managed, and the facets that were privileged, have undergone significant changes according to many factors, such as prevailing ideologies and immigration policies, demographic and political trends, the evolution of scholarship on immigration and ethnicity and the development of archival science.

Examining the processes by which archival collections are constituted – or “ethnic archiving” – will shed light on the role played by archives in the construction of another historical product – ethnicity.⁴ As some ethnic groups have long recognized, the power of the historical record to shape not only ethnic history but also ethnic identity is remarkable. Some archival scholars have also explored the connection between archival heritage and collective identities, and some historians have examined efforts by ethnic groups to shape or bend historical narratives to their advantage, using archives and other manifestations of cultural heritage.⁵ Be it through deliberate manipulation or involuntary side effects, the

⁴ The phrase “archiving as process rather than archives as things” was used by Stoler (2010, p. 20). For an in-depth reflection on the archive as historical product see Trouillot (1995).

⁵ Maybe the best study of an ethnic group's use of archives for identity purposes is Elizabeth Kaplan's study of the American Jewish Historical Society (2000). For a theoretical reflection on

archive helps bolster what Werner Sollors calls the powerful “illusion of ethnic ‘authenticity,’” (1989, p. xiv) which only the de-construction of the archiving process can help dispel.

Fact-gathering in the melting pot era: documenting “old world habits and customs”

In a 1969 article published in *The American Archivist*, historian Rudolph Vecoli (1969, pp. 140–141) aptly summarized the state of mainstream American archives pertaining to the history of immigration and ethnicity until the 1960s. He complained that historians and archivists alike had suffered from “cultural myopia” and neglected those aspects of history. Historians, he thought, had given little thought to the impact of immigration on American society, especially the formation of ethnic groups and their evolution in the United States. He pointed to the near absence of immigration and ethnicity from the major guides to archives published in the 1960s, described his own frustrations in his attempt to find relevant materials in major cultural heritage institutions, and concluded that a central aspect of North American history had remained strangely undocumented (Gjerde 1999, p. 42). Vecoli (1969, p. 140) attributed this neglect to the inability of historians and archivists to see beyond the “biases and limitations of their own cultural backgrounds,” determined by the prevailing Anglo-American perspective and a persisting belief in the melting pot ideology. For him, most Americans still believed that ethnic features were but “a fleeting stage in the process of Americanization.” Until the 1960s, indeed, research in the social history of immigration was limited. Not surprisingly, Western and Northern European immigrant groups were the best documented (Vecoli 1981, p. 4). Beside the resilient Anglo-centrism in historical scholarship and archives denounced by Vecoli, the surprising silence surrounding America’s ethnic history was also due to a political climate marked by durable support for the national origins quota system and by rising nationalism spurred by the Cold War. What is more, Americans in the 1950s were encouraged to rally around common values and to consider differences of class or ethnicity as secondary (Vecoli 1985, p. 10). This

the role of archives in identity formation see Ketelaar (2011). For studies of ethnic groups’ efforts to shape and interpret the past, see Bodnar (1991), Higham (1994), Schultz (2009).

environment provided few incentives for mainstream cultural heritage institutions to document American diversity and immigrant cultures. In Canada, the longstanding predominance of British culture, the issues raised by the presence of two “founding peoples,” and the lack of a strong sense of nationhood, created specific conditions that prevented the emergence of a melting pot ideology (Ramirez 1990, p.148). However, the question of ethnicity did not emerge in the public arena, and therefore in the preoccupations of cultural heritage institutions, until the 1960s (Ramirez 1990, p.160).

This does not mean that the history of American and Canadian immigration and ethnicity went completely unrecorded. In the late 19th and early 20th century, neglected by mainstream repositories, the more affluent and organized immigrant and ethnic groups in the United States established their own historical societies. Such societies as the American Jewish Historical Society or the German American Historical Society were semi-academic and national in scope. Their goals varied from celebrating the culture and history of their country of origin to highlighting the contributions of their people to American history, as they struggled to identify their group’s place in American society (Higham 1994, pp. 31–34; Kaplan 2000; Wesley 1952). However, they operated alongside and separately from a largely Anglo-American mainstream cultural heritage sector, as evidenced by the absence of immigrants or children of immigrants among trustees, directors and employees in national, state and local historical societies (Wax 1994, p. 59; Wesley 1952, p. 14). It is true that state and local historical societies started collecting historical sources about ethnic populations in the 19th century, and that their focus on a specific location and commitment to preserving the common man’s history led them to include some aspects of immigration history. Yet until the 1960s few of them undertook in-depth documentation of the diverse origins of their populations (Laugesen 2006, p. 202; Van Tassel 1960, p. 100). In Canada, historical societies were even less involved in documenting immigration until the 1970s. Early Canadian historical societies emphasized their British heritage in an attempt to ward off perceived Americanization threats and there were few societies organized by ethnic groups themselves (Burnet 1994). Historian John Bodnar (1991), who has examined the construction of public memory in the first half of the 20th century, notes that public tolerance and recognition of the immigrant and ethnic components in American history

dwindled or grew according to the political, economic and social contexts in which the United States operated. Celebrations and commemorations of history shifted from an emphasis on patriotism, civic loyalty and citizen contributions before World War II to a renewed focus on the themes of ethnic cultures and material progress during the Cold War. The inclusion of ethnic themes could then serve a nation-building and political purpose: “Ethnic contributions as a symbol could transform ethnic pride into national pride and acknowledge the growing political power of second- and third-generation immigrants” (Bodnar 1991, p. 139). Thus a limited form of ethnic difference became acceptable in the public forum. In Canada, during the same period, even as the dominance of British Canadians continued, government officials proudly referred to ethnic relations in the country as a “mosaic” to be contrasted to the United States’ melting pot. However, this metaphor mostly served nation-building purposes to strengthen social unity and order (Burnet 1976, p. 200).

In this context, the initiative of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin stands out. In 1955, seven years after the celebration of the state’s centennial, it launched a multi-faceted Ethnic and Nationality Groups Project. The Project consisted in a series of radio programs called *Sounds of Heritage*, an ethnic exhibit and a major collecting campaign to acquire documents and artifacts from immigrant families and ethnic communities in the state.⁶ The main objective of the project was to establish the importance of immigration in Wisconsin and to finally give it its place in the state’s official history: “To help the historians reconstruct the story of the contributions each group has made to the progress and development of the state” (SHSW, Schereck to Jones 1956). For that purpose staff travelled across the state to gather what the head of the program, William Schereck (1956b, p. 265), called the “recorded evidence” of the past – those documents and objects that lay ignored in people’s attics. The project sprang from the realization that the last living witnesses of the immigration wave of the turn of the century were passing away and that valuable materials were being lost or destroyed. It was intended to result in a quasi ethnographic study of people and places, facilitated by modern recording technology such as tape recorders and movie cameras. The project’s authors fully intended to be inclusive in their quest for “*all* documents,

⁶ The exhibit and research project are described in an article written by the head of the program (Schereck 1956a).

manuscripts and physical objects significant and pertinent to Wisconsin history,” including those in foreign languages (Schreck 1956a, p. 125).

Their awareness of the urgent need for a preservation effort, their recognition of ethnic diversity and their proactive, statewide collection development initiative placed the Wisconsin Historical Society among the leaders of ethnic archiving in the 1950s. The very use of the term “ethnic” at a time when it was not widely circulated (Rees 2007, p.5) was innovative in the world of archives. The project, however, was not without limitations. On the one hand, its creators believed that they had a duty to preserve documents and artifacts that recorded the past and to guarantee their authenticity so that historical research could advance on sound empirical foundations. As Schreck (1956b, p. 264) put it, “the museum item is the physical evidence of a way of life. ... The document is the recorded evidence of [a man’s] efforts and his intentions in the use” of such item. This approach was in-keeping with the historical society’s concern with scientific methodology, including “fact-gathering” (Laugesen 2006, p. 121). On the other hand, an often implicit and sometimes explicit goal was to celebrate the American melting pot and to reinforce the state’s and nation’s unity. A fundamental mission of the Wisconsin Historical Society, like that of other similar institutions, was to celebrate the community’s past achievements, strengthen its unity and ensure its future (Laugesen 2006, p. 122). It paid attention to the history of immigrants insofar as they contributed to *American* history, of which their state was part. Their objectives were influenced by the longstanding melting pot ideology and the Americanization movement, as well as by the growing involvement of state and federal government agencies in the celebration of American ideals inspired by the United States’ position as leader of the free world. Yet they saw no contradiction between their goal of preserving the “authentic” past and those other objectives. Initiated by a state historical society, the Wisconsin ethnic archival project had a scholarly purpose but was also intended to contribute to the construction of the state’s and the nation’s public memory. It reflected the broader tensions historical societies were experiencing, between a perceived need for professionalization and their role as “story-tellers” establishing the founding myths upon which their community thrived (Laugesen 2006).

