

From Settler Colonialism to the Age of Migration: Archives and the Renewal of Democracy in Canada



LAURA MADOKORO

Assistant Professor, Department of History and Classical Studies,
McGill University, Montreal

...our civilization will take an immense forward stride on the day when concealment, raised to a rule of action and almost to a bourgeois virtue, shall give way to the desire for information, which is necessarily the desire to exchange information.

Marc Bloch, 1944

My comments on the future of archives are inspired by the French historian Marc Bloch's reflections, excerpted above. One of the founders of the French Annales school of historiography, Bloch was interested in how to create history that was humane and accessible, that moved beyond antiquarian thinking about the past and away from privileged fascination with elite political society. Bloch's concerns about inspiring a "desire for information" and in turn provoking a "desire to exchange information" go to the heart of the challenges that currently face archival institutions of all shapes, sizes, and outlooks in Canada. Bloch's comments suggest the need for greater outreach and a bold declaration about the place of archives in Canadian society.

My thoughts on the future of archives are based on observations about the nature of global migration and the parallels between how the histories of First Nations and arriving migrants in Canada have been treated by the country's national, regional, and local archival institutions. As context for the following comments on rethinking archives in the age of migration, let us first consider the evolving nature of Canadian society. In 2012, the National Household Survey revealed that Canada's indigenous population had grown by 20 percent between 2006 and 2011. The survey also revealed that 6.8 million people in Canada were foreign-born, amounting to 20.6 percent of the population, the highest amongst the G8 countries.¹ There was a significant increase in the number of migrants from Asia, as well as from Africa. These statistics are

1 The Canadian Press, "Canada's Foreign-Born Population Soars to 6.8 Million," CBC News: Canada, 8 May 2013, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-s-foreign-born-population-soars-to-6-8-million-1.1308179>.

significant because the so-called “foreign-born” are, unless they decide to leave, a large portion of Canada’s future citizens. And, to be frank, these new migrants, as well as indigenous peoples in Canada, are almost completely divorced from the work of archives in the country at present. Formal archival institutions lag behind other cultural institutions in identifying the potential contributions that first generations can make to preserving the country’s documentary heritage. The history of First Nations peoples in Canada, by contrast, is heavily influenced by the holdings of archival institutions – particularly as they work through treaty negotiations, land claims, and processes related to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on residential schools.² Yet ongoing cultural divides inhibit First Nations peoples from actively shaping archival holdings, rather than being the passive recipients of decisions about acquisition and preservation made by institutions with mandates that are very different from the First Nations historical experience in Canada.

All archives face enormous challenges – or, for the optimists, opportunities – in an age of increased technological and communication flows. Alongside these flows, there has been an intensified period of global migration. Since the 1970s, the pace and diversity of migration across international borders have increased to such an extent that the times in which we currently live are regularly referred to as the “age of migration.”³ People are moving across borders more rapidly than ever before; their patterns of movement are more fluid, circuitous, and multi-pronged – especially in the case of the world’s elites.⁴ Individuals and families maintain multiple homes, loyalties, and affiliations. Migrants make regular visits home and send remittances to support family and friends, and First Nations communities in Canada are part of a global network of indigenous activism. For archives, particularly those institutions that think of themselves as guardians of a national story or narrative, the current mobility and global nature of individual connections require new ways of thinking about acquisition, access, and dissemination strategies.

In Canada, archivists are regularly inspired by the popular quote from noted Dominion Archivist Sir Arthur Doughty, in which he opined, “Of all our national assets, Archives are the most precious; they are the gift of one generation to another and the extent of our care of them marks the extent of our civilization.” As the foregoing suggests, generations were once imagined as fixed entities. Specifically, generations were imagined as fixed in one location: perhaps a village, sometimes a country. The idea of a fixed generation

