Documenting the Immigrant and Ethnic Experience in American Archives

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Abstract

This paper examines the development of ethnic and immigrant archives in the United States since the 1960s. It focuses on the dramatic evolution of "ethnic archiving"—the processes and objectives involved in documenting the immigrant and ethnic experience—and shows how cultural minorities evolved from an object or theme of archival collections to active participants in the creation, appraisal, description, and use of their own archives. A number of factors made this evolution possible: a new political context increasingly responsive to minority rights and cultural diversity, rising interest in social history, and the influence of postmodernist thought on archival theory. New digital technologies have also facilitated the expression and archiving of ethnic voices.

At the 1970 meeting of the Society of American Archivists, historian Howard Zinn argued that archives had long neglected large segments of society and privileged the rich and powerful. His paper, entitled "The Archivist and the New Left," challenged the archivist's accepted role as custodian of records. As he put it, "Far more resources are devoted to the collection and preservation of what already exists as records, than to recording fresh data."[1] A few years later, in a presidential address at the SAA Annual Meeting, Gerald Ham echoed Zinn's words, sharply criticizing the archivists' bias in favor of the already well documented.[2] Zinn's wake-up call stimulated debate among archivists about their roles and responsibilities, especially about appraisal and collection policies. In his 1970 paper, Zinn urged archivists "to compile a whole new world of documentary material about the lives, desires and needs of ordinary people." Ham, for his part, denounced the bias and gaps in the archival record, and proclaimed that "the most important and intellectually demanding"

[1] Howard Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives and the Public Interest," in *The Zinn Reader: Writings on Disobedience and Democracy* (New York: Seven Stories, 1997), 524.

[2] F. Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38, no. 1 (January 1975): 6.

role of archivists should be to "provide the future with a representative record of human experience in our time."[3]

Zinn included a host of individuals and groups in society as the undocumented "ordinary people," among them the poor, the young, women, immigrants, and ethnic minorities. This paper focuses on immigrants and ethnic minorities in the United States and traces the evolution of efforts by archives to document these important components of the country's history since the 1960s. It first analyzes the new interest among historians in immigration and ethnicity in the 1960s and its impact on the collecting strategies of archives. It then explores recent research into the theoretical underpinnings of what I will call "ethnic archiving"—the objectives and processes involved in documenting immigrant and ethnic experiences in the United States. My goal is to demonstrate the dramatic evolution of ethnic archiving under the influence of epistemological, social, and political forces such as postmodernism and multiculturalism. In the 1960s, "ethnics" were merely another theme or object of mainstream archival (and museum) collections. Today some challenge such a passive interpretation and look for ways to actively involve these communities in the appraisal, arrangement, description, and use of their own archives. Most archivists recognize the need for more diversity in the historical record and in the archival profession. Diversity, that is, ensuring that its members, the holdings that they collect and manage, and the users that they serve reflect the diversity of society as a whole, is one of three strategic goals of the Society of American Archivists for 2010 to 2013, and Elizabeth W. Adkins chose this theme for her presidential address to the 2008 SAA Annual Meeting.[4] In this respect, American archives are following the lead of other cultural heritage institutions, most notably museums[5] and aboriginal archives in Australia and in Canada,[6] which have long tackled the challenges of documenting ethnic voices and incorporating diversity.

The Rise of "Ethnic Archiving" in American Archives

Zinn's 1970 call to archivists reflected the development of social history in the previous decade. Social historians were interested in history "from the bottom up." Eager for information on ordinary people and on social groupings in society,

[3] Ham, "Archival Edge," 5–7.

[4] Elizabeth W. Adkins, "Our Journey Toward Diversity—and a Call to (More) Action," *American Archivist* 71 (Spring/Summer 2008): 21–49.

[5] Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991).

[6] See, for example, the activities of the Society of Australian Archivists' Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group, at http://www.archivists.org.au/files/Conference_Papers/2006/KIA_Workbook.pdf, accessed 1 December 2009; for Canada, see the Association of Canadian Archivists, "Aboriginal Archives," at http://archivists.ca/content/special-interest-section-aboriginal-archives, accessed 1 December 2009.

they found large gaps and biases in the archives. The institutional nature of archives in the United States and the influence of Theodore Schellenberg's appraisal theory and practice, shaped by his experience at the National Archives, contributed to the governmental and organizational focus of many archives. Searching for information on marginalized or anonymous individuals and groups could therefore be a time-consuming and labor-intensive task across geographically scattered local historical societies or collecting archives, an activity that historian Kathleen Conzen ironically calls "hunting the snark" in her chronicle of her own research.[7] At best, government records treated such individuals and groups as statistics. Archivists often rejected case files, perhaps the most significant source of information on individuals, because of their bulk and low evidential value.[8] Only the records of "notable persons," to use Schellenberg's phrase, were thought worthy of being preserved.[9] However, as research on social history and its impact on archives developed,[10] the Society of American Archivists urged its members to "compile a more balanced and representative record of history" by ensuring better documentation of neglected areas.[11] In 1987, Danielle Laberge could announce that "[i]n the last two decades, the cultural, social, and intellectual relevance of focusing societal attention and scholarly investigation on non-elite groups for the better comprehension of social interactions and general history" had become "more widely accepted."[12]

Parallel to the development of social history, Americans were rediscovering the importance of immigration and ethnicity in their history and society. They realized that among them were "unmeltable ethnics"—the term used by historian Michael Novak to describe the descendants of the immigrants who had come from eastern and southern Europe in the first decades of the twentieth

[7] Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Hunting the Snark, or The Historian's Quest for Immigrant Documentation," *Ethnic Forum* 11, no. 2 (1991): 16–28.

[8] Danielle Laberge, "Information, Knowledge and Rights: The Preservation of Archives as a Political and Social Issue," *Archivaria* 25 (1987–1988): 46.

[9] "From the point of view of their historical or biographical significance, they [records pertaining to persons] are important individually only to the degree that the persons to whom they pertain are important. An archivist obviously will preserve all records, whatever their character, for notable persons who lived in the past; but how is he to know who will become notable among the millions about whom records are now being created?" T. R. Schellenberg, "The Appraisal of Modern Records: Introduction," *Bulletins of the National Archives* 8 (October 1956), Archives Library Information Center, at http://www.archives.gov/research/alic/reference/archives-resources/appraisal-intro.html, accessed 1 December 2009.

[10] For a good assessment of the impact of social history, see Ian Johnston, "Whose History Is It Anyway?," *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 22, no. 2 (October 2001): 213–29. He points to, among other things, the special issue of the *American Archivist* dealing with ethnic archives (volume 48, no. 3, 1985) and the social history special edition of *Archivaria* (volume 33, 1991–1992).