The project also manifested the complex forces at work in memory-building. Bodnar (1991, pp. 13–20) argues that “public memory emerges from the

intersection of official and vernacular cultural expressions,” namely the official expression of national or state cultural leaders and that of small scale, specific and heterogeneous local communities. While the former is designed to reinforce social unity and continuity and to promote the interests of the whole, the latter represent a wide array of special groups that pursue their own interests. Manifestations of public memory result from compromises between all these competing interests, in ways that generally reinforce official culture while accommodating vernacular cultures. Such compromises are visible in the essentialist and folklorist conception of ethnicity that informed the public programs of the historical society’s Ethnic Project.

The meeting minutes and publications generated by the project reveal a clear assumption that Europeans who had settled in Wisconsin had brought with them a so-called ethnic culture defined by their birth and upbringing in a foreign country. After immigration some of these cultural elements wore off owing to the immigrants’ Americanization, but others persisted. The Wisconsin Historical Society was not so much interested in documenting the adaptation process caused by the immigrants’ transplantation, or a hybrid, evolving hyphenated identity, but rather in collecting the fixed vestiges of these imported cultures such as “folklore and folk customs, unique crafts and arts, and industrial and commercial skills” (Schereck 1956b, p. 263) – in other words, “materials which trace family histories back to the native land” (SHSW, Schereck to Rossman 1956), or which were created in Wisconsin “with the skills and knowledge acquired in the homeland” (Schereck 1956b, p. 265). While the Society welcomed the rich and diverse cultural heritage those objects and documents reflected, it also recognized in the immigrants and their descendents the same key American values as those of the nation’s founders, such as “the creative knowledge and genius, the high moral social order, the deep ingrained love for freedom which we call Wisconsin heritage” (Schereck 1956a, p. 124). Revealingly, the project only marginally included colored minorities. Diversity was acceptable only within the framework of a narrowly defined American community based on racial and ideological criteria.⁷ Slightly quaint and exotic, the ethnic elements that the Society favored did not threaten traditional American identity, but rather reinforced it by

⁷ For an interesting analysis of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin a-historical treatment of native Americans, see Laugesen (2006, pp. 125–158).

demonstrating the wonders of the melting pot. An introduction to the radio programs asserted that “the old world habits and customs that are still a part of [the immigrants’] daily lives are proof of the freedom and liberty that is ours” (Schereck 1956c, p. 1).

Thus interest in preserving “authentic” foreign cultural traditions converged nicely with the desire to celebrate American values. The public events associated with the Ethnic and Nationality Groups project were a popular success, in spite – or because – of the underlying tensions between its concern for authenticity and its celebratory agenda. Because they were not directly designed for public consumption, it can be assumed that the archival collections were less influenced by the celebratory agenda than the radio programs or exhibits. The Society gave its library and archives a scholarly mission, while its museum and school services divisions were committed to “taking history to the people” (Whitehill 1962, pp. 262–263). However, the archival and museal projects were intertwined, as the efforts to gather documents, images and artifacts proceeded from the same team. The context in which the Society’s ethnic archives were developed no doubt shaped not only the content of the collections but also what remained out of it.

Ethnicity as a New World phenomenon: preserving the record of sociocultural diversity

The rise of ethnic archives

Both the successes and gaps in the ethnic heritage project of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin were brought to light in the 1960s when scholars and the general public started expressing new interest in the history of immigration and ethnicity. The main reasons for this surge of interest are well-known, especially the development of social history, the civil rights movement and the rise of ethnic politics, new immigration flows, and the evolution of immigration and ethnic studies. Similar trends developed in Canada, although the political and social contexts differed due to the debate on bilingualism and biculturalism, the absence of a strong, historically-rooted sense of nationhood, and growing self-assertion by non-English, non-French ethnic groups (Palmer 1990; B. Ramirez 1990).

Research in immigration and ethnic history developed more slowly but steadily

and in cooperation with that in the United States (Burnet 1994, p. 70; Palmer 1990). Across North America the work of historians like Rudolph Vecoli and John Bodnar challenged previous scholarship and stimulated research on migration flows and the dynamic process of integration (Gerber 2011). As it became increasingly clear that ethnic culture was not equivalent to “Old World” culture but rather a creative response to “new world” conditions, research focused on the transition from immigrant to ethnic, or “ethnicization” (Conzen 1979, p. 604; Vecoli 1999, p. 122). Vecoli (1990), a prominent historian of Italian Americans and a leader in the social history of immigration, denounced the very concept of immigrant *contributions* and the traditional focus on the ethnic elite at the expense of ordinary people, whom he thought should be the focal point of immigration history.⁸ Ethnic neighborhoods and the more private aspects of ethnic life, such as family, entertainment or churchgoing, were increasingly studied. Meanwhile the American and Canadian publics were taking a liking to family history, the search for ethnic roots, and ethnic studies. In the light of the new scholarship and the rise of new generations of hyphenated citizens, ethnic traits ceased to be treated as the fixed relics of a lost culture and became part of a dynamic and changing identity.

These social, political and academic trends deeply affected the world of archives. While ethnic organizations revitalized old ethnic historical societies or created new ones, mainstream academics and archivists in both the United States and Canada set up new repositories devoted to the study of immigration and ethnic history with the help of increased public and private funding (Vecoli 1985, pp. 13–14). These initiatives arose largely in response to the needs of social historians of immigration like Vecoli, whose inability to find useful sources for his doctoral research in libraries led him to conduct field work within the Italian American community and to lead the development of the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) after 1965 (Vecoli 1981). In Canada his colleague Robert Harney, a historian of Italian immigration, followed in his footsteps and founded the Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO) in 1976 (Harney 1987). In Philadelphia, the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies was set up in 1971 with private funds. Locally, a range of institutions, from public libraries to academic research

⁸ Particularly revealing is Vecoli’s criticism of the American Museum of Immigration, which opened in 1972 after two decades of planning (Blumberg 1985).

centers, started more geographically or thematically limited ethnic collections (Grabowski 1985a; 1991, p. 50).

Collection development practices in archival institutions changed along with their mission. Traditionally, archives paid primarily attention to organizational records and the papers of the social or cultural elite. To meet the needs of social historians archivists started collecting new types of documents – those produced by individuals, families, associations and communities, including previously neglected items like private correspondence, photo albums, diaries, political pamphlets and ephemera theretofore collected only by local historical societies like that of Wisconsin. However, such materials were scattered across North America and beyond. They were sometimes hidden, often neglected, in bad repair, and of heterogeneous formats and languages. Consequently, a growing number of archivists adopted a “from the bottom up” approach to collection development, actively seeking out hidden treasures through investigative work in the field. The IHRC established extensive social networks with ethnic community representatives, following Vecoli’s assumption that “we must seek out the potential donor; he will not ordinarily come to us” (1969, p. 143). The MHSO, for its part, sent up to 350 field archivists across Ontario to establish trusted relationships within ethnic populations (Daniel 2012, p. 214). Archives collected items that allowed scholars to do history “from the bottom up,” but also from the “inside out,” allowing the immigrants’ own voices to be heard (Daniel 2010, p. 86). During the acquisition process they discovered non-traditional types of sources such as anniversary pamphlets and ethnic newspapers that they had not anticipated (Grabowski 1991, p. 53). Where no records existed they even created them through oral histories, thus breaking away from the archivists’ traditional role as a passive guardian of records created by others (Daniel 2010, p. 87). Archival practice also responded to a more complex vision of ethnicity articulated by scholars. As specialists of social history and ethnic studies challenged the essentialist and folklorist model, ethnicity came to be seen as a social construct, the product of complex adaptation processes within and across the host society rather than merely an imported object composed of biological or cultural traits from the home country. The Wisconsin Ethnic Project had defined an ethnic group as “a group of people, historically related, distinguished from other groups of people, even of the same nationality, on the basis of common traits, customs

