

Telling Stories from Montreal's Negro Community Centre Fonds

The Archives as Community-Engaged Classroom

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ABSTRACT Working in the classroom alongside teaching faculty is an ideal way to bridge the gap between undergraduate education and archival research and to reach students who might never venture into the archives of their own accord. This article offers a sustained reflection on one way that historical archives can be placed at the centre of undergraduate education. It also considers how this engagement can open up spaces for public remembrance, particularly for marginalized “source” communities. The ongoing relationship between communities and the archives that they produce is vitally important. The focus here is on the intermediate history course *Telling Stories*, held in 2017, and developed around the Negro Community Centre/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre Fonds housed in Concordia University Library’s Special Collections. The Negro Community Centre was the hub of Montreal’s English-speaking Black community from 1927 until it closed in 1992. The course was timed to coincide with the public launch of this major new archival fonds, giving the students the honour of being the

1 It is important to be transparent about our positionality as researchers and authors. The article represents a collaboration between Alexandra Mills, an archivist; Désirée Rochat, a community educator and graduate research assistant whose work focuses on community archives; and Steven High, a professor of history. None of the authors come from the English-speaking Black community: Mills and High are white, and Rochat is Haitian-Swiss. All three authors had previously been involved in Little Burgundy, through either work or various projects based in the community. Rochat had the chance to learn from long-term community organizers in her years of community work and involvement in the area. High is writing a book on the history of the area and has published extensively, including “Little Burgundy: The Interwoven Histories of Race, Residence, and Work in 20th Century Montreal,” *Urban History Review* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2017): 23–44. Mills preserves and provides access to archival resources documenting the history of Montreal’s English-speaking Black community and has worked with community members and others interested in preserving and learning more about the history of Little Burgundy.

first researchers to ever go through these boxes. The idea of the course was thus simple: what can we learn from the history contained in these boxes and how can we return this history to the community? Allowing younger generations to make meaning from the archives and leave their marks there is a way to open spaces for new Montreal (hi)stories to be written.

RÉSUMÉ Travailler dans une salle de classe adjacente à une faculté d'enseignement est la manière idéale de combler le fossé entre les études universitaires de premier cycle et la recherche archivistique et de rejoindre des étudiants qui, autrement, ne se seraient jamais aventurés d'eux-mêmes dans les archives. Cet article propose une réflexion soutenue sur une façon de mettre les archives historiques au cœur des études universitaires de premier cycle. Il aborde également comment cet engagement peut ouvrir des espaces de commémoration publique, notamment pour les communautés « sources » marginalisées. La relation continue entre les communautés et les archives qu'elles produisent est d'une importance vitale. L'accent est mis ici sur le cours d'histoire intermédiaire *Telling Stories*, donné en 2017, développé autour du fonds *Negro Community Centre/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre*, conservé à la bibliothèque des collections spéciales de l'Université Concordia. Le Negro Community Center a été le centre de la communauté noire anglophone de Montréal de 1927 jusqu'à sa fermeture en 1992. La programmation du cours s'est faite de façon à coïncider avec l'ouverture officielle de ce nouveau fonds archivistique important, offrant aux étudiants l'honneur d'être les premiers chercheurs à consulter ces cartons. L'idée derrière ce cours était simple : qu'y avait-il à apprendre de l'histoire contenue dans ces boîtes et comment est-il possible de retourner cette histoire à la communauté? Permettre aux générations futures de saisir la signification des archives et d'y laisser leur marque est une façon d'ouvrir de nouveaux espaces qui permettront l'écriture de nouvelles histoires de Montréal.

I think all History students should have an opportunity like this one to do direct and active work with archives to see what historical work can actually do for a community.

ANONYMOUS STUDENT²

Bar none, this is absolutely the best class that I have ever had the privilege of taking in my entire university career (and I already have a BA). The opportunity to actually produce history, in a grassroots way that is actually useful for the community it is produced about, and not just producing elitist academia for academics, meant a lot to me. I learned so much in this class, not just in terms of class materials, but I also gained some ambition, inspiration, and direction for my life and my future in general by participating in this class.

ANONYMOUS STUDENT

This was such an incredible journey and experience! I am honoured to have been a part of this course, having had the opportunity to go through the archives myself. . . . I have to say I'm really going to miss this class and the environment that was created.

ANONYMOUS STUDENT

This was the best class I have ever taken at Concordia. For the first time in my life, I almost felt like a real academic. I had a fantastic time this semester, and I feel the need to continue my research in the archive.

ANONYMOUS STUDENT

2 These anonymous comments are drawn from the end-of-term student evaluations for the Telling Stories course. They are in the possession of Steven High.

Without exception, the year-end student evaluations for Telling Stories, a 300-level undergraduate public history course offered at Concordia University during the winter term of 2017, were glowing. Students spoke passionately about the course, their instructors, what they learned, and the opportunity to work in partnership with community organizations – but most of all, about the opportunity to work directly with historical documents. It is extremely rare for undergraduate students, especially at the intermediate level, to undertake original archival research, and it is almost unheard of for them to do this in a sustained or collective manner. Typically, historical knowledge is generated in the undergraduate classroom via professorial lectures, the reading of secondary sources, and seminar discussion. A few diligent students might find themselves conducting primary research at a public archives or taking part in an arranged group visit, but that would be it. Public history courses are more applied but are far more likely to engage with digital and oral sources, or even the built environment, than with archival research.³

The focus of the Telling Stories course was on the Montreal neighbourhood of Little Burgundy and the Negro Community Centre (NCC), which served the city's English-speaking Black community from 1927 until it closed in 1992. Sadly, the old stone NCC building was demolished in 2014 after standing abandoned for more than 20 years. At one point, over 100 boxes of material, some of them already water damaged, were salvaged from the abandoned building and placed into deep storage at Concordia for safe keeping. There these materials remained until they were officially deposited with Concordia University Library's Special Collections, becoming the Negro Community Centre/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre Fonds (hereafter NCC fonds). The course was timed to coincide with the public launch of this major new archival fonds, giving the students the honour of being the first researchers to ever go through these boxes. The idea of the course was thus simple: what can we learn from the history contained in these boxes and how can we return this history to the community?

Not surprisingly, the undergraduate history students who trickled into our classroom that first Wednesday morning were a little disoriented. On top of each desk stood one of 45 archival boxes, with a box listing placed on top. It was unlike anything they had ever seen before in an undergraduate classroom. We invited

3 Public history emerged as a subdiscipline of history, with its own journal and conferences, in the 1970s. It is mainly interested in public memory and brings together historians in museums, archives, and other spaces of historical remembrance and education.

students to choose their seats carefully, as they were also choosing the archival material that came with it. In the coming weeks, each would become an “expert” on the contents of an individual box. Knowing this, most students walked up and down the rows, looking at the box lists until they found one that piqued their interest. Others quickly sat down where they felt most comfortable. Slowly the room filled, and everyone waited nervously for the class to start. Teejay Bhalla remembered this initial encounter with the archive this way: “On our first day of class, in January, we were each assigned a mysterious box containing documents that had not been analyzed in 20 years. For most of us, this was our first experience with archival material and I realized that this was not going to be a normal History course.”⁴

This initial encounter with the archive was carefully staged, as we sought to transform the history classroom and students’ expectations about how historical knowledge would be generated over the course of the semester. From the outset, we wanted students to have the sensation of physically and intellectually entering the archives. The first four weeks of the course were thus scheduled to be held at the Vanier Library, where Special Collections is based. This, too, was a radical break for our students, as almost all humanities and social science courses are located downtown and not out at Loyola, Concordia’s suburban campus. The physical location of the archive thus presented a logistical problem for students, as they needed to take a 30-minute shuttle bus each way and could not schedule other courses immediately before or after this one. Many students had to drop the class as a result. Others joined the class once word spread about its unique methodology and focus on Black Montreal. It was no coincidence that many of those switching into the class were themselves Black Montrealers. The majority of the class members were white or racialized students of other origins. Most were Montrealers, and a few had connections to Little Burgundy, either having grown up there or knowing people from the neighbourhood. “I know a lot of people from Little Burgundy,” Summit Ollivierre told the student newspaper.⁵ “My family is black, and we’ve been here for a while, so I thought maybe I’ll find something out about my family . . . and the opportunity to work with archives is

4 Teejay Bhalla, presentation at the final public event of the Telling Stories course, April 11, 2017, text in the possession of Steven High.