[11] SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities, *Planning for the Archival Profession: A Report of the SAA Task Force on Goals and Priorities* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1986), 10–11.

[12] Laberge, "Information, Knowledge and Rights," 45.

century[13]—and that those white ethnics wanted their contributions to American society recognized as well. Following Glazer and Moynihan's *Beyond the Melting Pot*,[14] historians and social scientists tried to understand why the descendants of immigrants had not been totally absorbed by the fabled melting pot and studied specific hyphenated American communities. At the same time, the civil rights movement and subsequent legislation led African Americans to proudly reclaim their black heritage and identity. The Black Power and Black Is Beautiful movements inspired other nonwhite minorities, especially Chicanos and Native Americans, to take pride in their cultural heritage and to demand recognition of their rights. While, in the mid-1960s, ethnic studies were devoted to white ethnics, by the end of the decade, ethnics of color were becoming the main focus. Archives strongly felt the impact of this cultural, political, and academic movement. Ethnic archives, or archives set up by ethnic communities, were not a new phenomenon in the United States. In this country of immigration, newcomers and their descendants had locally established archives and museums to remedy the lack of interest they observed in "mainstream" (WASP) archives[15] and to "elaborate a collective identity, honor ancestors, and celebrate progress in their communities."[16] From the 1960s, however, activists and amateur and professional scholars from the ethnic minorities, motivated by renewed pride in their distinct heritage and identity, set up new archives and cultural heritage institutions. Thus, black and Chicano research and heritage centers sprang up throughout the United States.[17]

Furthermore, historians took the initiative to seek out new documentary materials that would ensure the preservation of immigrant and ethnic experiences and would allow for their study. Rudolph Vecoli, for example, was a pioneer of

[13] Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the 1970s* (New York: McMillan, 1972). In 1964, in an article refuting Oscar Handlin's *The Uprooted*, Rudolph J. Vecoli had already pointed out the resilience of Italian immigrants' cultural heritage and urged historians to "study the distinctive cultural character of each ethnic group." See Rudolph J. Vecoli, "*Contadini* in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*," *Journal of American History* 51, no. 3 (December 1964): 417.

[14] Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *Beyond the Melting Pot* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1970).

[15] Lisa Singer, *The Value of Community-Based Archives: A Resource in Development*, master's thesis, University of Manitoba, 1997, at http://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/bitstream/1993/1018/1/mq23498.pdf, accessed 1 December 2009; John Higham, "The Ethnic Historical Society in Changing Times," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 30–44.

[16] Higham, "The Ethnic Historical Society," 32.

[17] Robert Harris, Jr., "Ethnic Historical Societies and the Association for the Study of African American Life and History," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 13, no. 2 (Winter 1994): 56. A comprehensive or even representative list of archives and other cultural institutions interested in ethnic groups is too long to mention here. For African American archives, see Jacqueline Goggin, "Carter G. Woodson and the Collection of Source Materials for Afro-American History," *American Archivist* 48, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 261–71. For Hispanic archives, see Salvador Guerena, "Archives and Manuscripts: Historical Antecedents to Contemporary Chicano Collections," California Ethnic and Multicultural Archives, at http://www.library.ucsb.edu/speccoll/collections/cema/archives_manuscripts.html, accessed 1 December 2009.

Italian American history in the United States. He later explained that as a PhD student, he tried in vain to find information on Italian immigrants "in the great libraries of Chicago" and turned to the Italian American community itself to find the resources necessary to write his dissertation. This experience made him aware of the gaps in American archives, which he accused of suffering from "ethnocentric myopia," and of "the urgent need to collect the surviving records which were decaying in the basements and attics in America's old immigrant neighborhoods."[18] Vecoli was not alone in his quest for ethnic records, and this need resulted in the creation of the Immigration History Research Center (IHRC) at the University of Minnesota in 1965, with Vecoli as its director. Similarly, in 1971, the Balch Institute was founded in Philadelphia with a mission "to document and interpret American immigration history and ethnic life."[19] Meanwhile, existing "mainstream" archives and historical societies interested in the ethnic dimension of the history of their area began to collect more related materials. Thus, the Western Reserve Historical Society started the Cleveland Regional Ethnic Archives in 1971.[20] The Houston Metropolitan Research Center at the Houston Public Library started building a collection of Mexican American Houstonian history in 1978, recognizing that Mexican Americans had been ignored although they had been part of local history since at least the 1870s.[21] Institutions like the IHRC, devoted exclusively to ethnic and immigrant records, remained rare, and most archives collected such records within the framework of their general mission of documenting the history of an area.

Archivists interested in documenting ethnic groups in the 1960s and 1970s felt a sense of urgency. As Vecoli had observed, the records that the turn-of-the-century immigrants had created in America were fragile, scattered, and, often, still in the possession of their creators; furthermore, the last members of the first generation were dying. To harvest these neglected records, archivists adopted a number of strategies. Following Zinn's recommendation, they became "activist archivists" and launched into fieldwork. The best strategy proved to be making contact with ethnic organizations and leaders. Vecoli searched out "those ethnic institutions which, by their very nature, created written records," that is to say, the ethnic press, churches, mutual aid societies, and labor and political organizations.[22] The key to obtaining the custody of these

[18] Rudolph J. Vecoli, " 'Diamonds in Your Own Backyard': Developing Documentation on European Immigrants to North America," *Ethnic Forum* 1, no. 2 (September 1981): 3–4.

[19] Joseph R. Anderson, "Building a Multi-Ethnic Collection: The Research Library of the Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies," *Ethnic Forum* 5, nos. 1–2 (Fall 1985): 7–19.

[20] John J. Grabowski, "Ethnicity in Perspective: The Collections of the Western Reserve Historical Society," *Ethnic Forum* 1, no. 2 (September 1981): 29–36.

[21] Thomas H. Kreneck, "Documenting a Mexican American Community: The Houston Example," *American Archivist* 48, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 272–85.