and beliefs” (Schereck 1956a, p. 124). Scholars now questioned the very nature of ethnic identity, especially its cultural, political, and psychological dimensions, and offered new theories of instrumental, situational, or even symbolic ethnicity that took contextual factors into account. Ethnicity was now seen as a multidimensional, dynamic and ongoing process in which interested parties played an active role in response to specific contexts (Conzen, Gerber, Morawska, Pozzetta, and Vecoli 1992). Accordingly, archivists modified their institutions’ collecting scope. While earlier projects like that of the Wisconsin Historical Society placed significant emphasis on materials documenting the “old country,” archivists now explicitly gave priority to documents reflecting the American experience of immigrants. Thus the Balch Institute decided not to “acquire materials created in the countries of origin except for those which directly relate to emigration” (Bourque and Anderson 1992, p.vii). The MHSO also had strict guidelines that excluded such materials (Daniel 2012, p. 216; Harney 1977). The new collections, archivists hoped, would allow researchers to explore the components of transplanted and integration, as well as the processes of construction and reconstruction of ethnicity. It is for that reason that they sought documents owned by ordinary people, rather than the elite or formal organizations, and privileged records of everyday life that had not been considered archival material before. Collection development focused on immigrant households and ethnic neighborhoods, which scholars were most interested in (Conzen 1996, p. 21). At the same time, some archives reached out beyond the national borders in order to capture the broader contexts of migration flows, working with foreign institutions in countries of origin to provide access to documents such as “letters of America” (Daniel 2010, p. 87; Vecoli 1991, p. 44). This approach offered a richer, more nuanced and detailed image of the past, as it helped “recover the full-bodied humanity of the immigrants” (Vecoli 1969, p. 145). Furthermore, the efforts of the new social historians to bring back to life the voices of history’s forgotten people not only challenged the historical canon but also the historians’ longstanding belief in the objectivity of archives. By contesting the choices made theretofore by libraries and archives, social historians opened the door to the questioning of those institutions’ power of “life and death” over the historical record – the power to determine what future generations will be able to know of the past. More responsibility was therefore placed on archival

institutions and archivists to articulate the rationale for their collection development strategies and to demonstrate the value of their practices and collections.

To be or not to be ethnic: defining the nature of ethnicity in archives

Nevertheless, some difficult epistemological questions remained. The dramatic development of ethnic archives and the expansion of archival materials raised many questions that were not always addressed (Daniel 2010, pp. 87–89). In 1991, after two decades of social history, Timothy Ericson (1991, p. 71) criticized archivists' lack of reflection on their own practice:

Many acquisition policies of the past two decades announce a commitment to documenting the lives of “ordinary people” or the “common man,” without ever bothering really to define what constitutes “common” or “ordinary.” We speak in phrases such as “capturing the general fabric of experiences,”... We report how we are “documenting the... experience in the community.” Such statements sound good, or are useful as constructs that differentiate past from present practice, but alone they are insufficient as guidelines.

Ericson was challenging archivists to consider the subjects being documented, the format of the documents as well as the relationship between those documents and the past from which the latter emanate. The terms “capture” and “document” suggest that the archivists' mission remained the same in spite of the changes initiated in the 1960s – to preserve whatever documents are necessary to reconstitute the past as accurately as possible. It is striking that the first proponents of social history themselves often referred to their work as “real history,” or the history of “real people.” For example, in a report assessing the need for multicultural archives Harney and his colleague Harold Troper (n.d., p. 20) stated that “...care should be taken to reach the real people.” Vecoli, for his part, wanted to achieve “a realistic appraisal of our cultural diversity” (1969, p. 45). Thus it was easy for archivists to define their task as filling in the gaps left by the “old” political and institutional history and achieving a more complete or

“more representative” view of the past, a theme that was often present in the professional literature of the 1970s and 1980s.⁹

Consequently, although they showed new interest in ethnic minorities and opened up to a more dynamic and nuanced view of ethnicity, archivists often failed to articulate the implications of this concept for their professional practice. They used a variety of criteria to determine the scope of “ethnic” material to be collected – such as language, foreign birth, religion, immigrant status and color of the skin – but rarely made an explicit effort to define what made a document “ethnic” and how far “ethnic history” reached. Many took ethnicity for granted as an object of collection and study. If they made conscious collection development choices, they did not make such choices clear to the users of their archival collections, although these choices had implications for their research value.¹⁰ At best, they explicitly relied on self-identification to define the extent and boundaries of ethnicity. Thus the IHRC limited their collections to materials that documented “self-conscious ethnicity,” and excluded those that simply provided information about ethnics, or expressed outsiders’ views about them (Grigg 1985, p. 289). In the published guide to its collections, the Balch Institute laid out the definition of ethnicity they were using: “An ethnic group is an aggregate, category or group of people who, by birth, share a common culture, social structure, and/or physical appearance differing from those of other similar groups, and who identify with or are identified with that group.” It also explained that it did not “assign ethnic labels or identity” but “accepted the identity chosen by the individuals and organizations whose papers and records we collect” (Bourque and Anderson 1992, p. vii).

Such an approach contrasted with the Wisconsin project’s *ascriptive* conception of ethnicity, which assumed that ethnic membership depended on objective factors like shared history and group traits. In practice, however, reliance on ethnic self-identification raises significant questions as it encourages archivists to believe that identification as ethnic is self-explanatory. It led them to apply a contemporary concept, the product of a specific social and political context, to periods when that concept had a different meaning or did not exist. As Rees demonstrates in his political and cultural history of ethnicity, the idea was

⁹ For example, see Grabowski (1985b, p. 308).

¹⁰ See the introductions to the following guides: Forte & Scardellato (1992), Wurl & Moody (1991).

historically relative. It assumed different values and meanings as it emerged in the 1940s to explain differences within the white race, then was appropriated by black nationalist discourse in the 1960s and 1970s to provide a cultural basis for blackness (Rees 2007, p.5-6). Instead of identifying possible meanings of ethnicity, Balch archivists assumed an “I know it when I see it” approach to ethnic materials.¹¹ As a result, the archivists’ work was plagued by misunderstandings and discrepancies about the use of the term “ethnic.”

The notes of field archivists preserved in the Balch records provide evidence that they often struggled with identifying the ethnic character of materials produced by individuals or institutions for which ethnicity was at best only one of many identifiers. A 1974 internal task force recommended excluding “famous individuals who are immigrants but who distinguished themselves in areas that extend beyond ethnic lines,” such as “professional people whose ethnic identification is minimal” (HSP Task Force Final Report, 1974). Beyond the ethnicity of the records creators, Balch staff considered the ethnic character of the content of the records. To be included, authors had to “be directly linked to the ethnic community and the content of his work must incorporate his ethnic experiences to merit inclusion in the collection” (HSP Task Force Final Report, 1974). In practice, though, identifying such “ethnic experiences” was not easy. Immigrants and their descendents did not always consider themselves “ethnic.” Thus in his answer a letter of solicitation by the Balch, a potential donor asserted that there was “nothing appropriate to ethnic research and study” in the papers of an Italian American judge (HSP, Cercone to Mooney, 1972). Furthermore, some collections encompassed what Balch staff identified as both “ethnic” and “non ethnic” materials. For example, some of the materials in the papers of Abraham Hurschman, a prominent Jewish lawyer of Latvian origin who was active in Democratic politics, did not clearly qualify as “ethnic” because they related to his professional activities (HSP, Hurschman Collection, 1974).¹²

In fact, as Conzen (1991, p. 28) has noted, “the issue of ethnicity runs through virtually every kind of documentary record that Americans have produced.” It can also extend beyond self-conscious activism, and it is always closely intertwined

¹¹ These are the words used by a 1992 study of the Balch Library ((HSP, Balch Institute Library Evaluation, 1993)

¹² See also the case of Dr. Sturgis, a Swedish American with mixed Huguenot and German origins (HSP, Stone Memo, 1973).

with other aspects of individuals' and organizations' lives. In that sense the selection of what belongs in ethnic archives and the organization of ethnic collections could not but be based on arbitrary decisions that cut through the complexity and messiness of social reality. While useful, reliance on self-identified ethnicity discouraged archivists from investigating and articulating the conceptual framework of the collection development decision-making process.

The blinkers of the pluralist emphasis

Finally, many American archivists described their undertaking in terms of recognition and celebration of diversity and pluralism, thus unwittingly replacing the ideology of the melting pot with another mantra. Typical is Nicholas Montalto's (1978, p. 404) description of the activities of the IHRC and his encouragement to fellow archivists to preserve "the documentary record of our social and cultural diversity," to "document the experience of the poor and the powerless, to recapture the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of millions of ordinary folk, and to make the archives a creative and community-centered institution meeting a new and expanded set of social needs." Describing the IHRC's mission, Vecoli (1981, p. 13) concurred that a "truly inclusive" conception of American history was necessary. These statements reflect the reshaping of American public memory in the wake of white ethnic revival, political demand for recognition of ethnic identities, and new public and academic interest in American pluralism. At the same time, governmental and cultural elites felt the need to reaffirm the nation's social unity and loyalty and worked to reformulate the national narrative to accommodate vernacular diversity, giving new life to the motto "e pluribus unum."

