Transnational archives: the Canadian case

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Abstract
This paper is a brief overview of the concept of the transnational archive as a counterpoint to the idea that a national archive is necessarily a locus of a static idea of nation. The Canadian national archives is used as a case study of an archives that was transnational in its inception, and one that has continued to change in its mandate and materials as a response to patterns in migration and changing notions of multiculturalism as a Canadian federal policy. It introduces the most recent formation of the transnational archive and its denizens: the genealogical archive inhabited by family historians.

Keywords: transnational archives; Canadian national archives; library and archives Canada; ethnic archives; genealogy, memory and migration

Anthropologist Michael Levin from the University of Toronto has written that flows and places are the minimal objects of transnationalism, to which I might add, that memory is the process by which those objects are closely observed. Levin expands: “Flows unite the twin phenomena of transnationalism and globalization, but place separates them. . . . Transnational processes are not worldwide but anchored in places, i.e. states, both homelands and nations of settlement.” Further to Levin’s discussion, I observed in my introduction to Memory and Migration, that place in relation to memory is often the repository of an anxious fixity in the constant flow of memory. So how might we conceptualize the national archive, not just as an institution and a concept but as a transnational archive, at once part of the flow and a place of fixity—anxious or otherwise? A transnational archive would necessarily be a place, historically physical, but increasingly electronic, that references both homelands and nations of settlement. A place where transnational flows pass through, but also come to rest, where individual testimony and state documents combine to create a permanent record of movement momentarily arrested. In order to understand what a transnational archive is and does, I will present here a brief overview of Canada as a case study of a nation whose national archive was built, I will argue, from transnational origins and has, necessarily, as representative of a nation of immigrants, continued to negotiate the constantly shifting heritage of nations of origins at the heart of a nation of settlement.

The idea of the transnational archive is not foundational to archive theory, quite the opposite. If we look to the most influential theorists of the archive, we find the idea of a single patrimony, be it familial or national, is both the ground and the trouble of archives. Jacque Derrida warns us that the archive collects its documents as a means of controlling epistemology, sequestering them under “house arrest,” protecting a narrative of origins. Pierre Nora, now famously or notoriously, accuses the archive of supplanting memory, that archives, particularly national archives, are “sites” of artificial memory, places where history disguised as memory becomes reified. And Paul Ricoeur, whose emphasis on phenomenology gives us, oddly enough, the most sympathetic reading of the archive, finds there the historian whose job it is to turn the testimonial evidence of
individuals and individual documents into the collectivized knowledge of history, where the document sits on the cusp between memory and history. It is no accident that these three great philosophers of the archive were French, from a country with one of the most stable archival systems in the world, built after the French revolution primarily in the interests of parliamentary and legal history. But, does an archive amassed in a country which is transnational to begin with, a settler nation built by various newcomers from all over the world, have a different sort of formation? Does it pose a different theory of the archive altogether?

The origin of the Canadian archives was in its inception already transnational. The first Archivist of the Dominion, Douglas Brymner, took it upon himself to establish “a great storehouse of history of the colony and colonists,” that is, to create a storehouse of records, many of which originated in France and England rather than the Dominion of Canada. As Laura Millar explains, for early Canadian archivists, the “decision to copy and collect rather than manage institutional records emerged out of a concern for the preservation of those records central to Canada’s history of exploration and settlement, records not necessarily found in Canada, and particularly not in the offices of the governments of the day.” In this manner, the Dominion Archives were from the outset concerned not only with the development of a uniquely Canadian identity, but one that was established through private papers, letters, diaries, journals, what are called “manuscripts,” as much as it was through the public record. The Canadian archive tended towards creating and preserving heritage in a manner closer to Ricoeur’s idea of an experiential archive than Nora’s nation. And many of those private papers were written by people who came and went, early settlers, missionaries, traders and officials from colonizing countries, recording interactions with the “First Nations” of Canada, the indigenous peoples who themselves had no written records. Another way to understand the early record of Canada is as one of discontinuity, the destruction of self-contained but transitory nations in the formation of one that tied these remnants together under the uneasy sign of a common heritage. The idea of Canadian heritage is built from these fragments: the decimation of the indigenous peoples from the sixteenth century on, the defeat of New France at the hands of the British in 1790 and the successive arrival of waves of immigrants thereafter, each group bringing with it a culture that changed the mix of the nation. This flow has continued unabated in Canada. The 2006 Census recorded a full 40% of Canadians were first or second-generation immigrants, and it catalogued 247 spoken languages.

The most obvious recognition of the Canadian National Archives as a transnational project came with the Federal Multiculturalism Policy of 1971, which significantly altered the interpretation of “national significance” as a criterion for the collection of Canadian heritage materials. The policy recognized that though there were two official languages of Canada, “there was no one official ‘culture’ and that all Canadian cultures were recognized as integral parts of the Canadian experience.” Combined with the archival principle of the “total archives,” archives that would, theoretically—until it proved to be impossible—collect materials in every medium, the implications of official multiculturalism were profound for the re-imagination of who or what the archives represented. From this directive came the idea of the “ethnic archives.” Myron Momryk, who was put in charge of determining the constitution of the Ethnic Archives, was faced with the conundrum of how to refine the notion of nation and of national significance and how to determine which cultures reached that threshold. “Research was conducted in the records of the Immigration Branch (RG76) to determine which ethnocultural organizations had a long history of contacts with the federal government.” These groups had to have a national presence, that is, they had to constitute a kind of nation within the nation. “[T]he term ‘national,’ and therefore ‘national significance,’ assumed a subjective character. This was in conformity with the informal approach of the Manuscript Division towards the identification of ethnocultural groups where the Manuscript Division would accept the specific group’s definition of themselves as national entities.” Here we have an internal transnationalism based on the national significance of groups that have built a national profile for themselves by maintaining their identification with their nations and cultures of origins.

