ETHNICITY AS PROVENANCE:
IN SEARCH OF VALUES AND PRINCIPLES FOR DOCUMENTING THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT: This article adds to a recent strand of archival literature that challenges traditional definitions of the principle of provenance by extending it to encompass ethnic communities. Understanding cultural groupings and a manifestation of provenance has several ramifications for archival work. It can assist archivists in overcoming the historical tendency of filiopietistic approaches to documenting ethnic groups and can help to avoid oversimplified conceptions of cultural diversity. Perhaps most notably, it calls into question the conventional archival values of ownership and custody. The author argues that the framework of custodianship should be replaced by one of stewardship as archivists work to build effective documentation of ethnic communities.

Human value systems are generally constructed over years or decades, but sometimes they are jolted into clarity by unforgettable, even unsettling moments. In 1992, I was asked to deliver a keynote presentation for the Society of California Archivists annual meeting in Pasadena on the subject of documenting diversity. The date, more precisely, was May 1, 1992, two days after the acquittal of three Los Angeles police officers in the Rodney King beating trial. I flew into the Ontario, California, airport the evening before and rented a car. The drive between the airport and the hotel in Pasadena was remarkably serene. Smoke was plentiful and the freeways were all but empty. The streets were quiet, nothing at all like what was going on not many miles away. Even so, arriving at the hotel felt a bit like finding sanctuary. I wasn't sure why at first; my personal safety was never at issue. I would soon realize that it was my emotional and moral condition that was shaken to the core.

That realization started to hit me just about the time I was to take the podium. I looked at my paper—an assessment of past, present, and future considerations in administering archives on immigration and ethnicity—and it suddenly seemed sterile and meaningless. I prefaced my talk by verbalizing how anachronistic and academic it felt for us to be contemplating the issue of documenting minority cultures when just down the road, society was breaking apart along racial and ethnic fault lines. Although I wasn't sure it made sense to proceed, I did, and the conference went forward successfully.
But something was snapping inside me as I tried to reconcile what seemed then to be a complete disjunction between the supposedly noble career I had chosen and the critical needs and challenges of the real world outside the cozy walls of a Pasadena hotel.

I was facing a crisis of confidence, one that had me thinking I might have been mistaken about the importance of archives. My job of acquiring, preserving, and making accessible the informational remnants of immigrant groups seemingly had little to offer in the task of building a more tolerant and just social infrastructure. Clearly, archives had no power to prevent the seething discontent and devastation that had taken place in LA those several days.

Or had they? It wasn’t until a few weeks later that I learned of an incident that occurred at the apex of the riots that yanked me out of my funk for good. Looters and arsonists had worked their way to the south LA neighborhood of the Southern California Library for Social Studies & Research (SCL), a major repository on contemporary social justice movements and underrepresented communities. Standing guard, building manager Chester Murray encountered a group that announced its intention to burn down his building. Murray responded by telling them the library contained the history of African-Americans, Latinos, and working class people and persuaded them to leave it alone. Many of the surrounding buildings were damaged or destroyed, but not the library.

I use this self-reflective parable as the entree point for this essay not just because it is an inspirational touchstone, nor even because I think of it as the kind of episode that can, for any archivist with a social conscience, ignite a passion for the work we do. Rather, I do so chiefly because it provides a sharp-edged illustration of how some of the following concepts and principles play out in real time with real people and very real consequences at stake.

The SCL was saved due in part to the bravery of one man but significantly also due to a realization on the part of the rest on destruction. The facility contained something important to them, probably something they hadn’t been fully aware of before then. In fact, it contained a partial antidote for what drove them to act out in the first place. It comprised documentation not only about underrepresented communities but more importantly of those communities. Not just the ongoing power of history but the core question of who owns that history surfaced in one fateful flash point that illuminates some important lessons to draw on in considering how—and of course why—various cultural communities might be documented by archivists and others.

Unlike previous writings on this subject, the following commentary does not deal primarily with issues of methodology, nor does it provide a typology of archival records generated by ethnic groups. Rather, it focuses foremost on matters of principle and values. This is to denigrate the importance of practical applications. It is simply my conviction that deeper reflection on the conceptual framework buttressing archival decisions will lead more coherently to techniques of implementation. If we are charged with building archival resources on particular cultural groups, it matters little how we do this if we haven’t really wrestled with the broader questions of why and with whose authority. And if, as Elisabeth Kaplan has so forcefully expressed, “we collect what we are,” a more conscious grasp of our own value systems and conceptual vantage points is essential to judicious professional decision making. A precursory disclaimer is in order: Most of these observations emanate from my experience in documenting the phenomenon of immigration and its aftermath. While I would like to believe that some of these ideas resonate for other social or cultural groups not borne of a migration process, I fully realize that distinctions could well supersede similarities.