5 Maggie Hope, “Concordia Students Uncover Details of Montreal’s Cultural Identity,” *Concordian*, April 4, 2017, accessed May 1, 2019, <http://theconcordian.com/2017/04/concordia-students-uncover-details-of-montreal-cultural-identity/>.

not something that ever happens to undergrads.”⁶ For the majority of the class, however, this was an opportunity to learn about a community and an area they had most likely heard of but knew little about. To a much greater degree than normal, the 34 students who remained in the class were self-selecting.

This article considers one way that historical archives can be placed at the centre of undergraduate history education. It also considers how this engagement can open up spaces for public remembrance, particularly for marginalized “source” communities. The ongoing relationships between communities and the archives that they produce are vitally important. Writing about the intergenerational memory work done by family photo albums, Martha Langford argues that the conversation is “suspended” once the album leaves the care of the family.⁷ A similar risk exists when the day-to-day connections between archival records and the communities that produce them are broken. How, then, to regenerate these “lost” connections to the past?

The decision to donate the records of the NCC to Concordia University had been a controversial one within the Black community. Some preferred these records to stay within their community, while others pointed to Concordia's own checkered past (despite the university's status as one of the most diverse campuses in the country).⁸ In early 1969, the university's computer centre was occupied for 10 days by Black students and their allies over charges of racism by one faculty member and the university's perceived failure to acknowledge the problem. The resulting “computer riot,” to which police were called, was a pivotal moment in race relations in Canada.⁹ How, then, to rebuild trust with a community that was historically located just a few hundred metres south of the downtown campus?

6 Ibid.

7 Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2008).

8 For more on this hesitancy, see Karina Vernon, “Invisibility Exhibit: The Limits of Library and Archives Canada's ‘Multicultural Mandate,’” in *Basements and Attics, Closets and Cyberspace: Explorations in Canadian Women's Archives*, ed. Linda M. Morra and Jessica Schagerl (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2012), 193–204.

9 Sean Mills, *The Empire Within: Postcolonial Thought and Political Activism in Sixties Montreal* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2010); and David Austin, *Fear of a Black Nation: Race, Sex, and Security in Sixties Montreal* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2013).

Little Burgundy and the Negro Community Centre

A mixed-race neighbourhood developed in what is today known as Little Burgundy – an area between Concordia University and the Lachine Canal, just down the escarpment in Montreal’s southwest borough – due to its close proximity to Montreal’s two railway stations. The railways were among the few employers to hire Black workers. In fact, following US practice, the railways employed only Black men as sleeping car porters, cooks, and in some cases, dining car employees.¹⁰ As a result, until the 1950s, railway porters were virtually synonymous with Black men in Montreal.¹¹ Babsey Simmons recalled as much in her 2005 oral history interview:

My father was a porter, actually he was a tailor from home, but in those days there were no jobs for Coloured men whatsoever; the only job for them was on the train, as a porter, which was a very demeaning job at that point in time. . . . They were underpaid, but they did their job with dignity because their primary objective was to educate and feed their children.¹²

While Black railway porters were at the bottom of the railway’s occupational hierarchy, these well-travelled and often highly educated men emerged as leaders within the Black community and played an important part in the foundation of community organizations, including the Negro Community Centre, in the early 20th century.¹³ Racism was rife, according to railway porter Carl Simmons:

10 Agnes Calliste, “The Struggle for Employment Equity by Blacks at American and Canadian Railroads,” *Journal of Black Studies* 25, no. 3 (1995): 297–317; Sarah-Jane Mathieu, *North of the Color Line: Migration and Black Resistance in Canada, 1870–1955* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); and Stanley G. Grizzle and John Cooper, *My Name’s Not George: The Story of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters* (Toronto: Umbrella, 1998).

11 Dorothy Williams, *The Road to Now: A History of Blacks in Montreal* (Montreal: Véhicule Press, 1997); and High, “Little Burgundy.”

12 Concordia University, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), Voices of Little Burgundy Fonds, Babsey Simmons interviewed by Rachel Levee, November 15, 2005. These archived interviews were conducted by students enrolled in an oral history seminar taught by Steven High and were also used in the Telling Stories course.

13 June Bertley, “The Role of the Black Community in Educating Blacks in Montreal, from 1910 to 1940, with Special Reference to Reverend Dr. Charles Humphrey Este” (master’s thesis, McGill University, 1984); see also Williams, *The Road to Now*.

We're all human beings; your skin is a little different coloured than mine, but we have the same heart, we have the same blood. Your blood is red, mine is red. People used to say to me, "Oh, you don't have red blood." I said, "Well what colour do you think it is? You want me to cut myself and show you that it's the same red blood like you got?" They used to think I had black blood. I couldn't understand why people could be so stupid.¹⁴

De facto rather than legal segregation prevailed in Quebec, as proprietors had the right to serve whoever they wished. Black Montrealers therefore faced uncertainty every time they walked into an unfamiliar business establishment or community organization. They responded by forming their own parallel organizations and businesses – breathing spaces where they could find collective strength and personal fulfillment. These Black community institutions also served to unify what was in reality a community of diverse origins. Many had come to Montreal from the United States, some from rural Nova Scotia, and others from the West Indies. It is with reason that the sports teams at the NCC were called *Umoja*, Swahili for unity. Throughout the 20th century, Montreal was a key node in the Black diaspora.

The NCC was central to community life. Before it, other organizations, such as the Coloured Women's Club (1902), Union United Church (1907), and the local chapter of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) (1919) were established to serve the Black community. The NCC provided a variety of activities and services, and while its membership was predominantly Black, white residents living nearby also frequented it. Participation peaked in the 1960s and 1970s, with over 44,000 visitors attending in 1967 alone.¹⁵ Thereafter, the NCC went into a long decline as the neighbourhood (like other Black communities across North America) was targeted for demolition.¹⁶ First

¹⁴ Concordia University, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), Voices of Little Burgundy Fonds, Carl Simmons interviewed by Etienne Stockland, October 24, 2005.

¹⁵ Concordia University, Concordia University Library Special Collections, Negro Community Centre/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre Fonds, Report of the Negro Community Centre (a neighbourhood house), 1967, box HA04245, folder 10, F013.

¹⁶ See for example Ted Rutland, *Displacing Blackness: Planning, Power and Race in Twentieth-Century Halifax* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

the Ville Marie Expressway was built through the area, displacing hundreds, and then much of the rest of the neighbourhood was razed to make way for a massive public housing complex. The historic anglophone Black community was dispersed as a result, and many Black businesses were permanently lost. Thereafter, the old community institutions struggled to remain relevant to a geographically dispersed community. Attendance at the NCC declined until it closed. Shirley Gyles, the last director of the NCC, lamented these changes: “We as a Black community, we don’t have a building that we can say is our own, a place. And Black people have contributed, contrary to what a lot of people believe, to Montreal.”¹⁷

Much can be inferred from the failure of city and provincial authorities to recognize the historical importance of the NCC building. As Kenneth Foote observes, there is a “close connection between the places a society values and that society’s view – or ‘myths’ – of its past. Like archives, cultural landscapes can be said to maintain a representation of the past.”¹⁸ While it was clear to Black community members that the NCC was a historical landmark, that was not the case for municipal and governmental bodies, which failed to respond to the efforts to preserve the building. Interviewed in front of the empty lot, David Clarke, who had attended nursery school at the NCC nearly 70 years ago, said, “It’s very upsetting to see what remains of what had been such a special place.”¹⁹ It bothered him that some people referred to the neighbourhood as a “slum area. But it wasn’t at all. It was a residential working class community, with a blend of people who lived well. The idea that it was drug and crime-infested is a complete distortion of history. I have great memories.”²⁰

17 Concordia University, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), Voices of Little Burgundy Fonds, Shirley Gyles interviewed by Rachel Levee, November 5, 2005.

18 Kenneth E. Foote, “To Remember and Forget: Archives, Memory, and Culture,” *American Archivist* 53, no. 3 (1990): 384.

19 Bill Brownstein, “Spirit of Negro Community Centre Lives On in Concordia Student Project,” *Montreal Gazette*, April 11, 2017, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://montrealgazette.com/opinion/columnists/spirit-of-negro-community-centre-lives-on-in-concordia-student-project>.

