Community and Cultural Chronicles: Archives Reflected for the People by the People
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Abstract

This paper looks to community archives and the ways in which they represent the history of often-underrepresented communities, and therefore how they enhance a nation’s history. Three Canadian community archive projects are examined, including the following initiatives: the [murmur] project in Toronto, the Project Naming collection, and the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum in Puce, Ontario. These three community-archive projects are highlighted to demonstrate how they provide a more holistic picture of various aspects of Canadian history and culture, and also how they fit within the community-archive framework of various theorists, such as Jeannette Bastian, Terry Cook, Andrew Flinn, Anne Gilleland and Karen Underhill.

Keywords

Community archives, cultural archives, Canadian archives, community

Through the lens of these cultural celebrations – folk traditions that lie at the core of the community identity – we discern the heart of the community itself.
—Jeannette A. Bastian, 2013, p. 122

In the discussion of archives, all the collective contributions to our stories and our histories need to be considered, including community archives. At a very foundational level, community archives, whether they recognize a cultural celebration or a history not fully represented in the mainstream archive, play a part to enrich a nation’s heritage by fleshing it out further. These other representations also give unique perspective from a source that is not generally tapped for material, and so develop to provide a missing ingredient, the cultural “heart” in the record.

Maintaining an integrative approach between institutional or mainstream archives and community archives can result in a more holistic frame in order to capture a comprehensive and more balanced picture of history and representation. This article will examine community archives broadly based on the literature, indicating how community-based archives have added value and voices to mainstream archives and beyond. It will address some of the weaknesses of community archives, and will look to three examples of Canadian projects that have adopted a community-based approach in order to flesh out stories of voices or groups underrepresented in institutional or governmental archives.

In defining the terms community and community archives, several articles (e.g. Bastian, 2013; Cook, 2013) make the point that these are sometimes problematic expressions with broad definitions that are difficult to narrow down. Andrew Flinn (2011), a theorist from the UK who writes extensively on the topic of community archives, points out in many of his articles that commu-
As a term, “capable of varied interpretation and its use is subject to some controversy and debate” (p. 146). Additionally, he says that these terms do not have clear or solidly established definitions, and that they can be interchangeable with a variety of expressions including “local history group, oral history project, community history project and community memory project” (Flinn, 2007, p. 152). Further, in a keynote address delivered by Flinn and Anne Gilliland (2013), they state the following:

Unease over the use of ‘community’ is common and relates to a lack of clear definition, its ubiquitous use in government policy-speak and its associated potential for being used in an ill-defined fashion by media and state bodies as a device for denoting the ‘otherness’ and ‘separateness’ of the specific group in society being described as a community (as in the black community, the Asian community or the gay community), whose interests and concerns can be therefore ignored as being not reflective of the majority of society. (p. 3)

They make the point that the term community has been overused in certain institutional instances. The meaning has been muddied by these multiple interpretations and associations. The community in question is then deemed separate from the mainstream so that their concerns are not as relevant to society in general.

However, in another article Flinn and co-authors Mary Stevens and Elizabeth Shepherd (2009) grapple with outlining the terminology and aim to comprehensively sum up the meaning of communities by specifying that the “defining characteristic of community archives is the active participation of a community in documenting and making accessible the history of their particular group and/or locality on their own terms” (p. 73), not completely bound to the constraints of mainstream or institutional conditions. In a later article, Flinn (2010) also states that community archives can cover several different considerations in “all manner of community identifications including: locality, ethnicity, faith, sexuality, occupation, shared interest or a combination of one or more of these” (p. 41). For the purpose of this article, this definition and its central motifs are sufficient to address the main concept of community archives, along with the notion, from Bastian (2013), that community archives help “to uncover and recover suppressed, marginalized or omitted voices” (p. 125). This study aims to apply these basic principles to the examples of three specific Canadian community-archival initiatives, including a community memory project, an oral history project, and a community history.

One of the overarching themes to emerge in the literature is the importance of a healthy relationship being established between community archive creators and those working in institutional archives that are considered more mainstream and traditional. Flinn (2007) argues that community archives should be reflected in the mainstream archive because the “marginalized or underrepresented [groups or identities] within our histories...impacts on all our stories, and together they make up an inclusive national heritage, our national histories” (pp. 151-152). From the other side of the debate, Karen Underhill opines that collecting institutions need to be mindful of the community’s perspectives, and that “[communities], in turn, are encouraged to recognize the positive role institutions can play in cultural revitalization and preservation of documentary heritage” (p. 138).