2 See Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=3>.

3 Stephen Castles, Hein de Haas, and Mark J. Miller, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2013).

4 Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Chapel Hill, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

no longer works as people move farther and farther afield. Nor does the idea of archives as a gift. As numerous scholars have observed, archives are more than a gift to society. They are instrumental in ensuring the functioning of democratic societies, in offering the means to hold governments accountable, and in determining whose stories and histories are considered of value.⁵ To think of them as a gift is to ignore how many groups have been marginalized and disappointed by archival institutions. It took a long time for heritage institutions to recognize the significance and the value of oral traditions among First Nations peoples in Canada; they began to do so only in the aftermath of activism around the federal government's unilateral efforts to revoke the *Indian Act* in 1970.⁶ The 1997 Supreme Court decision in the Delgamuukw case was instrumental in further affirming the legitimacy of oral histories. Yet much work remains to be done in recognizing how other kinds of cultural and material records might be considered of archival value.⁷ Similarly, the Chinese, Japanese, and South Asian migrants who were subject to discriminatory immigration legislation in Canada beginning in the late nineteenth century, and their descendants, have found that their historic marginalization has been replicated in the country's archival holdings. The limited government archival records, which survived the passage of time and are now reflected back to these once marginalized communities, are a far cry from the much richer, textured experience of their lives in Canada.

Take, for instance, the holdings at Library and Archives Canada. The so-called multicultural archives largely consist of records from Eastern European communities. Institutional blindness and a deficit in language and cultural skills meant that, in the heyday of 1970s multiculturalism, the records of Chinese, Japanese, South Asian, African, and Caribbean communities in particular were regularly ignored by Canada's national archives. Little has changed in the intervening years. While the institution preserves key documents that reveal the workings of the capitation tax imposed on Chinese migrants from 1885 to 1923, the details of the 1914 voyage of the *Komagata Maru*, and the history of Japanese Canadian internment and redress, the fact

- 5 Not surprisingly, scholars involved in post-apartheid archives in South Africa have been at the forefront of these discussions. See Verne Harris, "The Archival Sliver: Power, Memory, and Archives in South Africa," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1 (2002): 63–86.
- 6 Harold Cardinal, *Unjust Society: The Tragedy of Canada's Indians* (Scarborough, ON: Prentice Hall, 1971). This activism coincided with the advent of official multiculturalism in Canada, which many critics viewed as an attempt to erase the history of settler colonialism and displacement in the country.
- 7 See, for example, Nelson Mandela Foundation, *A Prisoner in the Garden: Opening Nelson Mandela's Prison Archive* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005). In this book, the authors embraced the premise that anything related to Mandela constituted part of his archive. This included memorials and statues in countries outside of South Africa and beyond the formal purview of his prison archives.

remains that there is more to the history of communities in Canada than their relationships with the federal government's exclusionary legislation.

The same is true of First Nations' histories, which too often are reflected through the lens of government records alone. Part of the challenge is to move beyond the holdings that currently exist in institutions such as the Hudson's Bay Company Archives and among the records of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to document the broader aspects of indigenous experiences in Canada and to do so in a way that encourages communities to take the initiative in determining what records have archival value and where and how they might ultimately be preserved. Formal archival institutions have a role to play in facilitating these initiatives, but there is no reason why they must be the sole sites of acquisition and authority. In fact, the work of formal archives would be much better served if these institutions pursued robust outreach programs that enabled more people to participate in the preservation of the country's rich heritage. In other words, the future of archives in Canada relies on rethinking acquisition and preservation strategies so that more work takes place outside of formal institutionalized settings and more people are invited to participate in and contribute to the preservation of the country's heritage.

To this end, archival institutions must think about the distinct history of Canada's First Nations as well as the changing population in Canada, especially the fact that in contemporary Canadian society people have multiple loyalties and affiliations. This rethinking is crucial if acquisition and access strategies in the present are to have any bearing on social and civil life in the future. Time is of the essence. First-generation Canadians, who since the 1960s have come from increasingly varied geographic and cultural backgrounds, need to know that their histories also matter, even if they are new histories. At the same time, it is important to understand how their histories intersect with those of other groups in Canada, including the First Nations and Métis. This means working with communities on archival education projects while, at the same time, acknowledging their distinctive individual and group histories. By encouraging new arrivals to think about their membership in Canadian society, both in the present and the future, archives can play a critical role in moving beyond the token multiculturalism that has too often characterized the federal government's approach, in particular, to questions of inclusion, assimilation, and integration. The Chung Collection at the University of British Columbia⁸ is an example of the benefits that can accrue to archives and society as a whole when engaged community members take the initiative to collect and preserve records of interest. The Chung Collection boasts a rich variety of materials that shed light on the Chinese experience in Canada and across the Pacific in a way that is lost in collections that document only one aspect of the

8 University of British Columbia Library, The Chung Collection, <http://chung.library.ubc.ca/>.

migration experience. The Chung Collection is a model of what archival institutions can aspire to in terms of working with partners to document community histories that go beyond the relationship of migrants and citizens with governments. If these records can be brought into conversation with records from indigenous communities and white settler colonialists, through a public education program, research, or an exhibit, the history of Chinese migrants to British Columbia and Canada will take on an even deeper, more nuanced contextual significance.