20 Ibid.

The Negro Community Centre Fonds

In the wake of the physical demolition of the NCC, the centre's archive acquired a particular importance. The materiality of the records is a reminder of the lived experiences of community members who passed through the NCC's doors. Engaging with the archive, therefore, becomes a learning experience that is as much about presence as it is about absence and silences. Touching, feeling, and seeing records that recount community life allows those interacting with the archive to apprehend the physical, historical presence of the Black community in Montreal. By allowing us to retrace a history of Black community building, organizing, mobilization, and education in a context of racism and informal but real segregation, the NCC fonds offers an antidote to the cultural erasure that often befalls racialized minorities.

The NCC fonds is extensive, containing over 30 linear metres of community-generated textual records, including administrative and financial documents, correspondence, programming files, reports and publications, and more than 2,000 photographs of community life and events. These and other materials – when seen together – document the mission and administration of the centre; its wide-range of recreational, educational, and cultural programs; and its role in addressing the social, economic, and living conditions of its members.²¹ The NCC's celebration of Black history and culture is evident throughout, as is its emphasis on education, empowerment, community mobilization, and support of its members against racism, poverty, and marginalization. The documents in the archive serve to confirm what has already been made clear by former members of the centre: throughout its years of operation, the NCC played a central and fundamental role in the lives of English-speaking Black Montrealers. Valerie Hernandez, for example, recalled in an oral history interview that “every weekend, you had some place to go. And that was the focal point: the Negro Community Centre.”²²

The NCC fonds is a unique and important resource: Montreal's diverse Black communities are underrepresented in mainstream archival repositories, a result

21 The finding aid is accessible at <https://concordia.accesstomemory.org/negro-community-centre-charles-h-este-cultural-centre-fonds>.

22 Concordia University, Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), Voices of Little Burgundy Fonds, Valerie Fernandez interviewed by Michael Schwartz, November 4, 2005.

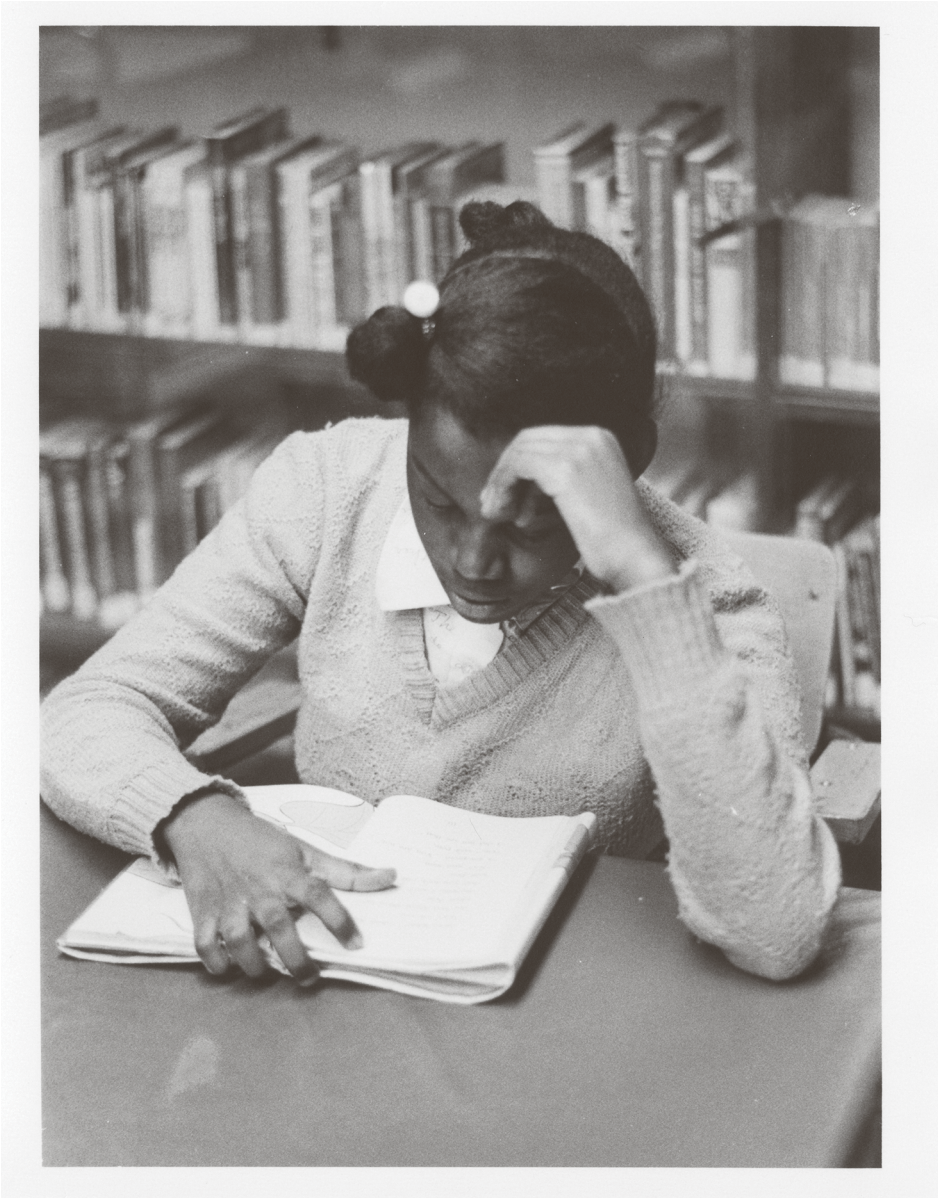


FIGURE 1 *Photograph by Graeme Clyde, 1981. The Negro Community Centre/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre Fonds, F013-02-091. Source: Concordia University Library Special Collections.*

of passive collecting practices and narrow policies that privileged the preservation of dominant narratives over those of minority communities. While the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia University holds an important oral history collection documenting the stories of Black Montrealers from Little Burgundy – and there have been a few recent community-based archiving projects within Black communities, such as the one at Maison d'Haïti – the NCC fonds is an important record of the English-speaking Black community with its roots firmly planted in Little Burgundy.²³ Though many silences in the archival record remain to be filled, the documents that compose the archive of the NCC begin to tell stories about a community that has often been ignored or forced to play a marginal or supporting role in the telling of Montreal's history. While it focuses on the activities and functions of the centre, the archive of the NCC also tells us about other institutions that were established “to help Montreal Blacks survive the discrimination and isolation imposed by the surrounding white population.”²⁴ Evidence of allied organizations including the Coloured Women's Club of Montreal, the Quebec Board of Black Educators, the Walker Credit Union, and the Negro Theatre Guild can be found throughout the fonds and help bring to light the important network of individuals and organizations that shaped the community over time.

The archive of the Negro Community Centre arrived at Concordia University in 1998, after it was recovered from the NCC's vacant building at 2035 Coursol Street by Dorothy Williams, a historian and former president of the NCC, in collaboration with the Concordia University Archives.²⁵ The documents, which were stored in filing cabinets, drawers, and boxes in former offices, storage closets, and even the gymnasium, were at risk due to the rapidly deteriorating condition of the building. With no money available to repair the NCC's long-time home, the decision was made to remove the documents from the building to protect them from damage. The hope was that Concordia University would be a stopgap, a place to safely house the documents while the NCC worked to repair its building and re-establish itself as the NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre.

23 See Désirée Rochat, Kristen Young, Marjorie Villefranche, and Aziz Choudry, “Maison d'Haïti's Collaborative Archive Project: Archiving a Community of Records,” in *Community Archives: Sustaining Memory*, ed. Jeannette Bastian and Andrew Flinn (London: Facet Publishing, 2017).

24 Williams, *The Road to Now*, 38.

25 Now known as Records Management and Archives.

In 2013, then-president Shirley Gyles made the decision to donate the archive of the NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre to Concordia University. The library's Special Collections, which is mandated to preserve and provide access to the private archives of individuals and organizations, was designated as the new home for these important papers. The NCC fonds has grown since its initial donation, with deposits made to the archive in 2014 and 2015 by the then-president of the NCC/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre. These deposits describe, among other things, the activities of the NCC since its official closure and document efforts to revive and reopen the community centre. It was clear from the library's first encounter with the NCC fonds that it held vast research and pedagogical potential, and Special Collections was thrilled to become the final home for this important archive.