In Canada, where successive governments were busy fighting cultural and regional divisions and building a stronger sense of nationhood, multiculturalism became official federal policy after 1971. Many funding opportunities were available to institutions and individuals interested in the promotion of cultural diversity. Initially, the government prioritized heritage and educational projects. Thus the MHSO was created with a multi-million dollar grant from the province of Ontario to document the history of immigration and ethnic diversity and encourage the development of knowledge on the contributions of cultural minorities to the growth of the province (Daniel 2012). Although the United

States did not adopt an official policy and Americans were arguably more ambivalent about multiculturalism, there too, governmental agencies were supportive of cultural heritage initiatives studying and celebrating American ethnic groups. The Ethnic Heritage Studies Act signed into law by President Nixon in 1972 helped stimulate ethnic studies initiatives nationwide (J. M. Anderson 1979). To be sure, Canadian provincial and federal governments played a significantly greater role in the management of ethnic relations and identities than did their American counterparts (B. Ramirez 1991, pp. 177–178). As director of the MHSO, Harney often complained about the impact of government policy on his institution's priorities and financial constraints but also recognized that only massive commitment on the part of government could sustain this kind of initiatives (Daniel 2012). Nevertheless, multiculturalism as an ideology became a powerful force in the American education and cultural heritage systems in the 1980s. In both countries, cultural heritage institutions embraced ethnic diversity in their mission and policies. Their reliance on public and private grants for their operations made them even more receptive to a political climate that favored diversity awareness and other issues related to ethnicity.

Thus the new ethnic archives often expressed their public mission in terms of fighting ethnic stereotypes and promoting true understanding through scholarly work and public education. For Vecoli (1981, p. 13), the aim was “to educate (or reeducate) ourselves regarding what is American history.” The MHSO and the Balch Institute, which had both a public and scholarly component, placed public education explicitly in their mission (Daniel 2012). The Balch, for example, strove to document and interpret the “multicultural heritage” of Americans in order to “promote greater inter-group understanding and a stronger, more tolerant and cohesive society” (HSP, Statement of Mission, 1988). The scholarly and public missions had different requirements that could lead to different representations of ethnic diversity, because the public mission was influenced by the political context to a greater degree. Thus Harney feared that the MHSO would overemphasize public events like exhibits at the expense of their scholarly mission and focus on ethnic groups' achievements and hardships rather than less glamorous, aspects of day-to-day life (Daniel 2012; Palmer 1990, p. 78). The fight against discrimination and the promotion of cultural diversity upheld their own stereotypes, informed by the conviction that cultural retention was permanent and

by a focus on the societal benefits of cultural pluralism. Whether through the challenge of the melting pot ideology in the United States, or the celebration of the cultural mosaic in Canada, the official approach minimized the assimilative processes at work in migration flows as well as the challenges and hardships experienced by immigrants and host communities.

Finally, this approach contributed to the “essentialization” of ethnicity by giving it a certain obviousness, treating it as an a priori category inherent in the nature of immigrants and their descendents, and assuming it would endure. Such essentialization was facilitated by a political context that encouraged ethnic groups to minimize internal divisions and present a more homogeneous front to gain political advantage (Daniel 2012, p. 222; B. Ramirez 1991, p. 174).

Voluntarily or not, archivists became active agents in its promotion through the acquisition and public display of new collections that documented ethnic resilience. Yet few of them explicitly analyzed the impact of the political and social context in which they operated and the implications of their combined scholarly, political, educational and memory-building objectives when developing their ethnic collections, leaving their users clueless about the ways such objectives may have affected the content of the collections and their silences.

All in all, the evolution of scholarship and public memory until the 1990s were conducive to a heightened view of ethnicity and diversity. In a 1996 article on the historiography of immigration Kathleen Conzen (1996, pp. 20–21) analyzed the benefits of the historians’ “pluralist revolt” in the late 1960s and 1970s and its focus on ethnic retention. But she also noted that “the pluralist emphasis [wore] blinkers of its own.” Its “unexamined assumptions” shaped the research agenda in a way that gave priority to ethnic communities as places rather than individual trajectories, “where the odds of finding ethnic maintenance are greatest.” She identified the historian’s bias toward “inward-looking” records documenting ethnic autonomy at the expense of materials reflecting immigrants’ interactions with people or institutions outside the group. The historians’ interest for internal ethnic culture and for immigrants’ self-perceptions is echoed in many archivists’ analysis of their work from the 1960s to 1980s, as previously mentioned. The focus on the “internal life of the immigrant groups” accounts for the acquisition of sources “that permit the immigrant to speak in his or her own voice” (CDIE Planning Committee 1991b, p. 13). Because of limited means archival institutions

prioritized geographically identifiable ethnic neighborhoods and the records of organizations that were easy to recognize as ethnic or materials that had clear ethnic content. Thus, for the so-called Anthracite project the Balch Institute identified a coal-mining region in north-eastern Pennsylvania where “ethnic group identification had remained a strong and enduring factor” (R. J. Anderson 1985, p. 302). The focus on strongly ethnic areas or organizations, along with reliance on self-identification, probably led to over-representation of actively ethnic individuals and institutions.

In 1985, inspired by new archival literature about collection development theory and practice, IHRC curator Susan Grigg (1985) published an article that raised key questions about collecting strategies for ethnic records and the scope and limits of ethnic collections. She pointed out the pragmatic need for clear collection development policies that would rely on an analysis of the universe of documentation and determine which aspects of ethnicity archives would focus on. Yet she also considered the complexity of selecting ethnic materials “within a composite of topical, geographic and chronological limits.” She was torn between her awareness of the need for a pragmatic and therefore narrowly defined collection development policy and her recognition of the elusive and changing nature of ethnicity, which challenged the archivist’s ambition of representativeness. On the one hand she argued that the best strategies to document immigration and ethnicity were to collect “by institution and by community,” since those were “the principal public means by which ethnic group members relate to one another;” on the other hand, she recognized that for large and dispersed communities that had not generated easily identifiable ethnic materials through ethnic activism, developing collections would be difficult (Grigg 1985, p. 293). Referring to the descendents of immigrants, she noted that “the ethnicity that is an element of contemporary culture is relatively inaccessible to standard document-gathering techniques” (Grigg 1985, p. 295). In internal IHRC documents she appeared to struggle over the ambiguity of ethnic boundaries for collection development purposes. She recognized that the IHRC’s emphasis on the records of specific ethnic organizations stemmed in part from the ease with which such institutions could be identified and tracked (HSP, Grigg to Rutkowski, 1983).

The archival turn: redefining ethnicity in the digital era

In 1991 American and Canadian historians and archivists organized a conference to measure the work done and determine future initiatives for “documenting diversity.” Participants decided to continue to gather and preserve the records of the immigrant experience, to reach out to ethnic organizations, and to collect “non-traditional” types of sources that more accurately documented ethnic life (CDIE Planning Committee 1991b; Grabowski 1991). They expressed frustration at the tensions they felt between the passion for collecting expressed by ethnic organizations and driven by ethnic pride, and the need for professionalism, which only mainstream institutions and practices could provide (Grabowski 1991, p. 50). They rightly identified the need to define the scope of ethnicity and the difficulty of tracing ethnic materials across heterogeneous archival collections determined by other collecting needs (CDIE Planning Committee 1991b, pp. 7–8; Grabowski 1991, p. 51). The growing complexity of immigration and ethnic history, caused by theoretical developments and the emergence of new methodologies such as quantitative analysis, left archivists with more questions than answers about the “veracity and viability of sources.” They knew their ethnic collections were incomplete and unbalanced, but the diversity and disorganization of these materials prevented them from determining how collections could become more inclusive (CDIE Planning Committee 1991b, p. 9; Grabowski 1991, p. 55; Wurl 1991, p. 61).

Even as they were articulating plans address these challenges, the scholarship of ethnic and immigration history was evolving. As immigration picked up after the 1970s and non European and non-western minority populations expanded in North America, the focus of scholarship and the public debate shifted to include these new minorities. By the 1990s immigration historians were at a crossroads, reconsidering the relations between immigration and ethnicity and exploring new interdisciplinary approaches (Gabaccia 1999). New scholars criticized their predecessors for ignoring the centrality of race in the experience of non-European immigrants, thus rendering the latter invisible. They developed historical narratives based on stories of oppression in which racial prejudice, governmental policies and bureaucratic control complemented or replaced the migration

experience as the key determinants of ethnic identities.¹³ The presence of non western cultures also put into relief the historically relative nature of the conceptions of ethnicity and pluralism that were developed in the 1960s and 1970s, which focused on European immigrants and their descendents. In addition to ethnicity, historians turned their attention to an ever larger number of factors shaping identities, such as race, gender, religion, language and class, and to the interactions between them. They moved beyond the simple dichotomy between the assimilation model and a vision of a pluralistic America characterized by the juxtaposition of ethnically distinct communities. Olivier Zunz (1985) questioned both models and invited historians to examine large scale factors that cut across ethnic lines – a call that triggered new examinations of the role of ethnicity in American society. Dirk Hoerder's (1996) research took into account structural factors before, during and after migration to explain the migrants' experience with acculturation. Furthermore, with the decline of Euro-American ethnic institutions that had been the focus of study in the 1970s, scholars expanded their exploration of cultural and symbolical signifiers of ethnicity such as historical associations, festivals and the construction of ethnic memory (Bodnar 1991; Schultz 1991). Simultaneously, growing geographic mobility within the host country and diasporic phenomena challenged views about the spatial and social structures of ethnicity, leading scholars to shift their focus away from distinct ethnic neighborhoods and toward translocal or global frameworks (Gabaccia and Ruíz 2006, p. 4).