Related to the question of rethinking the character of Canada's population and the global connections maintained by many of its citizens is the issue that many democracies in the world are under stress as they contend with the rapid change in information technologies and the evolving relationship between citizens and government. Information has always been powerful; the Second World War slogan "Loose Lips Sink Ships" comes readily to mind. But the immediate impact of the availability of information is perhaps greater than ever before. One has only to think of the fallout from Edward Snowden's revelations in 2013 about the extensive surveillance of American citizens undertaken by the US National Security Agency or of the controversy surrounding Julian Assange and WikiLeaks' publication of US military and diplomatic documents in 2010. While governments are increasingly sensitive to the speed at which information is flowing in this globalized age, individuals are making personal information about themselves available in an unprecedented manner, prompting concerned observers to caution the general public about the need to protect ourselves from identity fraud and abuse.⁹ Governments are all too aware of the value of information, but individuals seem to be dangerously undereducated about the value of their own personal information.

In my opinion, these two phenomena – that of citizens and potential citizens with little or no connection to the country's archival institutions, and the huge preponderance of information, especially information that is being wielded, distributed, and consumed at dizzying speed – are linked because they go to the heart of a healthy, functioning democracy. The well-being of citizens is critical to a democracy that is dynamic, just and, simply put, functioning. This doesn't happen if people do not value the information about themselves, their communities, and the places where they live, and if they don't, in turn, feel valued and validated. No other professionals are better placed to speak and to work toward a more functioning democracy than the archivists and the staff who toil in archives across Canada, from local, community efforts to government-funded provincial and national institutions. Archives need to foster and

9 Gordon Hull, Heather Richter Lipford, and Celine Latulipe, "Contextual Gaps: Privacy Issues on Facebook," *Ethics and Information Technology* 13, no. 4 (December 2011): 289–302; Alice Marwick, "The Public Domain: Social Surveillance in Everyday Life," *Surveillance & Society* 9, no. 4 (2012): 378–93.

develop outreach programs that treat audiences as potential partners and to reconceptualize the geographic borders in which they currently operate.

This means acknowledging and legitimizing the existence of multiple narratives, not just one national narrative into which various groups can try to integrate. At the Canadian Archives Summit, held in Toronto in January 2014, organizer Ian E. Wilson mentioned the challenge of representing different experiences of the First World War, such as those of Mennonites in Canada, who opposed the war and refused to enlist because of their pacifist beliefs. Even more challenging, he noted, is the question of how to produce a national narrative when many of today's citizens had family who served and suffered on the opposing side of the war. Is such a narrative even desirable?

Whereas Dr. Wilson drew attention to the question of a national narrative, I am more interested in the possibility of multiple narratives and, specifically, how archives might contribute to a plurality of narratives that don't necessarily contribute to a holistic story. This question of how to tell different stories, including competing, contradictory ones, is just one dimension of the tasks confronting archives. The other is a rethinking of the very nature of archives, their audiences and the publics they serve. How, for instance, would one tell the story of the 222 Japanese Canadians who enlisted in the Canadian Expeditionary Force in order to prove their worth as full citizens and obtain the right to vote? The story of the Japanese Canadian soldiers was not just one of military service, but also of a community's fight to combat racism, discrimination, and prejudice. The Japanese Canadian veterans who served in the First World War received the right to vote in 1931. Telling this aspect of their postwar experience requires records that only individuals and the community can offer. This means rethinking the role of the public as potential partners, not just passive receptors to archival education.

Archives need to develop effective public programming that teaches communities about the value of records and encourages them to develop their own collections. Using a "teach the teacher" model, archives should give communities the tools to develop, preserve, and document their own histories, in ways that reflect and respect their own cultural practices. The ultimate goal should not be readying an archival fonds for preservation at an archival institution but rather encouraging communities that preserve records that they themselves have identified as valuable – whether it be oral history projects with elders, family correspondence, or some other kind of item of import. A prime example of one such fruitful collaboration is the Portuguese Canadian History Project at York University, Toronto.¹⁰ This project encourages the Portuguese community in Toronto to identify and donate materials to the Clara Thomas

10 York University, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, "Portuguese Canadian History Project/Projecto de História Luso-Canadiana," <http://archives.library.yorku.ca/pchp/>.