Course Design and Archival Preparation

The Telling Stories course was part of a wider Right to the City (RTTC) pedagogical initiative at Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS). From 2014 to 2016, High, along with professors in art education, theatre, and art history, taught "tethered" 400-level, graduate seminar, and studio courses within the impoverished but now gentrifying neighbourhood of Pointe-Saint-Charles, located across the Lachine Canal from Little Burgundy. Each year, students who enrolled in the RTTC courses – all of which were scheduled in overlapping time slots and based at Share the Warmth, a community group providing support to people living in poverty – learned how different disciplines engaged with the neighbourhood's past and present and raised important questions about the politics of research and the academic gaze. The primary focus was on oral history and the built environment during these years. One year, for example, High's students collectively produced a memory-based audio walking tour of the neighbourhood.²⁶

The Telling Stories course came about through a combination of serendipity and converging interests. High had missed the third and final cycle of tethered RTTC courses in fall 2016, as he was on half-sabbatical. Upon his return, he

²⁶ The La Pointe tour is available at www.postindustrialmontreal.ca. For a sustained reflection on its making, see chapter 6 of Elizabeth Miller, Edward Little, and Steven High, *Going Public: The Art of Participatory Practice* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2017).



FIGURE 2 Photograph by Graeme Clyde, 1981. *The Negro Community Centre/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre Fonds, F013-02-114*. Source: Concordia University Library Special Collections.

therefore took the opportunity, and his share of the modest funding attached to the teaching initiative, to try something new: shifting his geographical focus to Little Burgundy, his methodological focus from oral history to textual archives, and his pedagogical focus from senior undergraduate and graduate students to students in the larger intermediate-level classroom. He had already worked with Désirée Rochat, a PhD student in education at McGill University who was doing her research on Black community archives in Montreal. They had collaborated as part of a group of researchers, youth, and community workers in the SSHRC-funded MapCollab research project in Little Burgundy and another Montreal neighbourhood. High and Rochat wanted to continue working together, and RTTC funding would allow Rochat to be hired as a research assistant to support the project's hoped-for connection to Montreal's

Black community. High and Rochat then met with Alexandra Mills, an archivist at Concordia Library's Special Collections, to see what was possible – and the idea for this course was born.

Telling Stories was designed to enable students to undertake substantial research in order to make original contributions to knowledge. For the first four weeks of the term, we had them delve into the archival boxes – building their knowledge from the ground up. Instead of traditional lectures, we relied on short workshops and scholarly articles on the history of Black Montreal to convey critical knowledge and historical context. There was no mid-term or final exam in this course. Instead, individual participation was pegged at 35 percent. Students were expected to attend each week, come prepared, and participate fully. Their first assignment, worth 10 percent of their final grade, was to write a three-page “archival analysis” of their box – providing a sense of the themes covered and interesting stories that surfaced. They were also required to identify one document page that could be scanned and to write a 70–100 word caption for it. Substantial class time was set aside for students to consult their boxes, but we also gave them time before and after class to conduct their analyses. It was very time-consuming work, and many students had to arrange additional time to complete this task.

Working individually or in small groups of no more than three, students were then asked to design and implement a research-creation project. Their job was to analyze a selected aspect of the history revealed in their archival and oral history research, using the COHDS collection of oral histories made with Little Burgundy community members, and to share their findings with the originating community and wider publics. It was a three-step process: step one was a project proposal with a list of relevant primary and secondary sources; step two was a final research paper, worth 30 percent of their final mark; and step three was a public outcome, which would be part of the culminating public event on the final day of class. They were told that possible outcomes might include a newspaper or magazine article, poster, digital story, artwork, audio documentary, performance, installation, website, or other creative or public output. Many opted to contribute 1,200-word articles for a special issue of *Quebec Heritage* magazine, mainly because they felt most equipped to share their results via textual rather than other creative arts-based or digital formats.²⁷

27 For the special issue, see “Concordia’s Negro Community Centre/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre Fonds:

Considerable preparation was required to get the NCC fonds ready to be used in the course. The timing of the course, which coincided with the availability of the fonds to researchers, was no accident. The processing and description of the fonds, which began in 2014, was coming to an end, and it was clear that it would be ready for use by the start of the winter 2017 semester.²⁸ With the NCC fonds ready for consultation, the next challenge was to determine how to safely make the whole of the archive available to a group of more than 30 students. To do so, we had to rethink how library spaces could be used to accommodate the integration of the NCC fonds into the curriculum. It was determined that the Vanier Library's large study hall was the ideal setting for the first part of this course.

The study hall, which was transformed into a flexible classroom, provided students with the space required to conduct archival research and eliminated some of the transportation, preservation, and security challenges associated with moving large archival fonds out of the reading room into the classroom. Moving collections outside the repository is considered by some to be "potentially problematic due to the necessary precautions that must be taken to ensure the security and safety of the materials during transport and viewing in a less controlled environment."²⁹ Turning a study hall into a classroom ensured that materials could be consulted safely in proximity to the collections storage area and allowed us to adequately control the conditions under which the materials were used.

Students were also able to learn about and conduct archival research in an environment that combined the familiar features of a classroom with the conditions commonly found in archival reading rooms. Recreating a classroom environment in the library helped ease potential archival anxieties that sometimes plague new and less experienced researchers.³⁰ Additionally, by introducing some of the

Uncovered Gems from a Vanished Montreal Institution," ed. Rod MacLeod, special issue, *Quebec Heritage News* 12, no. 1 (Winter 2018).

- 28 Processing the fonds came with some particular challenges, stemming from its long-term storage in the vacant building on Coursol Street. After the NCC was shuttered, the vacant building was visited by urban explorers and community members alike. As the organization of the material appeared chaotic, it was believed that the original order may have been disturbed. After thorough analysis, it was determined that the arrangement was consistent with the operation and functions of the centre, as well as with the absence of a defined records management policy.
- 29 Matthew C. Reynolds, "Lay of the Land: The State of Bibliographic Instruction Efforts in ARL Special Collections Libraries," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 13, no. 1 (2012): 24.
- 30 For more on archival anxiety, see Anne Bahde, "Taking the Show on the Road: Special Collections Instruction in

equipment and procedures common to archival reading rooms into a familiar classroom environment, we were able to gradually introduce students to a less-than-familiar space. This gradual introduction was bolstered by the one-on-one support that students received during these four sessions. As argued by Anne Bahde, students' archival anxiety is diminished when a trusted faculty member takes an active role in archival instructional sessions.³¹ Students were able to develop their archival research skills in a familiar environment supported by a professor, a teaching assistant, an archivist, and library staff. In observing their interactions with archival materials in the classroom and reading room, we noted that this supportive introduction to archival research helped increase the students' confidence in engaging with primary resources.

Because many students juggle school, work, and other obligations, access to the archive was reserved for them before and after class time. For the first four weeks, the fonds was made available one hour before class began and then returned to the library's storage facility one hour after its completion, giving the students additional time to interact with the materials. Students were instructed to treat the classroom like they would the reading room: bags, coats, food and beverages, pens, and other materials were stored in a designated space at the front of the classroom, away from the archival materials. Along with archival and primary source literacy training, cotton gloves, acid-free flags, pencils, and rests were provided to ensure that students could consult the materials safely. Students were taught how to handle the types of documents found in the archive, including textual records, photographic materials, and oversized items. Importantly, each student had enough room to consult the fonds safely, as each had a space at one of the long tables in the study hall. While archival scholars have acknowledged that it can be difficult to use original materials with large groups and that small class sizes are more conducive to the integration of primary sources, *Telling Stories* proves that it is possible to effectively integrate archival materials into larger classes.³²

the Campus Classroom," *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 12, no. 2 (2011): 75–88; Sammie Morris, Lawrence J. Mykytiuk, and Sharon A. Weiner, "Archival Literacy for History Students: Identifying Faculty Expectations of Archival Research Skills," *American Archivist* 77, no. 2 (2014): 394–424; and Greg Johnson, "Introducing Undergraduate Students to Archives and Special Collections," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 13, no. 2 (2006): 91–100.