In the 1990s, the public perception of ethnicity shifted as a cultural and political backlash to the celebration of cultural pluralism developed in both the United States and Canada, based on fears of divisions and tensions that might threaten national unity (Bissoondath 1994; Schlesinger 1991). At the same time, however, the enthusiasm of Americans and Canadians alike for family history and ancestry continued unabated, including interest in their ethno-racial origins. The impact of these distinct, sometimes contradictory, trends was felt by the curators of ethnic archives. As scholarly and popular interest in European immigration waned and collection development efforts plateaued, Joel Wurl, an IHRC archivist, noted in 2003 that three decades after its creation the IHRC's focus on white ethnics was

¹³ See the special "State of the Field" forum of the *Journal of American Ethnic History* in Summer 1999 (Gjerde 1999).

sometimes seen as outdated and eurocentric (CDIE Planning Committee 1991b, p. 8; Wurl 2003, p. 34). As the political clout of white Euro-American organizations declined, governmental support and funding opportunities dwindled. In Canada the policy of multiculturalism remained in place but federal and provincial funding for cultural projects fell and the MHSO, which relied primarily on public funds, was forced to sharply reduce its activities (Daniel 2012, pp. 212, 224). Canadian officials now gave precedence to the fight against discrimination over cultural promotion. In the United States, grant providers stopped prioritizing ethnic cultural heritage projects.¹⁴ Through the 1990s, the Balch Institute was plagued with financial problems until it merged with the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in 2002. The IHRC, on the other hand, remained – perhaps because of its more stable source of funding within the University of Minnesota. At the same time, American and Canadian archival institutions came under increasing pressure to diversify their staff and management, as their predominantly white labor force seemed at odds with the fight against racial discrimination in society at large (Adkins 2008).

The intellectual foundations of ethnic archiving were also under scrutiny in the 1990s. On the one hand, the practice of developing and structuring collections based on the institutions and communities of specific ethnic groups was put into question. In a 1992 evaluation of the Balch Institute's library, three independent professionals suggested that the Balch consider the recent scholarship connecting immigration and labor history, as well as the intersection of ethnicity with factors like class, gender or work, and “move collecting away from the emphasis on individual ethnic groups and the ways in which communities were self-consciously ethnic” (HSP, Balch Institute Library Evaluation, 1993). This reflected growing criticism of historians' exclusive focus on ethnic maintenance and neighborhoods and their relative neglect of intergroup relations (Conzen 1996, p. 21; Vecoli 1990, p. 52).¹⁵ On the other hand, increasing recognition in the cultural heritage sector of the validity of non-western systems of knowledge production and transmission, especially those of oral cultures, challenged the western archival tradition centered on the written record. In Canada, court

¹⁴ In his 1988 annual report, the Director of the Balch Institute Library noted that he had received “strong indications” that the National Endowment for the Humanities would no longer fund ethnic archiving projects (HSP, Annual Report, 1988).

¹⁵ See also a review of a 1994 Balch exhibit in the *Journal of American History* that criticizes its approach, with each ethnic group standing “alone, united and indivisible” (Hirsch 1994, p. 204).

decisions led to legal recognition of oral testimonies and other forms of non-textual evidence, leading archivists to examine the differences and connections between written and oral forms of “communication, documentation and memory making” (Millar 2006, p. 345; Pylypchuk 1991). In the United States, growing interest for Indian, Asian, Hispanic and African heritage stimulated discussion on the nature and extent of the historical record.

The impact of the archival turn

In the late 1990s, the theoretical debate triggered by the “archival turn” brought new light on these issues and fueled new reflections on the mission of archives and the nature of their collections. The publication of Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever* in 1995 captured a movement that was already under way but had deep repercussions in academia and beyond. Scholars and cultural heritage professionals were inspired by Derrida’s concept of archivization, according to which the archive manifests a power of “consignation,” that is to say literally of “gathering together signs” into “a single corpus, in a system or a synchrony in which all the elements articulate the unity of an ideal configuration” (Derrida 1995, p. 10). This process is such that “archivization produces as much as it records the event.” As Derrida (1995, p. 17) put it,

...the archive, as printing, writing, prosthesis, or hypomnesic technique in general is not only the place for stocking and for conserving an archivable content of the past which would exist in any case, such as, without the archive, one still believes it was or will have been. No, the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content even in its very coming into existence and in its relationship to the future.

In this light, archives – as place and institution – are no longer the receptacle but the place of production of information. As a document, the archive is no longer the raw material of history, but a historical product. Derrida’s analysis brings us to a new stage in the epistemological transformation of history’s relationship to its sources, which Michel Foucault (1972, p. 6) had already announced in 1969 in the *Archaeology of Knowledge*. Archival records are no longer traces, voices or relics that reveal the past and introduce it into our present, but rather creations of our

present that offer representations of the past. The existence of a document, its inscription into the archives, its location in relation to other documents, all result from human choices influenced by specific political, economic, social or ideological contexts. In that sense, archives tell us more about the present than about the past.

Scholars in many disciplines have explored the theoretical implications of the “archival turn,” among them anthropologists. Ann Laura Stoler (2002, 2010), a specialist of colonial cultures and ethnographic methods, has written extensively on the archival turn of her profession. In *Along the Archival Grain*, she uses the case of the colonial archives of the 19th century Netherlands Indies to demonstrate the need to consider archival institutions in the political context of their production and to look at archival documents as more than neutral pieces of historical evidence. Stoler and other anthropologists have explored the connection between archival and political power in colonial settings, a connection Derrida (1995, p. 4) had summarized with the statement that “there is no political power without control of the archive.” Thus Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) analyzed the archival silences of the Haitian Revolution in *Silencing the Past*. Not surprisingly, the archival turn is contemporary to the development of postcolonial and diaspora studies, and more generally to the growing interest of ethnic studies scholars for non white racial minorities.¹⁶ The epistemological reflection on archival sources has led to a questioning of the role of archives in maintaining the dominant groups’ political and social control over populations as well as in propagating ethnocentric historical narratives.

Historians, however, have been slow to embrace the archival turn. The challenge to historical objectivity and theories inspired by postmodernism have undoubtedly opened the question of “the relationship between how knowledge is conceived and acquired and how power is distributed,” including the mediatory role of language and “forms of documentary representation” (Kessler Harris 1997, p. 238).¹⁷ Postmodern historians have focused on the archive as textual and non-textual language through which representations of the past are mediated (Joyce and Kelly 1991). Yet few historians have considered the archive as process rather

¹⁶ For an overview of the scholarship on colonial records and the impact of postcolonial studies, see Bastian (2006). For a theoretical introduction to the role of archivists in the shaping of national history and collective memory, see Brown and Davis Brown (1998).

¹⁷ Kessler Harris quotes the phrase “forms of documentary representation” from Joyce & Kelly (1991, p. 208).

than source, the constitution of archival collections rather than their use by historians. As Cook (2009, pp. 509–510) points out, Peter Novick, through the 629 pages of *That Noble Dream*, does not once mention the role of archives and archivists in his questioning of objectivity in history. In *History and Criticism*, Dominick LaCapra (1985, p. 38) warns against professional historians who “see texts as documents in the narrow sense of the word” (that is to say for their evidentiary nature) and ignore the “textual dimension,” namely the ways “documents ‘process’ or rework materials in ways intimately bound up with larger socio-cultural or political processes.” He also criticizes the historian’s temptation to see in the archive “a literal substitute for the ‘reality’ of the past which is ‘always already’ lost for the historian” – but he does so only in a footnote and he focuses on the mediation of language rather than that of archiving processes (LaCapra 1985, p. 92, note 17, 1995). LaCapra, like most historians, is concerned with the subjectivity of record creators, but not that of record curators. Similarly Carolyn Steedman’s *Dust* (2002), a collection of essays that revisit the historian’s conception of, and relation to the archives, challenges the historian’s desire to make direct contact with the past through authentic documents but neglects the role of archivists (Tollebeek 2004).¹⁸ For historians the temptation is still great to believe that they “discover” documents in archival boxes and to ignore the procedures and agents that were necessary to make those documents discoverable. Inspired by the challenge to historical objectivity, Joy Parr (1995, p. 372) pointed out to her colleague historians that interpretation begins long before they start writing – when the archives boxes are opened. Recalling her observation, Cook (2009, p. 511) responded that one should go back even further to understand the process of “historical meaning-making,” which begins not when the box is opened, but when the box is filled.