Terry Cook also delves into this debate. Cook (2013) states that “archivists need to listen as well as speak, becoming ourselves apprentices to learn new ways (and, sometimes, very old ways) that communities have for dealing with creating and authenticating evidence, storytelling, memory-making, documenting relationships that are often very different from our own” (p. 114), and that “[community] archiving, as a model, offers much to archivists, even as archivists have much to offer to community archiving” (p. 117). Cook also suggests that a shift “from exclusive custodianship and ownership of archives to shared stewardship and collaboration” (p. 115) is required, and that it is in community that traditional archivists “may find a new identity that reconciles our twin missions of evidence and memory” (p. 117). Cook expresses the advantages, for both community archivists and archivists working in established institutional archives, of being open to working collaboratively with one another and recognizing the value that their symbiotic relationship can add to their respective collections and the complete archival history.

One community-memory project in the Canadian archival landscape that clearly demonstrates the value added by a community-based archival project is the Project Naming collection. This collaboration was established in 2001 between Nunavut Sivuniksavut, Nunavut’s Department of Culture, Languages, Elders and Youth, and Library and Archives Canada, and it is considered a “community engagement and photo-identifi-
cution project” (“Project Naming and Canada’s North,” 2012, 0:53) that relies on community members and Inuit Elders for help in identifying people in a significant collection of thousands of photographs taken from the late 1800s to the mid-20th century in Canada’s North. The Project Naming website states that this work needs to be completed expeditiously because “[today’s] Elders may be the last people able to identify these individuals from the past, whose names might otherwise remain lost forever” (Library and Archives Canada, 2009, para. 1).

In addition to the obvious value of identifying unknown figures from Northern communities and supplementing the archival record with further details, Project Naming has many other benefits. These include: actively engaging participation with the process as the creators reach out to the community for their assistance; archivists and community members working towards a shared goal; and fostering a reconnection for aboriginal youth to their ancestral history. It also has pedagogical impact in updating curricula so that the material taught in schools is more representative of the actual record.

Frank Tester, of the University of British Columbia’s School of Social Work, is an advisor for the Nunavut Department of Education committee that is rewriting the school curriculum for grades seven to 12. He says that “this is a generation of young [Inuit] people that don’t know their own history” (“Project Naming and Canada’s North,” 2012, 3:00-4:00). Tester affirms that the archival work he is completing will shape the history that will be taught in classes to future generations and speaks to the possibility of bridging generations (“Project Naming and Canada’s North,” 2012, 3:00-4:00).

Project Naming appears to have come about out of interest in the subject and a desire to foster the dialogue between youth and Elders. But Project Naming also aims to “reclaim these ‘lost names’ ” (Library and Archives Canada, 2009), which leads to a point posited by Flinn and Gilleland about why community archives are established. There are certain traditions relating to the creation of community archives, and they are sometimes politically and culturally motivated, but community archives are also created for general interest. This “[acts] to counter to the absences and misrepresentations relating to a particular group or community in mainstream archives and other heritage narratives and those whose inspiration is not so directly or overtly political or cultural, but rather is a manifestation of a shared enthusiasm for the history of a place, occupation or interest” (Flinn & Gilleland, 2013, p. 5).

While it could be argued that Project Naming was developed as a result of all three of these considerations, another Canadian initiative, the [murmur] project, appears to have been primarily motivated by general interest and a unifying passion for a place’s history. Similar in nature to the Waltham Forest Oral History Workshop in the UK, which Flinn references in several articles, [murmur] is an oral history project spearheaded in 2003 in Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal by creators Shawn Micallef, James Roussel, and Gabe Sawhney. The trio says the project “started with one question: what impact does a narrative have on a physical space?” (Rundle, 2010, para. 1). The project includes recorded anecdotes and oral histories of people in specific neighbourhood locations that hold personal significance, and consists of “user-generated content,” in which, Flinn (2010) outlines, “the user speaks explicitly in his or her own voice” (p. 48). The symbol for the [murmur] project is a green ear with a phone number on it that people can dial to hear the recorded remembrance associated with that particular place. Users can “listen to that story while standing in that exact spot, and engaging in the physical experience of being right where the story takes place” ([murmur] Toronto, para.1). The Toronto chapter of [murmur] started in Kensington Market, but has expanded to include several neighbourhoods across the city. It encompasses the recollections of average citizens as well as those of such illustrious figures as filmmaker Atom Egoyan and historian and author Margaret MacMillan (Rundle, 2010). The creators aim to capture the “voices” of these locations and perhaps encourage others to learn about and relate to the personal tales of a particular community.