31 Bahde, "Taking the Show on the Road," 77.

32 See Bahde, "Taking the Show on the Road"; Sammie L. Morris, Tamar Chute, and Ellen Swain, "Teaching with

Using a Community of Records to Teach Archival Literacy

The fact that the NCC fonds was created by a community means that it cannot be separated from that community's collective (hi)stories and shared memories. Every community is, in a sense, a community of memory.³³ Collective identification is built up over time through shared experiences, memories, and relationships and through common knowledge and references. Communities have numerous – and sometimes contested – meanings, depending on the political, civic, and symbolic discourses that shape the ways they imagine themselves.³⁴ The spaces communities create for themselves are crucial to the negotiation of collective life and identity. They can be formal and physical, such as organizations and associations, as well as transitory and culturally constructed, such as events and traditional celebrations. The institutions that communities build in turn allow them to share new experiences and make new collective memories and relationships. Community-based organizations like the NCC are such institutions, created out of collective practices, desires, needs, and goals and shaped by community life and shared social practices. Documents are constantly being produced through the daily activities of organizations since “the need to record and remember in some format is a feature of all societies.”³⁵ Communities generate tangible records (letters, photographs, leaflets, posters, etc.), artifacts, and monuments as well as intangible records (songs, dances, etc.) that transmit and recount ideas, stories, and events. Those records are crucial in connecting and

Archives: A Guide for Archivists, Librarians, and Educators,” in *Teaching with Primary Sources*, ed. Christopher J. Prom and Lisa J. Hinchliffe (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2016); Susan M. Allen, “Rare Books and the College Library: Current Practices in Marrying Undergraduates to Special Collections,” *Rare Books and Manuscripts Librarianship* 13, no. 2 (1999): 110–19; and Anna E. Allison, “Connecting Undergraduates with Primary Sources: A Study of Undergraduate Instruction in Archives, Manuscripts, and Special Collections” (master’s thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2005).

- 33 Eric Ketelaar, “Sharing: Collected Memories in Communities of Records,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 33, no. 1 (2005): 44–61.
- 34 Elizabeth Crooke, “The Politics of Community Heritage: Motivations, Authority and Control,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 16–29; Andrew Flinn, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd, “Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream,” *Archival Science* 9, no. 1–2 (2009): 71–86; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Books, 1991).
- 35 Jeannette Allis Bastian, “Documenting Communities through the Lens of Collective Memory,” in *Identity Palimpsests: Archiving Ethnicity in the U.S. and Canada*, Series on Archives, Archivists, and Society 6, ed. Daniel, Dominique and Amalia S. Levi (Sacramento, CA: Litwin Books, 2014), 23.

preserving individual and collective memories, and “it is through the relationship between records and memory that communities define themselves and establish their identity.”³⁶ As Ketelaar observes, experiences and emotions are shared through cultural tools, turning individual memories into social memory.³⁷ These cultural tools produce a variety of “texts” through different mediums, whether these are written, oral, or physical.³⁸ The archives of community-based institutions therefore contain a variety of texts, pieces, and traces of collective memories and stories that help recount communal historical narratives. The NCC fonds itself can be understood as a “community of records,” where the community is both a generator of the records – tangible and intangible – and the knowledge and memory frame that contextualizes them.³⁹ For example, the correspondence, newsletters, administrative documents, and oral histories allow us to read community members’ stories and learn about their experiences of the centre. That information, in turn, further contextualizes the fonds itself. Communities of records are also “aggregates of records in all forms generated by multiple layers of actions and interactions between and among the people and institutions within a community. These layers of records and memories parallel the active life of the community itself.”⁴⁰

Archival holdings in university-based collections do not frequently inhabit spaces outside of their home institutions. This was especially true at Concordia prior to *Telling Stories*: items from the collection were sometimes exhibited at the university or at other cultural institutions but did not travel back or connect to their home communities in any real way. The efforts of Concordia Library’s Special Collections to foster an ongoing exchange with the community that created the NCC fonds aim at maintaining – and sometimes recreating – the ties between the archive and its community of origin. While the course encouraged students to engage in hands-on archival research on the histories of both the NCC and Little Burgundy, it also provided a unique opportunity to activate the archival records and engage community members in the process.

36 Bastian, “Documenting Communities,” 23.

37 Ketelaar, “Sharing.”

38 Ibid.

39 Jeannette Allis Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*, Contributions in Librarianship and Information Science 99 (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2003).

40 Bastian, “Documenting Communities,” 23.

Up until 2017, Concordia Library's archival holdings were not being well utilized for teaching and learning purposes. While Special Collections is an important piece of the library's research infrastructure, none of its holdings were used in the undergraduate classroom before Telling Stories. This is fairly typical at North American universities, where primary sources are used in graduate seminars but rarely at the undergraduate level. Archival repositories are still sometimes seen as dusty and foreboding edifices containing old, rarefied "museum pieces" that are to be used only by seasoned researchers and not by students. With a growing emphasis on active, discovery-based learning, special collections and archival repositories are now being seen as sites for engaging with documented history first hand.

This growing interest in the holdings of special repositories is not surprising. While archives and special collections have long been considered invaluable assets in academia, the rise of electronic journals, licensed content, and other digital resources has put a renewed spotlight on the rare and unique materials held by these repositories. With academic libraries purchasing or subscribing to many of the same resources, special collections and archives have become important points of distinction between institutions, and many universities – Concordia included – are committed to growing their holdings in these areas. These special materials, which attract faculty, graduate students, and other researchers, have obvious research value. They also hold enormous pedagogical potential, and as a result, teaching and learning are joining research as an important mission of archival and special collections repositories.

The Boyer Commission report on undergraduate education, which argued for making research-based learning the standard at academic institutions, has, according to Barbara Rockenbach, "opened the door for librarians and archivists to partner with faculty to bring primary source materials into the classroom and curriculum."⁴¹ This, along with the acknowledgment that special collections and archives are laboratories for learning and discovery, has helped propel their collections into teaching.⁴² This marks a shift away from seeing special

41 Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates in the Research University, *Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities* (Stony Brook State University of New York, 1998), 15, accessed October 25, 2018, <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED424840>; Barbara Rockenbach, "Archives, Undergraduates, and Inquiry-Based Learning: Case Studies from Yale University Library," *American Archivist* 74, no. 1 (2011): 297–8.

42 For further discussion on the idea of archives as laboratories, see Rockenbach, "Archives, Undergraduates, and

collections and archives as locked vaults containing rarefied and untouchable materials, and it steps beyond the traditional bibliographic, show-and-tell, and orientation-based approaches to instruction that have long been used to connect students to collections. Academic institutions that once may have been reluctant to allow undergraduates into the reading room are now developing pedagogical strategies to introduce them to the potential of primary sources.⁴³ Working in the classroom alongside teaching faculty is an ideal way to bridge the gap between undergraduate education and archival research and to reach students who might never delve into the archive of their own accord.

Embedding oneself in the classroom is a valuable strategy for archivists wishing to connect with undergraduates. In her recent article, Christy Fic writes that “archivists who work closely with faculty should co-opt the phrase ‘embedded archivist’” from librarians, who have long used the term *embedded* to describe instructional work done in close co-operation with teaching faculty.⁴⁴ Working in partnership with faculty allows archivists to teach archival and literacy competencies alongside specific domain or subject knowledge, contextualizing the archival research process in a way that would be difficult without such close collaboration. Embedded archivists are also able to develop a keener understanding of the students’ diverse needs and to encourage and guide them from the beginning of the research process until the end – something that is not possible when archival instruction is limited to a single session.

Introducing students to primary resources in the classroom allows archivists to reach beyond their typical audience and create new users. It also helps to demonstrate their relevance in a competitive educational landscape.⁴⁵ As argued by Steven Escar Smith, “If all we concern ourselves with is access for

Inquiry-Based Learning,” 300–301. See also Bahde, “Taking the Show on the Road,” 77; Ann Schmiesing and Deborah R. Hollis, “The Role of Special Collections Departments in Humanities Undergraduate and Graduate Teaching: A Case Study,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 2, no. 3 (2002): 466; Todd Samuelson and Cait Coker, “Mind the Gap: Integrating Special Collections Teaching,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 14, no. 1 (2014): 53; and Elizabeth Yakel and Doris Malkmus, “Contextualizing Archival Literacy,” in Prom and Hinchliffe, *Teaching with Primary Sources*, 18.

43 Elizabeth Yakel, “Foreword,” in *Using Primary Sources: Hands-On Instructional Exercises*, ed. Anne Bahde, Heather Smedberg, and Mattie Taormina (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2014), vii.

44 Christy Fic, “Working as an Embedded Archivist in an Undergraduate Course: Transforming Students into Scholars through an Archival Workshop Series,” *American Archivist* 81, no. 2 (2018): 292.