Those historians who have taken the archival turn and drawn consequences for their own practice tend to be historians of women, ethnic minorities, or

¹⁸ For more on these issues, see the essays in Blouin and Rosenberg (2007). The essays were written by scholars in various disciplines, including history and archives, but those that deal with archiving processes and archivists were written by archivists. The irony is that scholars have studied the development of archives in history –especially the role of archives as instruments of governance and imperial domination – but dislike studying archives as their sources. For example they have studied record-keeping bureaucracies in places as varied as colonial Peru, the 19th-century British Indian Empire and Nazi Germany, analyzing how governments have created, policed and used archives for political purposes. See Bayly (2000), Burns (2010), and Ernst (1999). For more examples, see Stoler (2002, pp. 95–96).

colonialism. In *Archives Stories*, a 2005 book of essays on historians' archival experiences, a majority of the contributions dealt with colonial archives and the presence of minorities in archives (Burton 2005b). In 2010 *Contesting Archives* reflected on ways to "find women" who are "hidden" in the historical record (Chaudhuri, Katz, and Perry 2010). Both investigate how archives reflect, and contribute to, unequal distributions of power between social groups. Archives are conceptualized as institutions that participate in the perpetuation of the majority's political, economic, cultural and sometimes racial dominance. As Foucault had already shown, and as postcolonial studies confirmed, archives are "documents of exclusion" (Hamilton, Harris, and Reid 2002, p. 8). Thus the contributions in *Archive Stories* and *Contesting Archives* either encouraged scholars to read traditional official archival sources "against the grain," – to look for "subtexts and silences" (Chaudhuri Katz, and Perry 2010, p. xv) – or "along the grain" – to better understand the rules, codes and ethnocentrism of their production (Stoler 2010).¹⁹

For archivists, the epistemological impact of postmodernism and the archival turn has been considerable (Daniel 2010, p. 89-93), causing archivists and historians to drift further apart in their approach to the historical record. Archival theory has challenged the very foundation of the archivist's profession – her mission as a neutral guardian of archives. For Cook (2001, p. 28), "[p]ostmodernism requires archivists to accept, even celebrate, their own historicity, their own role in the historical process of creating archives, and their own biases." The archivist has now switched from the role of an active collector, which he had acquired in the 1960s and 1970s, to that of co-creator of archives and therefore of history. Her mission is formulated in terms of representation rather than representativeness. All her activities are now conceived as mediation. Thus Tom Nesmith (1999) states that the archivist's tasks all act like filters that add new layers of meaning to the collections – from appraisal to arrangement and description. The creation of subject guides and finding aids, the digitization of archives, the organization of exhibits, preservation and other actions all contribute to shaping the visibility and meaning of the collections. Once constituted, therefore, archival collections are

¹⁹ Bastian (2006, pp. 273–275) aptly summarized the "against the grain" and "along the grain" approaches. For an overview of research produced by the archival turn, see also Hamilton, Harris, Taylor, et al. (2002).

not fixed; rather, they continue to change, as archivists continue to care for them (Derrida 1995, p. 17; Manoff 2004, p. 12).

Societal provenance, participatory archiving and “shared stewardship”

These developments, which have led archivists to a more critical view of their practices based on increasing awareness of their historical relativity, provided fertile ground for the exploration of new ideas about the theory and practice of ethnic archiving. One such idea sprang from a theoretical challenge to the traditional archival principle of provenance, which refers to the individuals or institutions that authored the records. In 2002, Nesmith (2002, p. 35) argued for the extension of provenance to “the societal and intellectual contexts” shaping the actions of the individual or institutional records creators. A few years later he laid out an influential theory of societal provenance (Nesmith 2006). At the same time Wurl (2005) suggested that ethnicity should not just be a theme of collections but provide a context of origin that archivists should take into account lest they objectify the ethnic groups they seek to document (Daniel 2010, pp. 95–96). As Barbara Craig (2002, p. 289) has noted, cultural communities are characterized by “explicit ideas and actions, implicit assumptions, and available technologies, which are joined in the concept and system of recordkeeping.” To better understand the recordkeeping practices of specific ethnic communities and make sense of the cultural values that imbue a community’s records with specific meanings, archivists and scholars need to explicitly document the complex, multiple contexts in which the records are created. Thus Craig (2002, p. 289) encouraged archivists to view provenance “as richly as possible, as source, as transmission over time, as locations,” while Wurl (2005, p. 70) urged them to consider ethnicity as one of many relevant social groupings.

The notion of collective provenance has also been theorized by Jeannette Bastian (2006, p. 283) who argues that the immediate (individual or corporate) provenance of colonial records should be complemented by a broader authoring context that includes the voices of the colonized. In the case of colonial regimes, limiting provenance to the direct record creators – generally the colonizers – leads to a distorted representation of history in favor of the dominant group; instead, a

more expansive and flexible understanding of provenance allows archivists to “read the record as part of and contributing to that context” and to offer “the full interpretation of the record.” As Nesmith (2006) pointed out, even official government records are not just *about* minorities; they document negotiations between a multiplicity of actors, including the record creators, the people being documented, and people who were in contact with the records or interpreted them over time. In this perspective, the contextualization of records and the inclusion of societal provenance during the archiving process should enable the preservation of culturally-specific meanings and a plurality of interpretations along with the records themselves. Concretely, this implies a much broader and more adaptable conception of the historical record that recognizes diverse systems of knowledge and goes beyond textual materials to include oral tradition, recorded performances, and other forms of knowledge transmission. It also implies re-examining the actors and processes of archiving so that those cultural contexts can be respected.

Various strategies have been formulated that address one or several aspects of this agenda. Following many postmodernist archival theorists, Wurl (2005) recommended that ethnic archivists give up the principle of custodianship and adopt that of stewardship. If archivists are no longer to act as guardians but co-creators of archives, he wrote (2005, p. 72), the former “subjects” of archival collections should be treated as actors and partners. Thus the transfer of documents to the archives should not mark the end of the relationship between donors and archivists, but rather its beginning. This has led archival scholars to a participatory model of archiving by which ethnic communities contribute to the archiving process from the appraisal of materials to arrangement and description, access and preservation (Shilton and Srinivasan 2007). Participatory archiving departs dramatically from the modern Western archival tradition, which gives the archival professional sole responsibility for the management of archives. While it may have value for all archives, in the case of immigration and ethnicity it has particular importance as it seeks to circumvent eurocentrism and the objectification of minorities in archives.

While the new ethnic archives that developed in mainstream institutions in the late 1960s explicitly sought to document ethnic groups from within, participatory archiving goes further. Through collaborative appraisal the creators of cultural

materials themselves select what will be archived, based on criteria of importance to them. In that sense participatory archiving helps preserve the contextual value of archival material such as the ethnic community that authored them perceives it (Shilton and Srinivasan 2007, p. 95). As a result, it not only relies on a group's self-defined ethnic identity but also strives to respect the multifaceted ways groups may construct and negotiate identities. More importantly still, participatory archiving aims to associate the record creators with the management of collections over time, thus allowing the collections to be treated as living archives rather than relics, and to evolve as ethnic identities change. Participatory archiving, therefore, serves a dual, archival and political purpose. It aims both to democratize the production of history by giving ethnic minorities more control over archiving and to provide scholars with richer, more varied and nuanced material to study the past. At the same time, in participatory archiving projects collecting diversely means not only documenting under-represented communities and themes but also documenting the diversity within those communities. As Ramirez warned, "if an archivist's and/or archive's intent is to collect and document simply in order to contradict the lack of historical evidence of under-documented groups, they risk crafting a historical picture that overemphasizes uniform and overly positive representations" (M. H. Ramirez 2009, p. 5). Opening the archiving process to a multiplicity of agents helps ensure the inclusion of diverse identifications.

Indigenous archives in Australia, New Zealand and Canada have been at the forefront of participatory archiving. In Australia, the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Protocols for Libraries, Archives, and Information Services*, published in 1995, has inspired many initiatives (ATSILIRN 2012). The "Trust and Technology: Building Archival Systems for Indigenous Oral Memory" project was initiated in 2004 to identify strategies to archive indigenous knowledge through participation (Trust & Technology Project 2012). Some cultural heritage institutions have incorporated indigenous values in their governance structures and procedures, and proceed from the legal recognition of the rights of indigenous communities to their traditional knowledge (Iacovino 2010). In New Zealand, partnerships between archival institutions and Maori have been forged for the curation of Maori materials (Morse 2012). In Canada, mainstream institutions are increasingly trying to involve First Nations in the creation and management of

their own collections (Rydz 2010, p. 55), although participatory practices are more advanced in museums (Laszlo 2006; Rydz 2010, p.70). In the United States, the *Protocols for Native American Archival Materials* were developed in 2006 at the initiative of Native American and non Native American professionals who identified best practices for “culturally responsive care and use” of Indian archives held by mainstream organizations (2007).