[22] Vecoli, " 'Diamonds in Your Own Backyard'," 6.

records was creating a relationship based on trust. The presence of an archivist who spoke the language of the ethnic group of interest or originated in that very community proved particularly useful.[23] To strengthen and systematize the IHRC's relationship with ethnic communities, the Friends of the IHRC was set up in 1977.[24] Other archivists report similar experiences as they strove to find better ways to establish trust with populations that had long been ignored or discriminated against.[25] For example, the Houston Metropolitan Research Center drafted a collection policy and a plan of community outreach to convince the Mexican American population of its impartiality in pursuing their records. The staff not only used the Hispanic media to publicize their outreach plan, but also patiently established relationships within the local population.[26] Oral history, popularized by social historians, was used extensively to record the experiences of ethnic leaders, community organizers, and also ordinary citizens, especially older people.[27] Field archivists were aware of the limitations of oral history, as the interviewee's memory, the formulation of the questions, and the technical quality of the recording distorted the information gathered. Yet they considered it a valuable tool to "harvest" information that was not available in written records but that would be the raw material for the new social history and ethnic studies. Finally, some archives went so far as traveling to Europe to trace records that immigrants to the United States might have left or mailed back. Such was the case at the IHRC, as well as at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan, which made a commitment to collecting ethnic materials relating to the history of the state.[28]

Collecting ethnic and immigrant records presented a number of challenges. Among many difficulties, records were often in foreign languages that archivists did not speak. A high rate of illiteracy characterized the immigrant population at the turn of the century, and most ordinary people left very little in the way of personal letters or diaries.[29] The records of ethnic organizations and leaders represented an important aspect of the immigrant experience, but neglecting anonymous individuals and families exposed archivists to the same accusation of

[23] Vecoli, " 'Diamonds in Your Own Backyard'," 6. See also Nicholas V. Montalto, "The Challenge of Preservation in a Pluralistic Society: A Report on the Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota," *American Archivist* 41, no. 4 (October 1978): 399–404.

[24] Joel Wurl, "The Immigration History Research Center: A Historical Profile and Prospective Glimpse," *Ethnic Forum* 8, no. 1 (1988): 81.

[25] Richard N. Juliani, "The Use of Archives in the Study of Immigration and Ethnicity," *American Archivist* 39, no. 4 (October 1976): 469–77.

[26] Kreneck, "Documenting a Mexican American Community," 284.

[27] Kreneck, "Documenting a Mexican American Community," 283.

[28] Robert M. Warner and Francis X. Blouin, "Documenting the Great Migrations and a Century of Ethnicity in America," *American Archivist* 39, no. 3 (July 1976): 319–28.

[29] Warner and Blouin, "Documenting the Great Migrations," 320.

elitist bias that underlay the social history movement. Whether of the elite or the grassroots in ethnic communities, records were geographically scattered and therefore difficult to collect. Traveling to Europe and setting up community outreach programs were expensive and time-consuming activities, especially in times of budget contractions. Many archives, unlike the IHRC or the Balch Institute, had other missions and collections beyond ethnic groups and were not able or willing to devote the resources necessary for this particular aspect of their responsibility, especially the development of strong relations with local ethnic populations. Consequently, Susan Grigg, then a curator at the IHRC, noted in 1985 that "new ethnic documentation has not come into general repositories as readily as many other materials for the new social history."[30] It may also be that, as Vecoli suggests, American society was only paying lip service to its multicultural past and that libraries and archives were still reticent to embrace non-English language materials.[31] Furthermore, with the passage of legislation in 1965 that eliminated racial criteria and established a colorblind immigration policy, new immigrants from different countries, especially Latin America and Asia, arrived in increasing numbers, and by the 1980s, were visibly transforming the social landscape. Americans began to raise questions and express fears about the future of their national identity. Ironically, these new immigrants of color also contributed to weakening political and academic interest in the "white ethnics" who had first encouraged the study of ethnic minorities.

Appraising ethnic records and determining the scope and limits of ethnic collections also proved challenging. With the enthusiasm and sense of urgency of the early days, archives solicited and accepted whatever materials came their way. Collections grew in a haphazard fashion, until they reached such a volume that the need was felt for collection policies and for clear and precise criteria that would narrow the collecting scope. Armed with fresh experience and a better understanding of ethnic communities, it became easier for archives to frame such a collection policy. Joel Wurl and Susan Grigg describe the IHRC's struggle with these issues in the mid-1980s, as it tried to narrow the original collecting scope of twenty-four ethnic groups in the entire United States and beyond.[32] At the same time, the Balch Institute was also assessing the result of over ten years of collecting and found that its holdings were broad but "lacked depth and coherence," concluding in favor of a collection development policy.[33]

[30] Susan Grigg, "A World of Repositories, a World of Records: Redefining the Scope of a National Subject Collection," *American Archivist* 48, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 287. By "other materials for the new social history," she meant materials concerning African Americans and women.

[31] Vecoli, " 'Diamonds in Your Own Backyard'," 12–13.

[32] Grigg, "A World of Repositories," 289–94; Wurl, "The IHRC," 74. Only in 1988 did the IHRC put in writing a collection development policy. Wurl, "The IHRC," 84.

[33] Joseph R. Anderson, "Managing Change and Chance: Collecting Policies in Social History Archives," *American Archivist* 48, no. 3 (Summer 1985): 298.

The Western Reserve Historical Society, whose ethnic collections had "little thematic integrity other than ethnicity,"[34] reached the same conclusion. More generally, archivists and historians began to seriously question what it meant to collect and study "everyday life." As Timothy Ericson bluntly put it,

> Many acquisition policies of the past two decades announce a commitment to documenting the lives of "ordinary people" or the "common man," without ever bothering really to define what constitutes "common" or "ordinary." We speak in phrases such as "capturing the general fabric of experiences," or capturing a "microcosm or representative sample of human activity." We report how we are "documenting the . . . experience in the community." Such statements sound good, or are useful as constructs that differentiate past from present practice, but alone they are insufficient as guidelines.[35]

By the mid-1980s, therefore, archivists began to distinguish between different types of ethnic materials—print, manuscript, or oral history—and different topics or subpopulations within ethnic communities. To remedy their early bias in favor of important ethnic organizations and leaders, and in response to historical studies documenting everyday life in ethnic communities, archivists shifted their attention to the contributions of women, children, and family units.[36]

One decade later, Richard Cox noted that archives had made many efforts to fill in the gaps in their holdings concerning the "underdocumented" and the powerless, and to better identify selection criteria. However, he lamented, "these efforts have not led to the development of any new archival appraisal theory."[37] By then, new theories were revolutionizing appraisal, and it was only a matter of time before they would affect the documentation of immigrant and ethnic groups.

Theoretical Developments

In the past fifteen years, the methods used in ethnic archiving have changed, and new theories have sprung up to explore the issues that the practice of ethnic archiving raises. These changes result from factors that came together in the 1990s. First, some archivists began to offer alternatives to Schellenberg's appraisal theory and methodology. In the United States, Helen Samuels developed what

[34] Grabowski, "Ethnicity in Perspective," 308.