45 Peter Carini, “Information Literacy for Archives and Special Collections: Defining Outcomes,” *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* 16, no. 1 (2016): 192.

researchers, most people will never have the opportunity to see the unique, inspiring, and educational items” housed in special collections and archives.⁴⁶ The use of the NCC fonds in *Telling Stories* gave students the unique opportunity to connect directly to the history of Montreal's Black communities through hands-on experience.

The classroom is also an ideal setting to introduce undergraduates to the interlocking concepts of archival and primary source literacies, both of which are necessary to productively find and use archival resources. “Defined as the knowledge, skills, and abilities an individual needs to effectively and efficiently find, interpret and ethically use archival primary sources,” archival literacy brings together the various literacies necessary for interacting with archival resources.⁴⁷ As suggested by Elizabeth Yakel and Doris Malkmus, becoming archivally literate involves understanding the fundamentals of archival theory and practice and being able to develop research “strategies for reducing uncertainty and ambiguity when unstructured problems and ill-defined solutions are the norm.”⁴⁸ The knowledge and skills associated with archival literacy cannot be isolated from those affiliated with primary source literacy, or the ability to find, interpret, evaluate, and use primary sources of all types.⁴⁹ These literacies, crucial when conducting archival research, are not normally included in undergraduate-level information literacy instruction in libraries, which typically revolves around finding and using secondary resources. The one-time sessions that are so commonly associated with literacy instruction in special collections and archives, while not without merit, are generally not long enough to have a significant impact on the archival and primary source literacy skills of students. Time and, importantly, hands-on experience with archival materials are necessary ingredients in developing the literacy skills required to effectively conduct primary research.

46 Steven Escar Smith, “From ‘Treasure Room’ to ‘School Room’: Special Collections and Education,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 7, no. 1 (2006): 33.

47 Morris, Chute, and Swain, “Teaching with Archives,” 76.

48 Yakel and Malkmus, “Contextualizing Archival Literacy,” 8.

49 Association of College and Research Libraries’ Rare Book and Manuscript Section and Society of American Archivists Joint Task Force, “Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy” (n.p.: Association of College and Research Libraries’ Rare Book and Manuscript Section and Society of American Archivists, 2018), accessed January 2, 2018, https://www2.archivists.org/sites/all/files/Guidelines%20for%20Primary%20Source%20Literacy_AsApproved062018_1.pdf.

The Telling Stories course used both hands-on and lecture-based approaches in weeks 1 and 2 to provide literacy training that would help students begin to navigate the archive of the NCC. These training sessions allowed students who were largely unfamiliar with primary source research to gain the skills necessary to dig into the contents of the NCC fonds. Students learned the fundamentals of archival theory and practice – including the principles of original order, provenance, and respect des fonds – to navigate finding aids, to safely handle archival materials in various formats, to critically evaluate and contextualize primary sources, to understand the roles of the donor and archivist, to think about the reasons behind silences in the archive, to discern evidence of power relationships in archival records, and to use the materials while respecting cultural contexts, among other things.

The Student Journey

Over the first four weeks of the term, students received a grounding in archival theory and method and in the proper handling of materials, as well as an introduction to the NCC fonds itself, by way of lectures and in-class activities. Considerable class time during this first phase was set aside for students to work through their boxes, taking notes as they went. Between classes, they also had to read scholarly articles on the history of Black Montreal.⁵⁰ Nicola Sibthorpe, one of the students in the class, told the *Link* that one of the unexpected things she found in her archival box was a photograph of a group of teenagers sitting in a tree.⁵¹ She also found plenty of evidence in her box about the close relationship between the NCC and Union United Church. Students were thrilled to discover unexpected global connections: with the civil rights movement in the United States, with Malcolm X, with Nelson Mandela and the anti-apartheid movement, and with decolonization struggles in Africa.

In week 3, we brainstormed ideas for possible research projects – ideas that

50 Among the articles read by the students are David C. Este, "The Black Church as a Social Welfare Institution: Union United Church and the Development of Montreal's Black Community, 1907–1940," *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 1 (2004): 3–22; and Carla Marano, "Rising Strongly and Rapidly": The Universal Negro Improvement Association in Canada, 1919–1940," *Canadian Historical Review* 91, no. 2 (2010): 233–59.

51 Kelsey Litwin, "Community Archives Open up a Global Past," *The Link*, February 7, 2017, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://thelinknewspaper.ca/article/community-archives-open-up-a-global-past>.

originated in the students' boxes. Then, in week 4, we had an exercise where students could visit every other student in the classroom asking them about the contents of their boxes. Those with firm project ideas found solid leads and accompanying file and box numbers for their project proposals. Others found the inspiration needed to come up with project ideas that they could run with. It was clear that the students had gained considerable confidence in their knowledge of the archive and of how to use, understand, and contextualize primary resources in three short weeks. It was a very successful classroom exercise, acknowledging students' newly acquired expertise in the contents of their boxes, and this historical knowledge provided a foundation for the course. At the end of week 4, students were required to write a short archival assignment, analyzing some of the themes that emerged from their boxes. They each also had to flag one page from their box for copying and write a caption for it. Here is one of the captions produced:

This letter, dated February 24, 1976, was written by Vera Jackson of the NCC to the MUCTC (Montreal Urban Community Transit Corporation) regarding a case of discrimination by a bus driver and a policeman against an unnamed NCC Recreation Supervisor and a group of minors he was travelling with. A copy of this letter was also mailed to the police. Many such letters were sent by Jackson in the surrounding years describing similar cases. There is no record of this event leading to any disciplinary action on the part of either the police or the MUCTC. *Harris Frost*⁵²

Students' choices were often interesting, centring, as this one does, on acts of racism and resistance. For the next phase of the course, we moved back downtown to our regular classroom, which was physically closer to Little Burgundy than to the NCC fonds out at Loyola campus. This shift in location was interesting because of what it revealed to us about our location as researchers and our proximity to the communities whose histories we engage with. In week 5, we brought a few excerpts from the NCC fonds downtown with us, posting the 34 photocopied archival page selections around the classroom at eye level, with the captions underneath. Students then had the chance to circulate, seeing what

52 Caption by Harris Frost displayed at the final public event of the Telling Stories course, April 11, 2017.

archival stories had stood out to their classmates and how other students had framed these documents in their captions. What followed was a very productive conversation about some of the themes that emerged from this selection, what was missing, and what made for an effective caption. By the end of the class, the white board was covered with our archival engagements. The exercise was so insightful that we decided to reproduce these selections during the project's culminating event, therefore making the NCC archive visibly present.

The next week, week 6, we shifted gears and introduced students to oral history as an alternative archival source. Each student was assigned an interview from the Voices of Little Burgundy Fonds at Concordia's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling. Their homework was to listen to the interview, take notes, and transcribe a story of 50–100 words that somehow spoke to them. These interview excerpts would later join the archival copies on the walls of the local Universal Negro Improvement Association Liberty Hall, another long-standing Black organization in Little Burgundy. For now, students were expected to share what they had learned as part of the “speed dates with history” exercise. First developed as part of our Right to the City work in Pointe-Saint-Charles, this exercise required students to “perform” as their interviewees, speaking in the first person. (They each had to pretend to be that person for 90 seconds.) Students sat in two concentric circles, with chairs paired up and facing each other. First, students in the inner circle would introduce “themselves” and speak for 90 seconds, sharing something of their experience; then the outer ring would do the same for the next 90 seconds. Then both rings rotated right, and they did this again, and again, and again. The exercise is interesting because it raises troubling ethical issues about the politics of representation. As academics, or students, we represent people all the time in our writing, freely quoting people based on archival records, which we can use without going through the same ethical procedures as, for example, when conducting interviews. This performative act, which required students to inhabit someone else's story and pretend to be them, raised questions about power and cultural appropriation. Like the archival exercise, the exercise also gave us an opportunity to consider what was left out.⁵³

For the next three weeks, following the spring break, students received feedback on their project proposals and welcomed a series of guest speakers who

53 For an example from a previous year, see <http://righttothecity.atwaterlibrary.ca/speed-dates-with-history/>.

straddled university and community. Dorothy Williams, a former NCC director and the author of *The Road to Now*, the most influential historical study of Little Burgundy, spoke of her experience and her scholarship. Then David Austin, the author of *Fear of a Black Nation*, spoke of Montreal's rich history of Black radicalism and the ways that Montreal acted as a hub in a larger Black Atlantic world. Later, Jean-Addlaire Gaétan, a community organizer who grew up in Little Burgundy and works mainly with young people, shared his own story and those of the organizations that he works with. Next, with the worst of winter behind us, we walked into Little Burgundy itself, visiting Union United Church, UNIA, and of course, the fenced-in empty lot that was once the NCC. From there, we fanned out through the neighbourhood with historical maps to consider how the neighbourhood had changed. What vestiges were still visible? What had been erased? The final three weeks of the term were spent preparing for our culminating event and going public with our research projects.