**Ethnicity as Provenance**

In an obscure but compelling essay published more than two decades ago concerning the Canadian government’s policy of multiculturalism and its impact on ethnic library and archival activity, the late historian Robert Harney inserted the following observation: “The remarkable fact is that after ten years of a multicultural policy in Canada and a century of rhetoric of being a ‘nation of nations’ in the United States, the ethnic dimension of man is still not seen as valid provenance.” This statement, which was elaborated on only sparingly in Harney’s article, haunted me for a number of years while I pursued the challenge of documenting American immigration. Its meaning and wisdom are only now becoming more apparent. How does one come to regard ethnicity as a form of archival provenance, and, more importantly, what are the implications of this idea?

Answering these questions requires exploring some definitions of two increasingly elusive concepts: provenance and ethnicity. Provenance is a term that at first glance appears to have clear parameters. In the words of Richard Pearce-Moses, author of the Society of American Archivists’ glossary of archival terminology, “Provenance is a fundamental principle of archives, referring to the individual, family, or organization which created or received the items in a collection.” At its core are the notions of origin, context, and integrity. As archivists learn early on, the originating source of archival material is something to be respected and represented in the way such material is gathered and made accessible. But the textbook definition of this most basic of professional tenets really pertains to the scenario of how one confronts a body of archival information on a processing table. It envisions a reactive behavior—*I have a set of items in a collection in front of me, how do I respond in order to make them comprehensible to others?* Because of this conventional focus on discrete materials, we tend to avoid the richer, more nuanced, and more expansive connotations embodied in the idea of “originating source.” Several archivists, most notably colleagues from Canada, have been challenging the profession to widen its understanding of provenance to encompass entities not conveniently bounded by the walls of a government agency, a set of business bylaws, or a household. Human beings operate in collective fashion and develop collective identities that, while perhaps more complex and not so neatly contained as the more distinct organizational or familial entities, are nonetheless corporate and corporeal. Recent writings by Jeannette Bastian provide especially compelling case studies in helping to understand how provenance can coalesce around such larger social groupings. Her article, “In a ‘House of Memory’: Discovering the Provenance of Place,” illustrates how a prominent New Hampshire artist colony, over time, took on a collective character that could not be understood as simply the sum of the individual participants who occupied it. The colony became more than a physical gathering.
and interdependent frameworks—frameworks that need to be understood and respected as embodiments of provenance.

Failing to perceive ethnicity as provenance can lead to some unfortunate results in the archival arena. As one writer reminds us, provenance is, foremost, "a principle of organization built around context." Without a full appreciation for the contextual whole of ethnic community development, efforts to document this dimension of society can take on a fragmentary and narrow approach. When ethnicity is not viewed as provenance, it tends to be viewed simply as a subject area or "theme," like education, labor, sports, or the arts. This paradigm of archival selection overlooks the rich reservoir of information originating deep within community infrastructures in favor of scattered products about communities, often generated by those on the outside looking in. It also runs a considerable risk of being grounded in distorted, if not damaging, preconceptions of ethnic identities and community experiences.

Operating with a clearer sense of ethnicity as a form of provenance poses a fundamental challenge to traditional archival perspectives of custody and ownership, a point I will return to. By the same token, it enables us to break free from the limiting constraints of the classical definition of provenance that is wedded to discrete, visible sets of physical documents and other materials. Documenting immigrant and ethnic life effectively, I believe, requires archivists to traverse some of the boundaries they tend to place on what constitutes archival evidence and to look more closely instead at the ways ethnic communities actually convey information. As a case in point, a University of Minnesota Ph.D. student is currently researching the local Hmong community and its forms of cultural and literary expression against the backdrop of the common pronouncement of the Hmong as a "preliterate" people prior to their refugee migration. As he notes, this type of conclusion and terminology can have a marginalizing or "exoticizing" effect in shaping how a community is perceived. It can also hinder a more authentic examination of the ways Hmong may have expressed literary inspirations through different constructs and the ways in which literature in the more traditional sense has evolved in their newer host environments. Archivists, likewise, need to cultivate an openness of thought to how ethnic community life is actually transacted, through communication structures that might not be familiar to the shelves of our repositories. It is only through an appreciation of ethnic communities as environments of originating context that we can liberate ourselves from constricted thinking about the evidence of ethnicity.