[35] Timothy L. Ericson, "At the 'Rim of Creative Dissatisfaction': Archivists and Acquisition Development," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–1992): 71.

[36] Wurl, "The IHRC," 74, 79.

[37] Richard J. Cox, "The Documentation Strategy and Archival Appraisal Principles," *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994): 29.

she called a "documentation strategy,"[38] and, at the National Archives of Canada, Terry Cook formulated and implemented the macro-appraisal theory. Both invited appraisal archivists to consider the context in which records are created before looking at the records themselves. While macro-appraisal stresses the need to document the functions of government and interactions between citizens and the state, Samuels's documentation strategy is not only concerned with institutional records but also offers a method to document social topics, activities, and geographic areas. Because of this social focus, the documentation strategy is particularly appropriate to ethnic archiving. It establishes as a prerequisite to sound appraisal "an analysis of the universe to be documented, an understanding of the inherent documentary problems, and the formulation of a plan to ensure the adequate documentation."[39] In a way, this theory provides a conceptual framework for the "grassroots" outreach strategies implemented earlier by archivists interested in immigration and ethnicity. Samuels offers archivists a more active role, implying that they should not just go after existing records and inviting them to intervene to ensure that records be created for the subject they are interested in.[40] Samuels's documentation strategy is controversial among archivists, and the difficulties inherent in such an ambitious program hinders its implementation, but it encourages archivists to look at the context of creation rather than at the records themselves, and this idea produces fruit in the field of ethnic archiving.

Postmodernist thinkers, whose ideas first appeared in the 1970s, also proved influential in the archival field in the 1990s. Speaking from a wide range of perspectives and expressing varied views, postmodernists explored at least two aspects that bear on archival theory: an assault on objectivity and impartiality, and a call to dismantle the dominant discourse and recover the voices of marginalized and oppressed groups.[41] In the archival world, these ideas were not really new—Cook calls it "new formulation for old concepts"[42]—but postmodernists stimulated archivists to explore such issues in unprecedented ways. For example, in his 1970 speech, Zinn argued that appraisal decisions served and reinforced dominant social and political structures.[43] In the 1980s, scholars in

[38] Helen Samuels, "Improving Our Disposition: Documentation Strategy," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991–1992): 125–40.

[39] Samuels, "Improving Our Disposition," 126.

[40] Samuels, "Improving Our Disposition," 134–35.

[41] For a definition and summary of postmodernism as it applies to archival theory, see Tom Nesmith, "Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives," *American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002): 24–41. See also Terry Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives," *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001): 14–35.

[42] Terry Cook, "Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts," *Archival Science* 1 (2001): 3–24.

[43] Zinn, "Secrecy, Archives and the Public Interest," 523.

history and museum studies wrote extensively about the "objectivity question,"[44] investigating the implications of the awareness that the past is partly a product of the present, in that the political, economic, social, and ideological context in which it is researched and written about fashions the knowledge we have of it. These writings forced historians, museums, and archives to do away with the long-established understanding of their role as neutral analysts or custodians and to face their responsibility as shapers of the past.[45]

Yet, while archivists recognized the bias inherent in their work, their reaction was often to try to find ways to minimize or even neutralize this bias by setting as their goal the collection of a "representative" record of human experience. Thus, Gerald Ham concluded his 1975 presidential address by exhorting archivists to "hold up a mirror for mankind":

> . . . [I]f he is passive, uninformed, with a limited view of what constitutes the archival record, the collections that he acquires will never hold up a mirror to mankind. And if we are not holding up that mirror, if we are not helping people understand the world they live in, and if this is not what archives is all about, then I do not know what it is we are doing that is all that important.[46]

Archivists influenced by postmodernism, on the contrary, may deny that representativeness is possible, or even a desirable goal. Mark Greene ironically comments that "they [Ham, Samuels, Cox, and others] replaced the passive, custodial, neutral archivist with an active, aggressive, neutral one."[47] By contrast, Cook states that "Postmodernism requires archivists to accept, even celebrate, their own historicity, their own role in the historical process of creating archives, and their own biases."[48] For these archivists, running away from the effects of their work actually prevents the profession from tackling the crucial task of exploring and understanding those effects.[49]

In addition, postmodernist ideas encourage archivists to look beyond the recordkeeping paradigm, based on the primacy of the transactional record and the administrative function of archives. Instead, following the "academic and cultural shift from reliance on the narrow constructs of the past as associated with

[44] Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

[45] See Cox, "The Documentation Strategy," 25, for a synthesis of this scholarship and its implications for archives.

[46] Ham, "The Archival Edge," 13.

[47] Mark A. Greene, "The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age," *American Archivist* 65, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2002): 52.

[48] Cook, "Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth," 28.

[49] Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 26.

history to an embrace of broader constructs of the past based on ideas about social memory,"[50] it points to the social role of archives as repository and creator of social memory, and expands established ideas of the archival record to include other forms of expression. For Greene, such forms may include "oral histories of former slaves, the diary of a milk truck driver during the Great Depression, or home movies of proms and weddings," sometimes mere "fragments of documentary material," which do "matter in piecing together history."[51]

In short, postmodernism has had a significant impact on archival theory, broadening the definition of records, the scope of events and people to be documented, and possibly modifying the functions of archives. The first implication for the study of ethnic and immigrant archives is the challenge to the archivist-as-custodian model. Francis Blouin uses the term *mediator*, as he depicts the archivist's work of selecting and presenting records as a "mediating process" between the records and their readers, which influences the way the past is accessible.[52] More recently, Nesmith demonstrates how "archival practice shapes records" by analyzing this mediating process for each one of the major tasks performed by the archivist: the selection of documentary materials, their arrangement in relation to others in the archival setting, their description, their preservation, their recontextualization with the addition of new records over time, and their presentation to the public through reference and exhibits. The meaning of records is therefore not "something established by the initial inscribers of the records once and for all." Nesmith even claims that by constantly adding layers of meaning and modifying them, "archives may actually make a greater contribution to the creation of the record than the inscriber" (a term he prefers to *creator*).[53] While such a view may seem extreme, an undeniable effect of postmodernism has been to blur the distinction between the archivist and the creators of records, emphasizing the *process* of recording rather than the *product* of it, a dynamic rather than a static model of archiving. Applied to immigrant and ethnic groups in the role of the "creators," this idea opens the door to a reconceptualization of ethnic archiving.