Archives and Special Collections at the university. At the same time, the project serves an important educational function: informing members of the community about how to identify and preserve documents they consider of value. Not all of the materials from the Portuguese community will end up at York University, nor should they. As is demonstrated by the contests over the preservation and conservation of material heritage taken from indigenous communities by various museums, there are legitimate reasons for enabling communities to preserve their heritage, on their own terms.¹¹

Archives and archivists cannot, and should not, do it all alone. Rather, archivists and archival staff need to be educators, bold educators. It is irresponsible and dangerous to assume that people will care about archives and their holdings if they don't see how their rights, needs, and interests are bound up with the work of archives. Recognizing that Canada's population is changing and that it will continue to do so, it behooves archivists to rethink both their clientele and their potential audiences. This means addressing the history of colonialism in Canada and enriching the resources available to First Nations and Métis communities to identify and preserve records they consider important. In the case of arriving migrants, archives should encourage family history and community history projects that recognize and value the fact that people's histories do not necessarily begin in Canada. Not only would this advance understanding across the broad spectrum of Canadian society about the multiple loyalties that typify, and have historically characterized, the generations of migrants that have made their way to Canada, but it would also create the foundations for potential partnerships across the globe.

One has only to think of Paul Lin, whose collection of archival materials now resides at Hong Kong University. The Canadian-born Lin went to China in January 1950, shortly after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. He lived, worked, and taught there for fifteen years before returning to Canada in 1964. Lin was an important intermediary in the lead-up to Canada's official recognition of the People's Republic of China in 1970. As a result, Lin's records are significant, not just for Canada's history but also for the People's Republic of China. Their preservation by Hong Kong University represents an opportunity for Canadian archives to build international relationships. Strategic partnerships that build on the globalized now, with an eye to an even more mobile, globalized future will generate resources that enable archives to do more, not less.

In the pursuit of substantive, productive partnerships, archival diffusion needs to be more than outreach for the purpose for securing future users. Archives can inform people about their mandates as well as the roles they can

11 See discussion in Miriam Clavir, *Preserving What Is Valued: Museums, Conservation and First Nations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2002).

play as engaged partners in the fostering of community histories. These two streams, that of formal institutions with specific mandates and richer outreach programming and community-based initiatives, complement each other and create the possibility for mutually beneficial partnerships, not to mention the enhanced advocacy in support of archives that will undoubtedly result when individuals feel they have a vested interest in the country's future and that of its archival institutions.

To this end, archives as institutions and archivists as individuals need to be outspoken about the value of information and the need for access to information in contemporary Canadian society. I feel a tremendous debt of gratitude for the lobbying undertaken by archivists and historians in response to the introduction of the National Household Survey, the cuts to the National Archival Development Program, and access issues under the current inadequate and outright damaging Access to Information regime in the Government of Canada. Still, what we need now is a visionary declaration about the role of archives, partnerships, the value of information, and how responsible access to information is at the heart of any functioning democracy.¹² The merit of something along the lines of an "information manifesto" or a "declaration of archival social responsibility" recommends itself by the sheer potential of such a declaration to galvanize interest and support for the work of archivists and archives in Canada ahead of any future cuts. Such a declaration could take inspiration from UNESCO's Universal Declaration on Archives,¹³ which developed from an initiative led by the Association des archivistes du Québec. Ideally, it would outline in principled terms the philosophy that underpins the work of archivists in Canada and the relationship between archives and Canadian society. With a focus on communities as partners and a renewed emphasis on giving communities tools that will facilitate the preservation of their histories, we can take important strides toward the open exchange of information that historian Marc Bloch envisioned over half a century ago.

12 I am thinking in particular of the work of the Association of Canadian Archivists, the Canadian Council of Archives (see the Call to Action on the News & Events section of its website, <http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca/action2012.html>), and the Canadian Historical Association (see the Advocacy section of its website, <http://www.cha-shc.ca/english/advocacy/scrapping-of-the-mandatory-long-census-form-chas-response.html#sthash.11kVoD8j.dpbs>), both accessed 6 May 2014.

13 International Council on Archives, "Universal Declaration on Archives," 26 July 2012, <http://icarchives.webbler.co.uk/13343/universal-declaration-on-archives/universal-declaration-on-archives.html>.