One of the key aspects of Telling Stories was the multiplicity of learning opportunities it offered. Through engaging with and researching the archival records, attending class and guest lectures, listening to oral histories, and participating in different pedagogical exercises and site visits, students had multiple opportunities to acquire information and gain knowledge and skills in various ways. The class went far beyond a simple demonstration or presentation of archives to orient students to the kinds of resources held by an archives – something that happens in most undergraduate classes where special collections departments are called to participate.⁵⁴ As Bianca Falbo observes, getting students to use archival materials in the classroom allows for the creation of a more student-centred classroom, where students develop their own knowledge and direct part of their learning process based on the archival material.⁵⁵ In addition, Falbo writes that having to read and question the archive also pushes students to interrogate what they know about “the work of reading and writing, about their experience making sense of a text,” and promotes critical thinking, reduces cases of plagiarism, and increases the quality of the essays they produce.⁵⁶ The use of

54 Michelle McCoy, “The Manuscript as Question: Teaching Primary Sources in the Archives – The China Missions Project,” *College & Research Libraries* 71, no. 1 (2010): 51.

55 Bianca Falbo, “Teaching from the Archives,” *RBM: A Journal of Rare Books, Manuscripts, and Cultural Heritage* 1, no. 1 (2000): 33–35.

56 Falbo, “Teaching from the Archives,” 34; McCoy, “The Manuscript as Question,” 49–62.

oral histories alongside the archive was also a key pedagogical aspect of the class that allowed students to gain an idea of the lived experiences of community members who had connections to the NCC and Little Burgundy. It was a way to help them to engage and connect stories and memories to the archival materials they were seeing in class.

Another important aspect of Telling Stories was that it entailed and facilitated different levels of relationships, which were conducive to the sharing of information and knowledge. “At basis an archive and its collections is a vast set of relational components: relational in the ‘real’ past lives these are traces of, also relational in archival terms.”⁵⁷ Telling Stories was as much about relationships between different people around the archive as it was about relationships to the archive itself. In addition, as Maria Tamboukou writes, “an archive is a dynamic space traversed and indeed constituted by multiple rhythms and is thus open to new ideas and encounters.”⁵⁸ Working with the archive as a starting point led to exchanges, encounters, and relationships that took place and developed before and throughout the class: between the professor, the archivist, and the teaching assistant, as they prepared and delivered the course; between the students, as they exchanged information about their boxes of archival material; between the students and the archival material, as students explored and learned about the material; and eventually, between the class and community members, during the final event. These multi-layered relationships came to the fore in that final public event, which pushed students to think about the ethical, relational aspects of doing research on a community to which most did not belong and having to disseminate their work in a public setting with community members present. In knowing that they would have to present to the community of records creators, students became more attentive to the content and means of expression and, ultimately, to the ideas and stories they would be sharing with the public. One of Rochat’s tasks was to accompany students as they developed their final projects, and many came to discuss this aspect of their work with her.

57 Niamh Moore, Andrea Salter, Liz Stanley, and Maria Tamboukou, “In Other Archives and Beyond,” in *The Archive Project: Archival Research in the Social Sciences*, ed. Niamh Moore, Andrea Salter, Liz Stanley, and Maria Tamboukou (London: Routledge, 2016), 22.

58 Maria Tamboukou, “Archival Rhythms: Narrativity in the Archives,” in Moore, Salter, Stanley, and Tamboukou, *The Archive Project*, 79.

Going Public

Planning the final public event proved to be a tremendous opportunity for the class to connect with community members. It was decided that the event would be hosted in a community space in Little Burgundy. While the event happened at the UNIA, the class also established contact with Union United Church. The event was promoted through various networks inside and beyond the community: Rochat contacted different organizations and community members she knew or had worked with, Mills contacted people she had been in touch with through the acquisition process, and High helped the students promote the event in the media. Students also put posters up around the neighbourhood, made a Facebook page, and promoted the event in their circles. Articles were published in student and local newspapers, and students were interviewed on television. Attendance greatly exceeded our expectations, and some people were unfortunately turned away.

Telling Stories received several waves of media attention over the course of the term, starting with Black History Month in February, when Concordia University showcased the initiative on its website and online newsletter, generating other media attention. Then in early April, during the lead-up to the culminating event in Little Burgundy, Concordia helped connect us with Montreal-area media, resulting in a substantial article in the *Montreal Gazette* as well as coverage on radio and television.⁵⁹ As much as possible, students who volunteered to do media work served as project spokespeople. They were passionate, articulate, and far more effective than the instructors would have been. Summit Ollivierre told the *Montreal Gazette* that the NCC “holds a special place in the hearts of my friends and family who grew up here.”⁶⁰ Lauren Engel, a studio arts student, told the student newspaper that the class had “really made me think a lot more about our education.”⁶¹ The media attention ensured that the event at the UNIA Liberty Hall was well publicized.

59 For examples, see Ainslie MacLellan, “Historic Negro Community Centre Given New Life at Concordia Archives,” CBC News, April 11, 2017, accessed May 1, 2019, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/negro-community-centre-concordia-archives-1.4065615?cmp=rss>; “Focus Montreal: Concordia Students Shine Light on NCC History,” Global News, April 9, 2017, accessed May 1, 2019, <https://globalnews.ca/video/3367138/focus-montreal-concordia-students-shine-light-on-ncc-history>; and Brownstein, “Spirit of Negro Community Centre Lives On in Concordia Student Project.”

60 Brownstein, “Spirit of Negro Community Centre Lives On in Concordia Student Project.”

61 Hope, “Concordia Students Uncover Details of Montreal's Cultural Identity.”

Still, on the day of the event, we had no idea how many people to expect. Everyone helped set up the room during class time that morning. We arranged 60 or 70 chairs in rows, with plenty of room for people to stand around them. The room was ringed with the student projects, arranged as table displays, and the reproduced archival documents and interview quotations were displayed on the walls behind. There was a digital projector and screen up front, which would display a slideshow of photographs from the NCC fonds. Mills set up a memory booth at the back, where people could identify the community members in the photographs by name and make notes about anything else in the images or what they represented. There were also assorted snacks and a program for the evening.

We designed the culminating event to launch both the student projects and the NCC fonds itself. We therefore invited our networks from within both the university and the Little Burgundy community. In thinking about how we wished to curate the event, we decided that we would start with a panel of four elders, who would share their memories of the NCC. This would be followed by a panel of students, who would speak to their projects and the course. Five students volunteered. Mills would speak to the NCC fonds, and Rochat would serve as the night's MC. The students were then released and told to come back 15 minutes before the evening start time.

People started to arrive 30 minutes early. At first, it was mainly older people from the community, who had personal connections to the NCC. They quickly filled up the chairs. By the time the students and their friends and families came, the room was already packed – and people kept coming and coming, until there were more than 200 people squeezed into the hall. Others were turned back, as it was just impossible to fit any more people in. Even Concordia's president could not get much further than the entrance area. Community members spoke with emotion about the NCC and their connections to it. One brought her Sepia Girls jacket, hanging it behind her. The students were passionate about their work and what they had learned. Teejay Bhalla told those gathered that students in the class were very aware of their “responsibility to represent, as objectively as possible, the history of our city, and the community of Little Burgundy.” He noted that many of the students in the class were not from the neighbourhood, “which gave us added incentive to make sure that we did your History the justice that it deserves.” Indeed, he said, “by uncovering letters, photographs and other visual and textual records, we were forced to look at things and ask ourselves:

'What does this tell us about Little Burgundy?' and think more broadly about historical context within space and time."⁶²

Kelann Currie-Williams, an undergraduate student who went on to explore this same archive as a master's student, went even further in her comments that day, saying,

Through the many boxes that form the archive, I have been remarkably moved by the NCC's dedication to strengthening the St. Antoine district as well as Montreal as a whole. In more ways than one, this came in the form of providing Black Montrealers with moments and spaces to celebrate their identity and assert their presence and visibility. Amidst attempts to render Black Montrealers invisible, that is to say have their visibility ignored, overlooked, not deemed worth perceiving or acknowledging, regarded as irrelevant . . . the NCC stood resolute in instilling ideas of community and support to its members, and empowering their perception of self.⁶³

Continuing, Currie-Williams told those gathered in the UNIA hall that the NCC had closed before she was born and the building had been demolished in 2014, the year that she moved to Montreal, so she never had the chance to see the building herself:

But its archives – its living archives – have provided me with knowledge of the Negro Community Centre's endeavour to educate and serve as a pillar of the community. And as seen through the many works created in response to the centre's archives, it is clear that through the sharing of memories, stories, and history to present generations, the Negro Community Centre is at once present, and at once visible.⁶⁴

It was a moment of heightened emotion in the room.