Before turning to this new model, it is useful to mention a second implication of postmodernism for the study of ethnic archives. Postmodernist ideas have helped fuel a growing literature on the symbolic value of records and the symbolic role of archives in identity formation and the shaping of collective memory. For example, Elizabeth Kaplan's study of the creation of the American Jewish Historical Society in 1892 demonstrates the powerful

[50] Francis X. Blouin, "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," *Archival Issues* 24, no. 2 (1999): 105.

[51] Greene, "The Power of Meaning," 48.

[52] Blouin, "Archivists, Mediation, and Constructs of Social Memory," 108.

[53] Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 34–35.

symbolic role archives can play for an ethnic group in America. The creation of the society resulted from a desire to synthesize an American Jewish identity out of the diverse national and religious elements of the Jewish population in the United States. The founders of the society also sought to affirm the Jewish American's place within American society. Although the protagonists would not have used the terms *ethnicity* and *identity*, Kaplan stresses the importance of these issues in their project. The historical society's mission would be to construct the Jewish American identity through the collection and preservation of documentary evidence. Implementing this mission was a sensitive and difficult task, as there was no agreement among the founders of the society and the Jewish American population at large about the nature of their identity. The new archives was therefore a mediating tool by which this community could both affirm its distinct identity and its sense of belonging in American society. It was also a contested terrain as the community engaged in a difficult debate about its identity and place in American society.[54] Kaplan's thesis that "we are what we collect, we collect what we are" undoubtedly reflects the scholarship of the preceding years and takes up the challenge of facing and understanding the inherent subjectivity of the work performed by historians and archivists. Her choice of an "ethnic" issue illustrates the broader political and symbolic stakes of ethnic archiving: the integration and identity of large segments of the American population within broader national and international contexts.

Empowering the "Archival Captive": Stewardship, Participatory Appraisal, and Web 2.0

These new theoretical developments are leading archivists to think deeply about their role and mission. While such introspection may potentially affect many features of ethnic archival theory and practice, one aspect in particular is changing under the influence of the recent literature: the role of provenance in appraisal and arrangement. As a result of this challenge, not only have archivists become more involved in the creation of records, but also to some extent immigrants and ethnic minorities are becoming active participants in the collecting process. The new model of a continuous process of creation, from the original inscription to the archiving of records, and the awareness of the symbolic, often political, nature of this process provide fruitful ground for this shift toward more active involvement by archivists and records creators.

[54] Elizabeth Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity," *American Archivist* 63, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2000): 126–51.

One of the earliest discussions of provenance in a postmodernist framework is found in Richard Coyne's *Designing Information Technology in the Postmodern Age*.[55] He challenges the established principle that the expertise of archivists is based on their knowledge of the provenance of records, seen as the individual, family, office, or institution that first created them. In the postmodernist view, which has led to a view of records creation as a continuing process, the origin of records is not as easily identifiable. Coyne wants us to look more deeply and broadly into the context of creation and to question common ideas of origin. Thus, he examines the origin of a photograph in light of the multiple technical and social processes involved in its creation, wondering which moment in the creation process to choose as the "origin" of the record.[56] Joan Schwartz also discusses the notion of provenance for photographs,[57] and, more generally, Tom Nesmith claims it should include "the societal and intellectual contexts shaping the actions of the people and institutions who made and maintained the records."[58] Furthermore, archivists in developing countries are questioning the very concepts of *record* and *record creation* that modern archival principles rely on: these notions are the outcome of the written culture of European bureaucracy and do not do justice to the ways other cultures preserve and transmit memory.[59] Jeannette Bastian therefore invites us to expand the time-honored conception of provenance to include new forms of records and "traces" and to think of record creation beyond individuals and institutions as the dynamic activity of a community with its own cultural values and practices. In a multicultural world, context can be place, ethnicity, or collective memory.[60]

Clearly influenced by the documentation strategy's emphasis on context, this view leads to the possibility of establishing ethnicity—along with other contexts—as provenance. Joel Wurl seizes the opportunity with his article entitled "Ethnicity as Provenance."[61] He starts from a striking observation made by Professor Robert Harney, the driving force behind the Multicultural Historical Society of Ontario, in 1982:

[55] Richard Coyne, *Designing Information Technology in the Postmodern Age: From Method to Metaphor* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1995).

[56] Coyne, *Designing Information Technology*, 344, note 141. See also Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy but More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the Ghost of Archival Theory," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999): 136–50.

[57] Joan Schwartz, " 'We Make Our Tools and Our Tools Make Us': Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995): 40–74.

[58] Nesmith, "Seeing Archives," 35.

[59] Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, "Archives, Records and Power: The Making of Modern Memory," *Archival Science* 2 (2002): 7.

[60] Jeannette Allis Bastian, "Reading Colonial Records through an Archival Lens: The Provenance of Place, Space and Creation," *Archival Science* 6 (2006): 279–81.

[61] Joel Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance: In Search of Values and Principles for Documenting the Immigrant Experience," *Archival Issues* 29, no. 1 (2005): 65–73.

> The remarkable fact is that after ten years of multicultural policy in Canada and a century of the rhetoric of being "a nation of nations" in the United States, the ethnic dimension of man is still not seen as valid provenance.[62]

Harney did not theorize his comment, but Wurl did not forget it as he was collecting the records of ethnic groups at the Immigration History Research Center. In the context of the 1990s and the new literature on provenance, he developed this idea into a new theory of ethnic archiving. Provenance, he notes, has become much more complex as it has come to include various aspects of the context of creation and especially social groupings "not conveniently bounded by the walls of a government agency, a set of business bylaws, or a household."[63] Immigrant and ethnic communities represent one such fuzzy but important social grouping that archivists need to consider as provenance. Wurl also draws on the research of social scientists on ethnicity, which did away with the essentialist view of ethnic groups as precisely defined and delineated by intrinsic qualities and analyzed ethnic formation as a dynamic and mutable social construct, produced by complex social interactions. This construct made ethnicity even fuzzier and more complex, yet important to understand American society. Wurl warns his readers against the dangers of not perceiving ethnicity as provenance, or as "the contextual whole of ethnic community development." Without this view, ethnicity is only "a subject area or 'theme,' like education, sports or the arts,"[64] and archival collections can only give a fragmentary, narrow, and static view of the so-called ethnic experience. Failure to understand the dynamic nature of ethnic groupings, and the role memory plays in it, results in treating the past as dead, "disengaged from the present."[65] Wurl also denounces the nostalgic, celebratory approach that leads to romantic—and therefore artificial—depictions of ethnic heritage.