Further, archivists argued that these papers, which had often been collected by the communities themselves, would have significance for those
outside specific ethnocultural groups (grouped by nations of origin). The papers would not only be nationally significant, but interesting for transnational qualities. Walter Nuetel, describing the documents of the late Professor Tadeusz Romer of McGill, which included his reports and correspondence accumulated during nearly 30 years in the diplomatic service of Poland, while Ambassador to Japan in the late 1930s and Ambassador to Russia during the early 1940s, as well as his records as Minister for Foreign Affairs of the government-in-exile, imagined that they would be of particular interest to students of international relations. His further examples are worth noting:

The records of the Finnish Organization of Canada, for instance, will be important to all students of the political left in Canada during the first half of this century. This collection and the papers of Maxwell Cohen are essential to persons interested in the history of labour. The records of the Jewish Labour Committee are probably more important for the study of labour and human rights than for that of the Jewish community, yet they document a vital aspect of the Jewish Community’s life and consciousness. The records of some other Jewish organizations focus on the provision of political and economic support for the State of Israel: the papers of Rabbi Samuel Cass and the records of the Central Organization of Sudeten Germans in Canada help us to understand the effect of World War II on Europeans, although their major focus is Canadian. The latter also explain reasons for some post-war agreements between Canada and West Germany. The records of the Kelen Travel Agency are useful, not only for studying the relationships between the Hungarian Canadian community and Hungary, but also the interest of other Canadian businessmen and tourists (including the present Prime Minister) in Hungary.

While the idea of the ethnic archives lasted, the groups in focus continued to shift. Once it was clear that Europeans and European Jews, in particular, had been well represented, lesser-documented groups were solicited. Some of them resisted for political and historical reasons. Japanese Canadians, for example, who had been interned in the interior of British Columbia as enemy aliens during the Second World War, losing their property in the process, were loath to give their collections to the archives of a nation that had found them disloyal subjects. Similarly, Chinese Canadians, on whom a head tax had been imposed in the early 20th century in order to restrict Chinese immigration, did not trust that the Federal government in central Canada had their best interests at heart. Some ethnic archives contemplated the return of their archives to their nations of origins, figured as an exilic return. These difficulties became muted as Library and Archives Canada (amalgamated in 2001) realized that it could not, given federal funding cuts, sustain these collections, and that they were better left in the hands of various municipal, provincial, university and community archives, a system of linked archives that was a more efficient and less unwieldy than a central organization. What had been a transnational project, grouped under the sign of nationhood, devolved again to separate nations under one. But, another rapidly expanding transnational demand was taking shape, reforming the archive yet again, insisting on recovering atomizing testimonials against the grain of the collectivizing function of a national archive.

Genealogy, the search for family history, now accounts for more than 50% of all archival traffic, locally and nationally. The first option button now offered to visitors on the Library and Archives Canada (LAC) home page is “Ancestor’s Search,” and the Canadian Genealogy Centre is the most visited collection at LAC. This is true not only in Canada, but also internationally, making it the largest transnational archival pursuit in the world. The ramifications of this interest are extensive, from resetting the priorities of archives at every level, to the commoditization of information, to resurgent questions of blood and belonging. This rapid reconfiguration of archival traces as personal transnational quest has foregrounded what appears to be a contrast between progressive transnational flows of people and information and a conservative quest for origins. As Catherine Nash observes, these “transnational practices of ancestral identification” set “people off on trips to local, regional, and national archives and on transatlantic and long-haul journeys to find distant relatives and significant places.” These travels in search of roots suggest “complicated relationships between rootedness and mobility across often intersecting local, national, and transnational forms of identification.” Most users of the Genealogy Centre at the Canadian National Archives are looking for information about traces of elsewhere, of nations
from which ancestors arrived, of records of people who were not or were in the process of becoming Canadians at the moment in which they entered the archive. The largest collection of documents of interest to Canadian genealogists are those found under the heading of “Immigration and Citizenship,” including transatlantic passenger lists (1865–1922) “naturalization” records, “citizen registration records” and immigration records (with specific collections of records of Immigrants at Grosse-Ile (1832–1937), Chinese immigrants (1885–1949) and immigrants from the Russian Empire (1898–1922). To some extent, the records themselves reflect an anxiety about transnationalism, the need to register who is coming from where, particularly when the numbers of immigrants or their nations of origins seem to pose some threat to the nascent idea of the nation.

The function of a national archive in a nation of transnational subjects illustrates the extent to which the archive itself is mobile. In Canada, the concept of the archives, its organization, collections and responsibilities has been a constant negotiation with the demands of its citizens, most of whom have imaginative transnational geographies of people who travel and return over generations. These transnational origins adhere to a new notion of place and embed themselves in an archive that is anything but static.

Notes

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