Ethnicity’s Relational Contexts

In using this expanded meaning of archival provenance as an analytical tool, it’s important to consider that contexts do not exist in singular fashion. Ethnicity is certainly a significant organizing force in human development, but it coexists with other broad contextual forces. One of these is time. Are archives the stuff of history? Are they authentic markers of the past? How we think about time and the place of archives within it is vitally important to the work we do. The distinctions between past and present, which on a surface level sometimes seem so clear and profound, are on a deeper
level quite congruent. As novelist E. L. Doctorow once put it, “history is the present. That’s why every generation writes it anew.”

Archivists who have come to share this insight on the “here and now” function of the past have encouraged us to adopt a mindset that explains the work we do not as preserving history but as facilitating memory. A leading exponent of this idea is Brian Brothman of the Rhode Island State Archives. In an extremely nimble essay published in 2001, he paints a contrast between the traditional construct of archivists as keepers of history vs. archivists as keepers of memory: “Memory’s archivist is interested in the past’s residue as material for promoting integrated knowledge, social identity, and the formation of group consciousness; history’s archivist is interested in finding records and, in them, uncovering evidence to develop a linear narrative about a past that is ours, yet different from us [italics mine].”

This is a delicate but highly meaningful conceptual distinction that resonates quite loudly in the arena of ethnic identity and group consciousness. In a “memory” construct of archives, the past is never really separate from what is active and immediate, and documentation, no matter its physical age, is always inextricably tethered to an ongoing process of collective remembering. Ethnic communities, as we’ve already noted, are dynamic social systems in a persistent state of formulation. “Things that have gone on before,” be it yesterday or a hundred years ago, are active ingredients of group consciousness and composition at any given point in its evolution. If we fail to grasp this in an archival setting, we risk treating the past and its remnants as disengaged from the present—as nostalgia or, worse, as grist for filiopietistic, celebratory, or romantic portrayals of immigrant and ethnic community life. The national landscape of ethnic archives is already dotted with enough outcomes of this approach to documenting particular communities. A discursive perspective on the present day’s uses and potential misuses of a living past is one of the most valuable tools any archivist of ethnic societies can possess.

Along with the context of time, ethnicity needs to be positioned as part of a varied menu of social groupings that compose collective identity. Rarely, if ever, do human beings maintain a single identity or locus of affiliation. Because identity is largely a volitional process, we tend to align ourselves with a multiplicity if groupings, any of which, depending on given circumstances, we might claim as an identity marker—our professional guilds, our religions, our political parties, our sexual preferences, to name but a few. And of course individual ethnic identities themselves are far from monolithic, with many people affirming and expressing a “consciousness of kind” with more than one group. Indeed, ethnic groups often take on layered identities, as reflected in subcommunities (e.g., Arab American Moslem or Christian; pre- or post-Solidarity Polish Americans) or in pan-ethnic structures (e.g., Vietnamese and/or Asian American; Dominican and/or Latino). The latter observation also introduces the element of race, which further amplifies the complexity of identity formation. While I do subscribe to the position that race, too, is a social construction and not a biological imperative, I can’t overlook the reality that racial thinking in this country most often ascribes this particular identity for us. Yet even our seemingly encrusted template of racial categorization shows signs occasionally of its permeability and its flaws as an instrument for comprehending our population, as evidenced by the inclusion for the first time of the “mixed” race check box on the 2000 Census. And to add yet another shade of nuance to identity, a large number of today’s immigrants live transnationally, nurturing economic, professional, familial, and other relationships in both their homelands and their communities of residency in the U.S.

The point here is that identity of any kind cannot be approached for any purpose, including archival, in isolation. Doing so runs completely counter to the reality of human behavior on an individual or a collective level. And if ethnicity is provenance, so, arguably, are other environments of social affiliation. The fact that these may often overlap, intersect, and even push against each other makes for a messy organizational chart of human activity. But society truly does not sort itself out in neat corporate compartments, and as archivists, we need to learn to brace ourselves accordingly. In more practical terms, we cannot approach the task of documenting immigrant or ethnic groups from a mindset that ethnicity is the only or even the pre-eminent form of identity that members of a community may exercise. The consequence of this myopia is a body of archival material that excludes ethnocentrism in the way it is accumulated and described. It also leads to ill-conceived efforts to capitalize on what may seem an opportune moment to “do diversity” informed by an oversimplified conception of the definitions and boundaries of ethnic communities. Such impulsive projects, well meaning though they might be, are likely to be temporary, fragmentary, and disconnected from the actual people and institutions they purport to represent in archival holdings.