His ideas in part reflect the evolution of immigration and ethnicity in American society. Around 1900, ethnic historical societies trying to document the history of their groups wanted primarily to celebrate their specific contributions to the American dream, while the majority of Americans considered ethnicity a folkloric remnant disappearing in the melting pot. In the 1960s, the rediscovery of the "unmeltable ethnics" led to a celebration of ethnicity as inherent in American history, culture, and politics—a static view still turned toward the past. Since then, with the arrival of new waves of immigrants, especially from nonwhite countries, and the spreading recognition of multiculturalism, academics have

[62] Robert F. Harney, "Ethnic Archival and Library Materials in Canada; Problems of Bibliographic Control," *Ethnic Forum* 2, no. 2 (Fall 1982): 67.

[63] Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance," 67.

[64] Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance," 69.

[65] Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance," 70.

come to understand ethnicity as a dynamic process of social construction and negotiation. Wurl's own writing reflects the dramatic evolution: in 1988, the assumption that ethnicity was the object of the collections, not the provenance, still largely infused his analysis of the IHRC's collections and collecting strategies.[66]

Of course, provenance is more than ethnicity. Wurl notes that considering ethnicity the primary source of identity shaping a community also leads to fragmentary and narrow collections, as ethnicity is only one of many social groupings that shape collective identity.[67] But he calls on archivists to "cultivate an openness of thought" and to give up the conventional notion of archival evidence, as well as to resist the temptation of "doing diversity" as the trendy thing to do. Without such open thought, and an awareness of the sociocultural context in which archiving takes place, collecting efforts "can never be sustainable and effective" because they will lack the support of the communities.[68]

Wurl stops short of giving concrete advice to his readers on how to accomplish this complex task but offers one direction for archivists: replace the ethos of custodianship with that of stewardship, defined as the "partnership and continuity of association between repository and originator,"[69] whose goal is preservation and access. Such an idea is not new: historian William Hagan, for one, used it in 1978 when he denounced the treatment of Native Americans as "archival captives," a phrase that aptly encapsulated the practice of considering minorities the subjects of collections rather than the creators.[70] Writing at a time when Native Americans were reclaiming their political rights and their cultural heritage, Hagan advocated more cooperation between archives and Indian communities, not only to give them access to their confiscated records, but also to help them take control of those records. Wurl further develops the idea of cooperation, stating that the transfer of documentary materials to archives should not be seen as marking the end of the relationship between donor and archives, but rather its beginning.[71] Thus, stewardship relies on a conception of the records life cycle as a continuum in which archivists and record creators are consistently involved with each other, rather than succeed each other.

Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan take up the idea of cooperation underlying an ethos of stewardship. They observe that "archival 'activism'

[66] Wurl, "The IHRC."

[67] Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance," 71.

[68] Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance," 72.

[69] Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance," 72.

[70] William T. Hagan, "Archival Captive: The American Indian," *American Archivist* 41, no. 2 (April 1978): 135–42.

[71] Wurl, "Ethnicity as Provenance," 72. Blouin, in a way, already emphasized such cooperation in his analysis of archival mediation.

cannot just occur on behalf of groups . . . but alongside groups."[72] Short of marginalized groups deciding to create their own archives and museums (as some choose to do), cooperation is the only way to empower such groups and to "collect diversely." For the past decades, American archivists have attempted to diversify their profession through the training and recruitment of minority members. However, as shown by the recent joint survey by UCLA and Monash University, European and white American theories and practices still largely dominate archival education programs, which take little account of local needs and alternative cultural paradigms.[73] With an emphasis on cooperation, Shilton and Srinivasan go further by formulating a theory of participatory appraisal, arrangement, and description. They draw on a rich literature in museum studies and anthropology that addresses the problem faced by all Western institutions when collecting, analyzing, and representing the cultural output of the "other"—often powerless and marginalized cultural groups.[74] The long-established practice of importing narratives, records, and artifacts into cultural heritage institutions led to loss of context and to objectified, sometimes exotic, always distorted, representations of these "others."[75] Museums, therefore, have multiplied ways to restore the local knowledge structure in which artifacts were created, as objects cannot be understood without the help of the communities concerned. In the archival field, participatory appraisal is the practice of including ethnic communities' representatives in the assessment of records. Therefore, appraisal decisions may be based on "culturally differentiated understandings . . . of what constitutes a record"[76] and may confer archival value according to culturally differentiated criteria. In addition, through participatory arrangement and description, the records creators can rely on their own cultural values to process the records, "to preserve contextual value *as the community understands it.*"[77]

This method gives new meaning to the archivist's cherished notion of provenance, in a manner consistent with Wurl's analysis. Indeed, it acknowledges that provenance is "a culturally constructed phenomenon." In other cultures,

[72] Katie Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections," *Archivaria* 63 (Spring 2007): 92.

[73] Anne Gilliland, Sue McKemmish, Kelvin White, Yang Lu, and Andrew Lau, "Pluralizing the Archival Paradigm: Can Archival Education in Pacific Rim Communities Address the Challenge?," *American Archivist* 71, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2008): 87–117.

[74] See, for example, Karp and Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures.*

[74] Conzen, "Hunting the Snark," 16–28.

[75] See, for example, Julie Cruikshank's summary of the challenges of "representing culture through word and things." Julie Cruikshank, "Oral Tradition and Material Culture: Multiplying Meanings of 'Words' and 'Things'," *Anthropology Today* 8, no. 3 ((June 1992): 5–9.

[76] Shilton and Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement," 93.

[77] Shilton and Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement," 95.

different definitions of authorship lead to dramatically different understandings of provenance:

> In work conducted by Srinivasan, members of the Kumeyaay, Luiseno, Cupeno, and Cahuilla tribes in San Diego County made decisions about provenance based on a complicated, inter-tribal network of authorship to shape the organizational structure of the Tribal PEACE online communication hub. . . . And Verran et al. describe Australian Yolngu communities where researchers have cooperated with communities to discover that authorship is less the point of community performance narrative than is their functional provenance, the performative conditions of their creation.[78]

It is no accident that these examples refer to aboriginal cultures: museums and archives most widely use methods of participatory design with those groups. With those groups, the contrast between earlier and newer collecting methods is largest: once an archival captive, the native is now becoming an empowered actor of his or her own cultural heritage.