While the case of indigenous archives may be considered unique due to the legal status of these communities, similar participatory strategies may apply in other contexts. As cultural heritage institutions in the United States and Canada work to include the history of new immigrants and ethnic minorities, especially Asians, Hispanics and African Americans, some have adopted forms of participatory archiving. While collaboration with ethnic communities had been widely practiced in early ethnic archiving projects by mainstream institutions like the IHRC and the Balch, more recent initiatives seek to expand community engagement beyond the acquisition – or transfer – process, to incorporate the public into the curation of the collections and to empower donors and their communities. For example, although part of the UC Irvine libraries, the Southeast Asian Archive was developed in 1987 at the initiative of Vietnamese refugees (Fujita-Rony and Frank 2003). The archive, considered by its staff as a “grassroots collection,” benefitted from an advisory board that included people from the local Vietnamese community as well as university staff. Projects like an itinerant exhibit illustrate the priority given to community support (Fujita-Rony and Frank 2003, pp. 161–162). Whereas this project ultimately rested on the leadership and commitment of an academic institution, other projects encourage ethnic groups to take on archiving tasks themselves with the help of professionals. Thus the *Latino Documentation Project* of the New York State Archives aimed to encourage archiving projects for, by or in collaboration with, New York’s Latino populations (New York Heritage Documentation Project 2002). To that effect a guide destined for interested communities was released in 2002. Based on a challenge to the socially accepted concepts of Latinos and Hispanics, it posited the racial, cultural, and national diversity of the Latino and Latin American populations in New York State as the starting point for collaborative archiving initiatives. It simultaneously encouraged archivists to rethink their practice to incorporate multifaceted and changing identities and advised community members

about the documentation process. Thus it described the steps record creators and curators could take together to ensure that the diversity of Latino history would be preserved (M. H. Ramirez 2009, pp. 8–9).

Such initiatives are based on varying degrees of community participation and generally preserve the central function and authority of professional archivists. Some projects, however, strive for full participation and co-curation. Thus the *Gibugadin-a-maa goom* digital archive project aims to create an Ojibwe archive that includes documents, images, artifacts and video recordings chosen by Ojibwe people and that lets Ojibwe people “create their own taxonomies for their own history” (Powell 2007, p. 176). Even if co-curation is still at best in infancy today, “the old paradigm can no longer hold” (Cook 2012, p. 20) by which archivists acted as the sole experts in charge of appraising, acquiring and curating records. Instead, archivists are finding new roles for themselves and forging new partnerships in a world where technology empowers individuals and communities to communicate, collect and publish on their own. As Cook argues (2012, p.20), professional archivists can transform themselves into “mentors, facilitators, coaches, who work in the community to encourage archiving.” In this new world, “shared stewardship” will be the norm (Cook 2012, p. 21).

Representations and expressions of ethnicity in digital archives

New communication and information technologies are instrumental in the development of participatory archiving endeavors. On the one hand, they make it easier for non experts to create and disseminate collections, to publish a variety of content, to create virtual communities and otherwise communicate across space and time. They account in part for the multiplication of independent community archives (Bastian and Alexander 2009; Byrne 2008; Cook 2012, p.19; Oiarzabal 2012). On the other hand, new technologies allow cultural heritage institutions to engage the public more extensively and deeply in the creation and management of collections, from simple tagging of digital records to co-curation of online exhibits. A growing number of mainstream archives are experimenting with forms of crowdsourcing to expand access to, and interpretation of, their collections (Oomen and Aroyo 2011; Shilton and Srinivasan 2007; Yakel, Shaw, and Reynolds 2007). By facilitating user participation, new generations of digital

archives enable forms of “decentralized curation” by which records creators, users and professional archivists can all play a role and stronger relationships between them can develop. “Decentralized curation” – a term used by Isto Huvila (2008, p. 25) to describe the principle behind two Finnish archives, the Saari and Kajaani archives – refers to the challenge to the centrality of the archivist’s role and corresponds to a “radical user orientation.” For ethnic archives, therefore, web 2.0 technologies hold a lot of potential. They make possible “decentralized” and culturally responsive archives in which stakeholders can co-curate their documentary heritage, thus opening the door to challenges of dominant Western or Anglo-American archival procedures and authority.

It is unclear, however, how digital technologies will affect ethnic archiving, as existing projects are still in the experimental stage. In 2006, Ramesh Srinivasan and Katie Shilton, who laid out the theory of participatory appraisal, announced plans to set up the South Asian Web, an online information system for the South Asian diaspora based on participatory design (2006). Yet the project has not been implemented to date. Many other initiatives are in the developing stages.

Digitizing Chinese Englishmen, a digital archive launched by Adeline Koh (Koh n.d.-a) in early 2012 to address an “archival silence” – that of British imperialism in Victorian Britain –, ambitions to “provide an avenue to reread and expand the cultural repository of representations of non-white people.” Issues of the *Straits Chinese Magazine* have been digitized and put online, but further plans to allow user input through paragraph-level annotation and a mobile interface have yet to be implemented. For The Plateau People’s Web Portal (Plateau Peoples’ Web Portal n.d.-a), a multimedia digital archive of materials of the Umatilla, Coeur d’Alene and Yakama nations held by the Washington State University libraries, tribal administrators have begun to “add tribal knowledge, edit the existing information, add new content that enriches the materials, add tags, and flag the material as culturally sensitive.” Creating Collaborative Catalogs, a multi-institution, grant-funded project, started exploring distributed information systems to share native American museum collections in 2010 (Boast 2011, 2012).

Projects that have reached completion so far have less ambitious goals and strive for user participation but not co-curation or decentralization. Started in the United Kingdom in 2005, the Moving Here digital archive (National Archives n.d.-a) is dedicated to the history of immigration to England and contains materials

provided by mainstream cultural heritage institutions as well as interested individuals. As of late 2012 it included over 1000 stories submitted by immigrants of all ethnic origins. With a mission “[t]o overcome barriers to the direct involvement of minority ethnic groups in recording and documenting their own history of migration,” (National Archives n.d.-b) Moving Here provides immigrants with opportunities to speak in their own voice, but within a framework defined and controlled by the archives’ staff.

Beside decentralized curation, digital technologies also allow archives to diversify the content of collections, their organizational structure and their interpretations. Culturally responsive archiving and interest in societal provenance have eroded the relevance of the distinction between textual and artifactual materials, between written documents and oral tradition, and between print and digital media. An ever greater range of formats and genres may qualify as archival, including the recording of live events that contribute to the shaping of collective memory such as music performances, carnivals or rituals, as well as even less traditional forms of expression like tattoos (Bastian 2009; Wright 2009). With digital archives, various forms of cultural expressions can be placed together in collections that can be seamlessly searched or browsed. While multimedia archives pose unique technical challenges that require professional expertise, from the user’s standpoint they offer integrated access to a range of materials that traditional archives kept strictly separated but that are all part of a community’s history. The separation between archival and artifactual materials, which Harney deplored as detrimental to the complete understanding of an ethnic group, can now be more easily overcome (Daniel 2012, p. 214). Furthermore, digital technologies provide a “much better medium than print culture for capturing the fluidity, spontaneity and multilayered quality” of oral cultures. Thus, a digital recording documenting an Ojibwe spokesperson’s interaction with a drum displayed a distinctly Ojibwe epistemology in ways that were richer and more nuanced than any textual or pictorial representation (Powell 2007, pp. 177–178).

Furthermore, the transfer of archives online allows for collaboration between geographically separated individuals and institutions and for the clustering and re-clustering of materials formerly isolated in archival silos. It has facilitated the development of partnerships – between ethnic and mainstream organizations, between different ethnic communities or between geographically separated

members of ethnic groups across national borders. For example the South Asian Digital Archive brings together a variety of digital objects emanating from different places and owners who keep physical control over their materials.²⁰ More importantly, the digital medium can accommodate multiple and flexible representations and interpretations of digital collections by curators and users. Such representations and interpretations are not predetermined but emerge from user participation and interaction. In the Saari and Kajaani archives, “there is no predetermined consensual community. The ‘community’ is a sum of all individual structures, descriptions, orders, and viewpoints contributed by individual participating archive users whether they are users or contributors, archivists, researchers, administrators, labourers, or belong to marginalised communities or the majority” (Huvila 2008, p. 26). Similarly, the Creating Collaborative Catalogs project is building an information system that “localizes” and diversifies – rather than unites – information resources so that they can not only be collected but also used to build local knowledge (Boast 2011).