Ethnicity, Archives, and “Ownership”

This very real danger of disconnection between archival programs and the communities they aim to document leads to what is perhaps the most pivotal implication of understanding ethnicity as provenance. The archival principle of provenance insists that the contextual source of documentation be respected in the way material is developed and administered. In the domain of ethnicity, I believe that the meaning of “respect” goes hand in hand with the matter of cultural ownership. If there is any one facet of documenting immigrant and ethnic communities that sets this realm of archival activity apart, it is this issue of jurisdiction. For archivists to comprehend this fully and sympathetically, it will be necessary to reconsider one of our most deeply ingrained professional values.

Archives are often portrayed in common parlance (often by ourselves) as “repositories of history” or “houses of memory”—places of honor or intrigue to which archivists hold the keys. This popular image has long-standing origins. In another thought-provoking article, Jeannette Bastian traces the evolution of the archival principle of custody, which equates the very definition of archives with the idea of material possession. Bastian finds practical indications of this precept as far back as the ancient Assyrian and Egyptian civilizations; however it is not until the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that this is elevated to the level of principle, reinforced in the writings of archival theorists Hilary Jenkinson and, later, Theodore Schellenberg. Custodial assumptions have been key underpinnings of archival programs in the United States up to the modern era. A
1992 handbook from the National Archives and Records Administration affirms this in defining custody as “guardianship or control of records, including both physical possession (physical custody) and legal responsibility (legal custody).”23 The inviolability of custody in the administration of archives has undergone recent challenges, as some colleagues have envisioned archival constructs comprising distributed responsibilities and decentralized holdings. For the most part, though, this emerging paradigm has been nurtured in the domain of electronic records, and it has precipitated a strong counterdefense that reflects the resilience of custodial thinking.24

In the world of ethnic archives, however, custodial principles need to give way to a different framework of jurisdiction and responsibility. In short, custodianship needs to be replaced by stewardship. In the custodial approach to archives, property is relinquished by the originating source; possession is taken both physically and legally by the archives. At the moment of transfer, from the perspective of the collecting institution, the importance of the material to the originator diminishes in comparison to its importance for external researchers. The material is now owned by the repository; the attention given to it is aimed at a largely imagined group of potential users, most of whom are not seen as being affiliated with the originators.

A stewardship ethos encompasses a very different set of relationships between stakeholders and materials. It is characterized by partnership and continuity of association between repository and originator. In a stewardship approach, archival material is viewed less as property and more as cultural asset, jointly held and invested in by the archive and the community of origin. Material may be gifted to a repository but with the expectation that in many respects, the relationship between donor and archive is just beginning. The goals of stewardship are preservation and access to information, wherever it might be physically held, while intentions or claims of possessing the largest or most valuable yield of material for a given community are both irrelevant and hollow. Because the universe of potential source material emanating from and pertaining to any community is limitless and ranges so far beyond the boundaries of formats conventionally regarded as archival, stewardship recognizes the misleading futility of a repository’s holdings as anything more than a selection of potentially useful sources.25

Accepting the premise of ethnicity as provenance and, consequently, adopting a principle of stewardship may seem to speak primarily to archival programs directly borne of ethnic communities. In such settings, the kind of symbiotic, ongoing “ownership” connection between archive and originator described above unfolds most naturally. There, the challenge lies not so much with recognizing the necessity and virtues of this relationship, but with internalizing the previously mentioned implications of ignoring ethnicity’s relational contexts (ethnocentrism, nostalgia, romanticism, and filiopietism). In the case of repositories not conceived by ethnic communities—what we routinely term mainstream institutions—the first task of any immigrant or ethnic documentation effort is to awaken to this paradigm of cultural provenance. Without a deep absorption of this socioarchival reality, such efforts can never be sustainable and effective. They can never be seen by the communities they endeavor to reflect as anything meriting true participation or assistance in time of need.

Documenting ethno cultural communities—both from within and outside of the communities themselves—is not a new development. Much excellent work has been undertaken in repositories throughout the country, where one can see the application, though seldom consciously expressed, of the values and perspectives outlined above.26 However, much more is needed in the way of thoughtful case study reporting that not only describes what has been done but that reflects on the philosophical underpinnings of an institution’s mission. At a time of profound demographic transformation, once again due in large part to international as well as internal migration, the archival community faces an enormous challenge to ensure that the record of society truly represents the people who compose it. This will require, among other things, enlarging the professional discourse on documenting subcultures, both by imparting practical experiences and by probing the overarching value systems from which they originate.27

And this brings us full circle to the spring of 1992 and the tense encounter at the doorstep of the Southern California Library for Social Studies & Research. That a courageous staff member could persuade angry rioters to leave the building alone is not only cause for relief, it is a powerful illustration of what it means when an archival institution “gets it.” History is filled with accounts of protest mobs destroying sites of records that were seen as representing authoritarian rule. Such were not records of the people but of the regimes—information used to control, distort, intimidate, and punish. One can easily imagine a similar fate befalling an institution in south-central LA perceived not as a steward of the living memory of the community but as an instrument of the establishment. Could it be, ultimately, that solutions to a more harmonious and equitable social condition lie, in part, in developing and strengthening documentation of minority cultures? The answer, it seems to me, is a resounding yes, as long as the work is done in ways that ensure the full and free engagement of the documented. If so, this is the kind of outcome that, indeed, merits sentiments of inspiration and passion for the archival mission.