Imbued with their own history and social organization, their own political and cultural values, their unique experience of immigration or of life as minorities, each immigrant and ethnic group therefore brings a different perspective to the archivist's work. Pioneer ethnic historians and archivists were often close to the communities they studied and interacted significantly with their members. However, archivists controlled the selection of records, and their goal was primarily the transfer of documentary materials to the presumably better-organized and safer archives of mainstream society. With participatory appraisal and arrangement, the records creators are not cut off from their records. Shilton and Srinivasan mention a number of examples that illustrate this point. At the Southeast Asian Archives at the University of California, Irvine, the archivist acted with Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian Americans "to incorporate the goals and visions of the Southeast Asian community, allowing the Archive to collect the narratives most valuable to the community itself." At the Chicano Studies Archives at UCLA and the University of California, Santa Barbara, Chicano students and scholars were instrumental in the selection of records they considered important for Chicanos.[79]

There are undoubtedly some gaps and flaws in the theory of participatory appraisal as formulated by Shilton and Srinivasan. They repeatedly emphasize that the main objective is to obtain records and collections that truly reflect the cultures of their creators, "as the community understands them."

[78] Shilton and Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement," 96–97.

[79] Shilton and Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement," 93.

They even mention that their method "will allow archivists to move towards the long-debated, and still unrealized, goal of representative collections."[80] Clearly, however, there is no such thing as a monolithic ethnic or cultural community; more than one understanding of the past and culture exists within any such community; and choosing specific individuals to participate in the appraisal and arrangement of archival materials will inevitably eliminate others who might have acted differently. Shilton and Srinivasan allude to such difficulties when they suggest that decisions will not be easy to reach because of disagreements within the group,[81] but they do not explore the implications of the challenge in this article. In addition, their analysis seems to imply that the dominant and dominated cultures are endowed with specific characteristics and can be clearly differentiated. Yet social scientists have shown that ethnicity and race are not only social constructs, but also that their boundaries are hazy and shifting.[82] In fact, it is impossible to obtain a "representative" record, if representative means faithful to the culture from which that record emanates and distinct from the other culture(s) in presence. These authors are on stronger ground when they implicitly refer to a more relational definition of *representativeness*, one that posits that truly multicultural archives should be archives in which the choices that have to be made result from an ethnic group's own decision-making process. Today, Srinivasan continues to explore ways to enable archives and museums to "support the generation and representation of knowledge in, by, and for diverse communities."[83]

In the era of the World Wide Web, new opportunities are open for what can be called "participatory multicultural archiving." Web 2.0 technologies enable collaborative undertakings with a cultural heritage objective. It is possible to create and publish, share and exchange, edit and comment on a multiplicity of documents, thereby developing collaborative digital libraries or archives that can better than ever reflect the values and debates within and between cultural communities. Social networking technology and practices allow for the expression of diverse, even contradictory perspectives, and for flexible and evolving collections. Links can be established between the documents and then changed, reordering the collections. For example, in an ongoing project, Shilton and

[80] Shilton and Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement," 91 and 93.

[81] Shilton and Srinivasan, "Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement," 100. It should be noted that in other writings Srinivasan develops a reflection on the issue of diversity within ethnic communities. See, for example, Ramesh Srinivasan, Robin Boast, Jonathan Furner, and Katherine M. Becvar, "Digital Museums and Diverse Cultural Knowledges: Moving Past the Traditional Catalog," *The Information Society* 25 no. 4 (2009): 265–78.

[82] For example, ethnographer Fredrik Bath showed in his groundbreaking work *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Differences* (Boston: Little Brown, 1969) that ethnicity results from ongoing negotiations of boundaries between groups.

[83] Srinivasan et al., "Digital Museums and Diverse Cultural Knowledges," 265.

Srinivasan are creating the South Asian Web, a cooperative digital archive for and by the South Asian immigrant population in Los Angeles. They rely on the participatory design methodology, which is increasingly used in the design of online information systems to allow the expression of community norms and priorities. In their view, participatory archiving has great potential for such online information systems:

> Within an accessible interface, the ways in which each piece of community media is connected and displayed—the process of representation through everyday artifacts and narrative contributions—will carry critical power in shaping understanding of the whole of 'The South Asian Web's' information landscape.[84]

Large mainstream institutions are also seizing the opportunities offered by new information and communication technologies. In Britain, the National Archives set up an experimental website encouraging viewers to post stories of migrations to England over the past two centuries and explicitly trying to "overcome barriers to the direct involvement of minority ethnic groups in recording and documenting their own history of migration."[85] *Moving Here* offers free access to an online catalog of original materials held by local ethnic archives and museums, and allows the public to add their own content. Visitors to the website are invited to submit their own stories by using a simple form. They can select images from the online collections to illustrate their stories or to build their own collections. Nonprofit organizations, ethnic associations, schools, and other local institutions also contribute by collecting and posting stories of their members.[86] The website does not allow any interaction between participants, but indirect connections have been made, as new visitors read stories and recognize people, places, or experiences and decide to write their own to comment on them. In Canada, the Art Gallery of Ontario, in partnership with the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and other cultural institutions, has set up Collection X, a community website which, in their own words, is "an open-source museum created by the public for the public," an "experiment in sharing and community-building that celebrates life and art . . . ." Institutions and individuals can contribute content in the form of images, video, and audio; they can create exhibitions and connect such exhibitions around common

[84] Ramesh Srinivasan and Katie Shilton, "The South Asian Web: An Emerging Community Information System in the South Asian Diaspora," *Proceedings of the 9th Participatory Design Conference* (New York: ACM, August 2006), 129.

[85] *Moving Here*, About This Site, at http://www.movinghere.org.uk/about/default.htm, accessed 2 December 2009.

[86] *Moving Here*, Stories, http://www.movinghere.org.uk/stories/default.asp, accessed 2 December 2009.

themes; and they can share thoughts through published comments and email exchange.[87] The site is not limited to ethnic or immigrant communities, but contains many exhibitions and digital files that relate to immigration and ethnicity.