⁶² Bhalla, presentation at the final public event of the Telling Stories course.

⁶³ Kelann Currie-Williams, "New Pasts, Old Futures: Reimagining the Narrative of Montreal's Negro Community Centre," presentation at the final public event of the Telling Stories course, April 11, 2017, text in the possession of Steven High.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

Clearly, it was a very special event. “This history of our lives is very important to us,” Norman Marshall Villeneuve wrote to Mills and High after attending the public event. “We are grateful to educators such as yourselves and to the students who actively take part in this kind of work to keep our history alive and relevant.”⁶⁵ Stephane Martelly likewise commented on how wonderful it was to see the students engage with this history, particularly given the “constant erasure of black history in Montreal.”⁶⁶ Similarly, Piyusha Chatterjee, a PhD student specializing in oral history, wrote, “It was wonderful and so inspiring. And the turnout was great. The students spoke from their heart and yet they were also so articulate and conscious about doing history in a community.”⁶⁷ Others were moved by the memories shared by community members. The students were also thrilled. Chloe Houde wrote that she “had no idea what this class would be like when I registered last year, but I feel so lucky to have been a part of something so special and meaningful. Having the opportunity to conduct real and tangible history was a privilege.”⁶⁸

Conclusion

There have been important legacies from the Telling Stories course. Clearly, there is considerable pedagogical value in placing archival research at the centre of postsecondary history education. Students learned by doing. Similarly, there is value in reanimating the archives this way, regenerating or maintaining their connections to source communities. The pedagogy of the course convinced High to teach a regular course focused on a single community organization. In the year since the NCC course, he has taught courses in partnership with the Atwater Public Library, which began its life in the 1830s as a mechanics’ institute; Saint Columba House, an urban mission of the United Church of Canada, which has worked with some of the most vulnerable people in Pointe-Saint-Charles for over 100 years; and Union United Church. In each instance, the community organization approached him with a desire to recover or engage with community

65 Norman Marshall Villeneuve, email message to Steven High and Alexandra Mills, April 11, 2017.

66 Stephane Martelly, email message to Steven High, April 12, 2017.

67 Piyusha Chatterjee, email message to Steven High, April 12, 2017.

68 Chloe Houde, email message to Steven High, April 13, 2017.

history. Dozens of oral history interviews were conducted as a result, and two special issues of *Quebec Heritage* magazine were released (and launched at large public events): the first on the Negro Community Centre and the second on Pointe-Saint-Charles. In January 2019, High and Mills partnered on another course on the NCC – this one extending to Union United Church and Little Burgundy more generally and culminating in another big community event and an exhibition in the Concordia Library vitrines.

Since the conclusion of Telling Stories, Black history has emerged as an important collecting area, and Special Collections has been working with individuals and organizations to find and acquire materials documenting the contributions of Montreal's Black communities. These documents, located in closets, basements, and attics around the city, are hard to find and generally inaccessible. Concordia strives to become a steward of Black history collections, helping the community preserve and provide access to its documentary heritage. While numerous donations were made by members of the Black community who attended the public event in Little Burgundy, as Karina Vernon and others have noted, we cannot simply sit back and expect Black history collections to land on our doorstep. It is up to Concordia to prove itself a careful, considerate, and trustworthy steward of Black history collections so that we will be entrusted with new archival fonds. Building and fostering trust and relationships is an essential aspect of this process. To do this, we are listening and responding to community needs and concerns and making sure individuals and organizations are comfortable with the way we will steward their records over the long term. Importantly, Special Collections is beginning to develop partnerships with community organizations in the Montreal area and to support them and their members by providing workshops, encouraging the use of their archives in teaching, and supporting exhibitions and public events. By collaborating and working with community organizations, we aim to ensure that communities have ongoing access to their archives.

Students enrolled in Telling Stories and community members who encountered the NCC fonds at the public event continue to access, use, and activate the archive. Former members of the NCC, many of whom were unaware that the archive had been preserved, have been engaging with its contents since its inaugural showcase. Each point of interaction between members of the Black community and the NCC fonds serves to re-activate the archive once more and injects new meaning into the records. Notably, students who took part in Telling



FIGURE 3 Photograph by Graeme Clyke, 1981. *The Negro Community Centre/Charles H. Este Cultural Centre Fonds, F013-02-115*. Source: Concordia University Library Special Collections.

Stories continue to return to Special Collections to conduct research – even for classes where it is not required. These students, who received archival and primary source literacy training and spent hours combing the archive, are noticeably more comfortable with the research process than other undergraduates.

Approaches to archival research increasingly call for researchers and students to engage with archives as contested sites of knowledge production, to be understood as incomplete but nevertheless complex units rather than just sets of records from which to pick and pull out decontextualized records and information.⁶⁹ Archival research should also prompt us to question the records themselves: their presence or absence from the archives; the relationships between individual records and other records, collections, or fonds; and the history of the records' creation and preservation. Engaging with the NCC fonds as a complex, historically and politically situated "object" offers us tremendous opportunities to inquire into the societal provenance of the fonds – that is, the social context of the creation and preservation of the records, shaped by "socio-economic conditions, social assumptions, values, ideas, and aspirations."⁷⁰ In addition, since "remembering is distributed between texts and other agents [and] neither operates autonomously but they work together in a network," exploring the archive as a repository of memories and stories also allows us to delve into the ways in which the source community documented and preserved its memory through the different "texts" it created.⁷¹ Developing a collecting area focused on Black communities in Montreal will allow us to juxtapose different fonds and collections – placing them in conversations with one another, opening the possibility of reading across different sets of records and looking for common themes that connect Black memories of and in the city.

The Telling Stories course and the launch of the NCC fonds happened in the midst of wider conversations and activities related to the preservation of Black histories in Montreal and Quebec. As mentioned before, the NCC was part of a network of organizations and associations, some of which still exist. Other projects, mostly volunteer-based, are currently organizing and preserving

69 Moore, Salter, Stanley, and Tamboukou, "In Other Archives and Beyond," 1–29; Ann Laura Stoler, "Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance," *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (2002): 87–109.

70 Tom Nesmith, "The Concept of Societal Provenance and Records of Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal-European Relations in Western Canada: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice," *Archival Science* 6, no. 3–4 (2007): 352.

71 Ketelaar, "Sharing," 44.

archives of community spaces such as the Maison d’Haïti and the Jamaica Association.⁷² This work, and that of Concordia’s Special Collections department, will eventually allow for the mapping of a rich history, articulated through multiple nodes located in and beyond Montreal. The next steps will be finding other ways to activate those archives and remembering that “every interaction, intervention, interrogation, and interpretation by creator, user, and archivist is an activation of the record. . . . Each activation leaves fingerprints which are attributes to the archive’s infinite meaning.”⁷³ Allowing future generations to make meaning of the archives and leave their marks there is also a way to open spaces for new Montreal (hi)stories to be told.

72 Rochat, Young, Villefranche, and Choudry, “Maison d’Haïti’s Collaborative Archive Project.”

73 Eric Ketelaar, “Tacit Narratives: The Meanings of Archives,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 2 (2001): 137.

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BIOGRAPHY Steven High is professor of history at Concordia University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling. He is an interdisciplinary oral and public historian with a strong interest in transnational approaches to working-class studies, forced migration, and community-engaged research. He has headed a number of major research projects, most notably the prize-winning *Life Stories of Montrealers Displaced by War, Genocide and Other Human Rights Violations*.