To accommodate such decentralized archives, various tools have been proposed that take advantage of the affordances of the digital medium, such as the “malleable finding aid” based on a wiki collecting user input, or participatory cataloging designed to promote a plurality of cataloging voices (S. R. Anderson and Allen 2012; Newman 2012). Thus items in the Plateau People’s Web Portal (n.d.-b) are organized and catalogued in different ways: the professional catalogers’ controlled vocabulary and metadata schemes run parallel to metadata provided by the Indian nations through tags, the addition of other informative elements to the items on display, and even the creation of different taxonomies to organize the items. The intended result is a form of multilayered arrangement and description. More ambitious still is the Ojibwe *Gi bugadin-a-maa goom* archive, which aims to rely on Ojibwe epistemology to present digital objects in ways that correspond to the worldviews of the people involved (Powell 2007).²¹

Furthermore, through innovative navigation systems and hyperlinking strategies, recent digital archives seek to “open up” archives to alternative readings. In the words of Koh (Koh n.d.-b):

²⁰ There are numerous examples of such partnerships. See Digital Library of Georgia (n.d.), Europeana & Digital Public Library of America (n.d.), Plateau Peoples’ Web Portal (n.d.-a), South Asian American Digital Archive (n.d.).

²¹ For more examples see Srinivasan, Boast, Furner, & Becvar (2009).

... [T]he digital nature of the project [Digitizing “Chinese Englishmen”], in which ideas, texts and connections are not viewed linearly through the development of an extended argument, but multidimensionally through the hypertext linking of different pages, tags, and sites encourage a different form of reading. This dynamic form of linking will hopefully “open up” the text to more diverse readings.

This may be particularly valuable for oral cultures that do not have a linear conception of history and story-telling.

In short, digital ethnic archives can be multi-faceted and multi-layered. They allow for diverging and even conflicting forms of expression and use. Through virtual collections, they enable connections between individuals and communities, between members of diasporas, and between the ethnic determinant and other socio-cultural determinants of identity and belonging – thus potentially leading to more complex and fluid representations of ethnic identities. Designed with the participation of interested communities, they aim to document ethnic identities as participating community members see them. But they not only give individuals opportunities to express their identities, they provide them with new tools to share and transform existing representations of individual and collective identities. If successful, recent participatory projects like Creative Collaborative Catalogs will lead to greater distribution of information resources for local appropriation and use, thus making possible new methods of identity building.

Nevertheless, reliance on user participation suffers from the same weakness as use of self-identification to select and name ethnic groups in collections. It leaves collections either open to deliberate manipulation by ethnic group members or susceptible to the involuntary bias of self-selection, as specific aspects or factions of ethnic communities may get overrepresented. This may be particularly true with populations with unequal access to digital technologies and communication infrastructure. Indeed, levels of participation cannot be expected to be uniform across populations. While digital ethnic archives enable new modes of representation, they may simultaneously marginalize certain groups and individuals. Furthermore, the complex, labor- and resource-intensive task of digital preservation renders the future of those archives uncertain at best.

Conclusion

Whether physical or electronic, archives in the postmodern, postcolonial era rely on, and contribute to, changing conceptions of ethnicity. Cultural heritage professionals have long sought to build collections that would counteract ethnic and racial stereotypes and provide richer, more complex representations of ethnic groups, following developing scholarship as well as popular representations of ethnicity. They have reached out to ethnic communities to document their histories and relied on self-identification by ethnic groups to label, arrange and describe their collections. Since the archival turn, an outpour of new theories and strategies has led to ever deeper questioning of archival practice. New roles for archives have been added to their longstanding partnership with historians; since archives increasingly serve not only historical scholarship but also collective memory, the evidentiary value of archival documents has weakened while their memory-building role has expanded. Professionals are realizing that the very standards and tools they have been using to ensure their neutrality are hiding, but do not remove, their ethnocentrism (Powell 2007, p. 174). In fact, because they reduce the visibility of existing bias, those purportedly scientific standards and tools make it all the more difficult to address it. Culturally responsive archiving and participatory curation offer alternatives that seek to model the content as well as the organization of collections on an ethnic group's understanding and to respect the diversity within the group. The disintermediation of archiving – or effacement of the professional archivists – enabled by digital media is expected to reduce ethnocentric biases. The challenge to archives as “fixed and immutable relics, artefacts of the past,” has made possible the exploration of new purposes for archives, especially in relation to their relevance and usefulness for the communities they serve and represent (McKemmish, Gilliland, and Ketelaar 2005, p. 156).

Ironically, though, diversification and effacement have not led to a more complete representation of ethnicity. On the one hand, the scholarly and public conceptions of ethnicity have shifted and expanded in ways that make it increasingly difficult to identify and collect “ethnic” facts – those traits that manifest and demonstrate ethnic identities. Traditional institutional markers of ethnicity like ethnic fraternal organizations and churches have disappeared for some groups but continue for others. Yet *perceptions* of ethnicity – individual awareness and public

manifestations of ethnicity – and symbolical indicators of ethnic identities have flourished. In a sense, ethnicity is more important than ever as a lens through which North American societies view themselves, yet it is also more complex, ambiguous and volatile than ever. It is somewhat deterritorialized, as virtual ethnic communities can form and evolve via online social networks and diasporic communication patterns. Free from their geographic anchors, ethnic communities and identities depend on, and express themselves through, a psychological sense of belonging, dense but informal communication patterns, cultural performances and other indicators whose documentation offers unique challenges. On the other hand, the archivists' strategies remain constrained by the necessity to distinguish between what will be archived and what will not. In the process of selecting historical material for posterity, decisions have to be made – either by professionals or the public – that are influenced by current trends in the archival literature, as well as the political and cultural context, and that are bound to lead to overrepresentation of some aspects or subgroups of ethnic communities, or underrepresentation of others. Furthermore, the very act of archiving – which results in the symbolic inclusion of an ethnic group into official history – is likely to influence the ways members of the group define their ethnic identities. To be sure, Sollors' "illusion of ethnic 'authenticity'" remains a powerful draw and archivists will never be immune to the temptation of representativeness. Nevertheless, awareness of the pitfalls of that temptation is spreading among professional archivists. In a participatory archives, Huvila (2008, p. 25) notes, "none of the participants, the person who created a record, an information manager, or a contributor, can be expected to be neutral," but the multiplication of subjective viewpoints in the archive is expected to expose that lack of neutrality: "[i]nclusion and greater participation are supposed to reveal a diversity of motivations, viewpoints, arguments and counterarguments, which become transparent when a critical mass is attained." Thus, transparency could replace authenticity as the ultimate goal of ethnic archives. Transparency could come from the juxtaposition of as many viewpoints as possible in participatory archives or, as another trend in the archival literature argues, from detailed documentation of archiving processes over time. Elizabeth Yakel (2003, p. 25) has urged archivists to "be more conscious of the activities that structure the creation of representations, their social construction, as well as their appropriate uses."

Reflecting on the evolution of archival representation systems – the tools and processes of cataloging, arrangement and description – she examined the need for archivists to document their work over time, so that the layers of meaning added by each new representation system can be traced (Yakel 2003, p. 13). She also suggests sharing that information with users, so that “archival arrangements and categorizations for access and collection management are transparent, flexible, and effective tools for both users and archivists” (Yakel 2003, p. 5).

Transparency is a worthy goal. It might help shed light on the processes by which archival collections and institutions participate in the social construction of ethnicity and those by which ethnicity – as a scholarly concept, social experience and popular representation – helps shape ethnic archives. In recent decades, the professionalization of archives, the development of distinct training in archival science and archives’ outreach efforts to the public have all contributed to the growing distance between archivists and historians. In this context, documentation by the archivist of her strategies and actions could be important factors helping historians understand the history of the collections. Nevertheless the idea of archival transparency has yet to be implemented by archivists and is neglected by historians. Ironically, ethnic and immigration historians have studied how representations of ethnicity were shaped and advertised by museum exhibits, public monuments, commemorative events and other celebrations of the past, but have yet to include archival collections and institutions in their research (Bodnar 1991; Schultz 2009). In fact, for historians of immigration and ethnicity, archives have largely remained sources rather than objects of study. Consequently research is needed on the historical role of archival collections and records in the construction of collective memory and on the interactions between scholarly, popular and archival representations of ethnicity. We need to better understand the contextual factors that shape ethnic archiving policies and practices as well as the latter’s impact on group identities and intergroup relations.

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