One problem with such initiatives is that they depend largely upon the interest of their users, as well as the kind of content they choose to create. *Moving Here* seems to have succeeded in attracting a significant number of migration stories, but the archival quality of contributions made by nonprofessionals is mixed and difficult to evaluate. The motivations of the contributors, or even their truthfulness, are unknown. In addition, participation is, in effect, limited to people who have access to, and the capacity to use, the latest computer technology. For these reasons, the French museum of immigration, or Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, opted for what could be called controlled participatory archiving. The museum's collection of multimedia portraits of immigrants is based on collaboration between immigrants who provide the content and museum staff who control the selection, arrangement, and presentation.[88]

As a whole, ethnic archiving presents numerous practical and theoretical challenges that may explain why the development of initiatives in that field has been relatively slow since interest in ethnicity began to rise in the 1960s. From a practical standpoint, Wurl's stewardship model and participatory appraisal are difficult to implement. Like the documentation strategy, they require extensive financial and human resources. The phenomena they strive to document—except for indigenous populations—are often transnational in nature, while the cultural heritage institutions that house the results of such efforts remain grounded in national territories. Geographic distance and linguistic differences have always been obstacles to ethnic archiving, as Blouin illustrated in his one-time project in the 1970s; but the multiplication of worldwide migrations turns the task of documenting them into an increasingly complex challenge. Ironically, improvements in both transportation and communication technology make it easier for records creators and archivists to harvest and preserve records, and also facilitate the creation of an unprecedented quantity of records. As Charles Jeurgens notes, it is a major challenge to represent groups that are "not rooted in the existing nation-state" in "the houses of memory,"[89] and while new information

[87] *Museum Remixed*, "Collection X Is Online," blog entry, 6 May 2007, at http://museumsremixed.blogspot.com/2007/05/collection-x-is-online.html; *Collection X*, About, http://www.collectionx.museum/en/about.html. Both accessed 2 December 2009.

[88] Cité Nationale de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, Histoires Singulières, at http://www.histoire-immigration.fr/index.php?lg=fr&nav=68&flash=0, accessed 2 December 2009. The portraits were made by the Atelier du Bruit company, dedicated to preserving the memory of immigration in France.

[89] Charles Jeurgens, "Migration and Archives," paper presented at the 15th International Congress on Archives, Vienna, 23–29 August 2004, at http://www.wien2004.ica.org/imagesUpload/pres_131_JEURGENS_CNETAIMS02.pdf, accessed 2 December 2009.

technologies might potentially facilitate the creation of archival collections across national boundaries, institutional practices have not caught up yet. The Shared Memory project, presented at the 2004 International Congress on Archives, represents one attempt to develop international collaboration to assemble, preserve, and bring together archival collections of different national origins. [90]

It is equally difficult to think through the theoretical implications of ethnic archiving. Since some communities exist outside of, or across, nation-states, new ways of conceptualizing the shaping of collective memory and identities through records and archives are needed. Bastian offers one such reconceptualization, *communities of records*, in her study of the relationships between records creation, people, and communities in a colonial context. The International Council on Archives also coined the concept of *joint heritage* to help solve conflicting international claims on archives. Drawing on these concepts, Eric Ketelaar advocates looking at records as "boundary objects" connecting "two or more communities" and creating a "joint archival heritage." From the relationships between "record-stakeholders," such as colonizer and colonized in the Caribbean, or immigrants and aboriginals in Australia, have emerged communities of records that are powerful forces in the shaping of collective identities.[91] More generally, one can safely assume that discussion of the role of archives and archivists in documenting increasingly complex transnational relationships and multiple processes of identity formation has only begun.

Conclusion

If archives cannot possibly achieve Ham's ideal of representativeness, of holding a mirror to society, why even invest so many resources in them, and if we do, why bother trying to elaborate reliable tools to build our collections? As Beth Yakel has shown, an archivist's work in appraising records, then creating surrogates that stand for them through arrangement and description, is an act of representation influenced by individual views and choices. Records creators themselves engage in representation, as their own subjective views inform the choices they make in the creation of their records.[92] In that sense, records tell us as much about the intentions of their creators as about the

[90] Nolda Romer-Kenepa, "Networking: Shared Memory—The Need of Modern Societies for Information and Formation," paper presented at the 15th International Congress on Archives, at http://www.wien2004.ica.org/imagesUpload/pres_226_ROMER-KENEPA_CARBICA01+02.pdf, accessed 2 December 2009.

[91] Eric Ketelaar, "Sharing: Collected Memories in Communities of Records," *Archives and Manuscripts* 33 (2005): 44–61.

[92] Elizabeth Yakel, "Archival Representation," *Archival Science* 3 (2003): 6–10.

reality being reported. The records life cycle is therefore a continuous process of representation. In this light, the quest for immigrant and ethnic documentation may well seem futile and hopeless.

Nevertheless, postmodernism provides significant food for thought for archivists in the postcustodial era. Throughout the history of immigration to America, people have tried to document the experiences of their own cultural groups and sometimes those of others. The advent of the civil rights and ethnic movements of the 1960s, the new immigration of recent decades, and Native Americans' claims for political and cultural recognition, but also increasing rates of intermarriage, all make the ethnic dimension of North American societies more important than ever. At the same time, following the example of social scientists, archivists interested in documenting immigrant experiences should not consider ethnicity a fixed sociocultural identifier but a dynamic and relational process. They must take into account the complex cultural phenomena caused by immigration and integration into the host country. Cultural traits are not either preserved or lost, they adapt, evolve, and transform through interaction with the receiving society and other cultural groups in it. Archivists must also take into consideration the effects of information and communication technologies on immigrant and ethnic groups, which should not just be seen as local, isolated pockets of populations but as elements in global, transnational communities. In "e-diasporas"—ethnic communities developing online—the circulation of information and record creation take on new forms that need to be studied.[93]

Treating ethnicity as provenance is key to a better understanding of these phenomena. Ethnicity as provenance and participatory archiving may not be directly the offspring of the postmodernist challenge to archives, but they are undoubtedly in line with the literature produced by archivists who confronted those challenges. Exploring different meanings of provenance reminds archivists of the importance of contextualizing records and gives them new conceptual tools with which to appraise, arrange, and describe records. No matter how messy and contested, the participatory decision-making process, which empowers ethnic communities to represent themselves, may be the closest we will ever get to a fair method of representation. The collaboration of archivists with members of ethnic communities through the records life cycle has encouraged cultural diversity in archival collections and is essential to the treatment of ethnicity as provenance.

Ultimately, if the archival process is fundamentally political, in that it implies choices including some aspects of the universe of documentation and

[93] For a study of some consequences of the spread of information and communication technologies on immigrant groups, see Ramesh Srinivasan and Ajit Pyati, "Diasporic Information Environments: Reframing Immigrant-Focused Information Research," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology* 58, no. 12 (2007): 1734–44.

excluding others, the best archivists can do is to make such choices consciously and to document their own documentation process. Therefore, the chief merit of the new theories of ethnic archiving is that they encourage archivists to be aware of the hard choices that cannot be avoided, to face them, to find innovative ways to perform their role in a multicultural society, and to justify or explain their decisions to their contemporaries and future generations.