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13. Bastian, "In a 'House of Memory,'" 15.


19. The changing nature of racial frameworks throughout U.S. history, especially as applied to the foreign born, is the primary focus of Roediger, Working toward Whiteness, and his earlier writings, including The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class (London & New York: Verso, 1991). Among the growing volume of scholarly examinations of transnationalism, an especially valuable work is Nancy Foner, From Ellis Island to JFK: New York's Two Great Waves of Immigration (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). As her book notes, the frequent attempt to set up transnationalism as a point of distinction between newer and older immigration is a matter of considerable debate.

20. A time and a place history on archival responses to widespread political and public focus on multiculturalism is Richard J. Cox, Closing an Era: Historical Perspectives on Modern Archives and Records Management (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2000): 104–114. Kaplan, "We Are What We Collect," is the most extensive and persuasive discussion to date of the dubious ramifications of archival efforts that endeavor to promote the virtues and invisibility of ethnic identity above all else.

21. The argument for jurisdiction being the main distinguishing feature of the realm of ethnic archives was a primary focus of my essay "If One Were to Build an Ethnic Archives Collecting Program" (presentation, Society of American Archivists Annual Meeting, Montreal, 1992). A recent discussion of the concept of authority in documenting cultural communities and some of the practical ramifications is Mark A. Greene, "The Heyday Business of Remembering: History, Memory, and Archives," Archival Issues (forthcoming, 2005).


24. See Bastian, "Taking Custody, Giving Access," 88–96, for a summary of the key contributions to the evolving re-examinations of custodial practices and the ongoing debate.


27. In 2005, the Society of American Archivists identified the issue of “diversity” as one of three paramount concerns and areas for targeted attention in its strategic vision for the archival profession. A statement produced by SAA Council and circulated via the SAA newsletter, *Archival Outlook*, and at the 2005 annual conference noted that “the relevance of archives to society and the completeness of the national record hinge in part on the profession’s success in ensuring that its members and their holdings reflect the diversity of society as a whole.”


Although this guide to preserving the records of truth commissions, which investigate and report on the abuses of deposed regimes, is only just over one hundred pages, it carries a big wallop because of its sensitive, analytical, and practical nature. Written by consulting archivist and public policy scholar Trudy Huskamp Peterson and funded by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, *Final Acts* is a guide for commissioners and senior staff members who seek to address the issues of records disposition. Faced with the huge task of how to handle all of the documentation that is the by-product of the work of truth commissions (20 of which have been established so far in Central and South America and Africa), Peterson offers answers to questions about access and preservation, as well as about law and politics, concerning historical materials of all media types created and received by such commissions.

As one would expect from Peterson, she succinctly explains why archives must save evidence beyond the annual report and advances a practical step-by-step approach to direct this important work. She is interested not only in the wider context of the materials but also in ensuring that all record types (administrative, program, and investigative) are professionally preserved and managed into perpetuity. She argues that it is vital that “amnesia does not prevail” and that the integrity and legitimacy of what a truth commission does is maintained. According to Peterson, “preservation complements the commission’s work.”

The volume is divided into four chapters. In chapter 1, Peterson offers an overview of the subject matter and identifies existing truth commissions and the diversity manifested in their design and by their work. Chapter 2 provides a list of questions dealing with the context of collected materials: archival, legal, and political, while chapter 3 contains a full discussion of the questions provided in chapter 2. The final chapter presents a sample of country reports, which Peterson draws on to describe the practices of the commissions. She also provides appropriate information on each country and details for those seeking further information.

*Final Acts* makes it clear that senior staff members serving on a truth commission must be mindful of the final disposition of the records used to carry out the commission's work, since those records are government property and laws exist to ensure that “citizens have the right to demand preservation of and access to this government property.” The volume also contains three useful appendices—“Criteria for Distinguishing Commission Records from Personal Property,” “Access Criteria,” and “Physical Storage Criteria.”

Overall, Peterson has produced a model practical guide written in clear, straightforward prose. For years to come it will be essential reading for practitioners seeking