Furthe...
Flinn (2010) also emphasizes the important role that community-based archives play in enriching the historical record. Community archives “transform not only professional practice, but scholarship and knowledge production as well” (Flinn, 2010, p. 48). An example of this instance in Canada is the John Freeman Walls Historic Site and Underground Railroad Museum located in Puce, Ontario. This site, which is referred to as a “family museum” (Underground Railroad Museum, para. 1), was established in 1985 by John Freeman and Jane King Walls’s descendants. According to the U of T Magazine article, “Up from Slavery,” this memorial site was mainly the work of Bryan Walls of Windsor, Ontario. Walls’s great-great-grandfather, John Walls, was a former slave who came to Canada via the U.S. in search of freedom in 1846 (Gibson, 2005). He offered the land he amassed with his wife, Jane, as a place of refuge for other emancipated slaves. This site mainly focuses on the Walls’ history, but it also works in “the larger history of North American slavery, [relating] the struggles of the estimated 40,000 slaves who followed the path to freedom in Canada” (Gibson, 2005, para. 10). Though this part of history is likely reflected in the Canadian national archive to an extent, without Bryan Walls’s contribution, including the oral history and artifacts he has carefully collected and preserved, this particular community might not be represented in the record on their own terms, and these accounts might not be an officially recognized part of Canada’s national heritage (Gibson, 2005).

For all the examples cited one cannot ignore the significant part that technology has played in the proliferative nature of community archives. This relates to another major theme in the literature. Without technology, these three Canadian examples and the numerous examples found in the literature would not have found as wide and varied of an audience, nor would they have had the ability to expand their reach to so many users or creators. Flinn (2011) says the development of community archives came about for two reasons:

- streams of public funding for ‘community’ based archive and heritage projects and ... developments in technology…, which enabled and popularized the easy digitizing, disseminating and sharing of local and community memory materials across the internet to great success. (p. 152-153)

Over the past decade, the huge expansion of social media platforms like Facebook make the concept of community archives that much more widespread and accessible. Many “community” groups, such as alumni groups, student groups, mom groups, arts groups, or people who share any kind of geographical, cultural identity or social commonality can gather (online) and share their personal documentation, photographs, or accounts that unify and identify them as part of that community. Returning to the notion that community archives and mainstream archives need to work collaboratively, Cook (1997) expresses that the shift to electronic records requires traditional archivists to adapt to a changing environment because “core archival principles will only be preserved by discarding many of their traditional interpretations and practical applications” (p. 42).

Although there are many benefits and much value to be found in community archives, there are of course weaknesses associated with them. One point raised by Sheila Watson (2010) is the ephemeral, short-lived nature of community archives and of communities themselves, which “change, evolve, dissolve and reform, and their identities alter over time” (p. 531). [murmur], for example, has been discontinued after a decade, since the content was static. In addition to the frequently-fast turnover in communities, technology and digital-collecting practices also evolve quickly, so community archives must be maintained apace (e.g., Howard, 2013).

Flinn speaks to two other points of weakness around community archives. First, there could be a question of reliability and trustworthiness (Flinn, 2010, p. 45). I was struck by the idea that contributors providing an oral historical account might have a different version of actual events or a questionable memory. Cook (2013) touches on this point as well when he states that “memory is notoriously selective – in individuals, in societies, and, yes, in archives” (p. 101). Also, there is not necessarily an archival agreement in some of these initiatives to guarantee appropriate representation, along with ensuring accuracy and authenticity regarding someone’s story.

Second, Flinn says that content should be generated and added regularly so as not to create a static, stagnant archive, but rather a dynamic record with a robust participation rate among contributors and users. Flinn (2010) cites the work of academic Charles Leadbetter, who maintains that participation is key or else “many of the benefits of collaborative creativity will struggle to emerge” (p. 49). In the examples cited previously, Project Naming and [murmur], participation is required.
for identifying people in photographs, and adding other personal stories to the oral history, respectively. Participation is critical, otherwise users might lose interest in the project. On the other side of that argument, there can also be too much information provided, as the availability of online archiving and an overload of internet sources make the deluge of personal content and available material sometimes overwhelming. Additionally, Flinn (2007) says that community archives can themselves be “exclusionary” to other groups, questioning, “On whose authority do they speak?” (p. 167).

Similar to humanities researchers who aim to shed light on society, community and mainstream archives and archivists provide puzzles to the missing pieces of the historical, cultural and societal record. In the words of Cook (2013), archivists “have thus changed over the past century from being Jenkinson’s passive keepers of an entire documentary residue left by creators to becoming active shapers of the archival heritage” (p. 102). Coming full circle, the last word goes to Bastian (2013), who says that, aside from the social-justice power intrinsic to the concept of community archives, we should also put credence into the cultural force that community-based archives engender: “The power of archives, we are told, should be for social justice. [Her article] suggests that we also consider using that power for cultural justice. Perhaps these two work in tandem as we build archives that reflect both” (p. 130).

References


