

From Provenance to Practice: archival theory and “return to community”

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In 1994 Pauloosie Angmarlik told Dr. Emily Faries, “As I have said, our ancestors were straight forward. I use that as a guideline; follow what is told to you.”¹ For the first generation of Native Studies research and practice, the knowledge that is transmitted by Elders and traditional teachers to those committed to this new way of learning has been through a participatory praxis of respectful listening. This has been followed by transcription and publication. In addition, the audio and visual tapes have been retained in study centres, libraries, schools and archives. While the immediacy of the original encounter between learner and teacher is diluted in this process of reception and transmission to a wider audience, the distance is usually acknowledged. In archives the long standing, if much debated, way of naming a similar distance has been achieved through the articulation of the principle (often called theory) of provenance.

Since provenance lies at the heart of Canadian and European archival practice, it is open to critique and (re)formation. At its simplest, *Archival Provenance* asserts that *records originating from the same source must remain together*. Archivists assume that adherence to the principle of *Provenance* will protect the context and thus the integrity or truth of what is communicated through the records no matter what their physical format.²

¹ Peter Kulchyski, Don McCaskill, David Newhouse editors, *In the Words of the Elders: Aboriginal Cultures in Transition*, University of Toronto, Toronto, 1999, 284-285

² For a clear description of the history of the principle of archival provenance see Tom Nesmith, “Archival Studies in English-speaking Canada and the North American Rediscovery of Provenance; Introduction” in Tom Nesmith editor, *Canadian Archival Studies and The Rediscovery of Provenance*, SAA/ACA and The Scarecrow Press, Metuchen New Jersey & London, 1993, 1-28 esp. “The 19th century European discovery of the contextual approach to archival administration is the most important intellectual development in

From this beginning archivists have determined that there are at least four tests for the integrity of a project based on archives principles:

1. Aggregations of Archives, commonly called *fonds*, should originate from the same creator (source).
2. The arrangement and description provided by archivists must maintain the context of creation.
3. Archives should continue to be available in the local milieu.
4. Archivists are charged with maintaining unbroken custody in order that archives can continue to provide evidential value for multiple uses.

If we are to contribute from the core of archival theory towards a return of archives to community, I am suggesting that we explore possibilities for expanding the principle of provenance to account for new realizations. This is not without precedent. In the 1980's Canadian archivists were faced with a complex set of circumstances dictated partly by geography and also by the insistent demands of local communities for more immediate access to their own heritage.

In response to The Symons Report, To Know Ourselves,³ which had called for a rapid expansion of archives to support the newly emerging field of Canadian Studies, archivists argued that “It is necessary to emphasize the long-standing archival principle of provenance, namely, that records originating from the same source should be kept together and not interfiled with records from other sources. We would like to add to this

history of the archival profession. European archivists formulated the idea that archival documents could only be understood in context, or in relation to their origins and to other documents, not as self-contained, independent items, to be reorganized along subject, chronological or geographical lines. At the heart of the contextual approach, then, is knowledge of the provenance of documentation or origins, original purposes, and organic characteristics of documentation. The concept of provenance, which was embodied in respect des fonds and original order, became the European archival approach to recorded communication.” p. 2

³ See The Symons Report: An abridged version of To Know Ourselves, Book and Periodical Council of Canada, 1978.

principle a new corollary to the effect that any particular set of records should remain as far as possible, in the locale or milieu in which it was generated. This may be called the extension of the principle of *provenance* (which aims at keeping the context of the records intact) to a principle of territoriality (which envisages the locale or milieu of records as their context). Allied to the principle of *provenance* is the principle of unbroken custody.”⁴ More recently the principle of provenance has generally been explored in three directions: ownership; content i.e. subjects/objects; and – author/source.

Ownership

Archival provenance is not the only recognized scholarly occurrence of the concept. Librarians and bibliographers, drawing on the practice of art historians and museums curators, employ provenance in a more specific sense of the history of ownership of an item. Book provenance then has a limited function as a descriptive tool that authenticates an individual work (not an aggregate) by authenticating chain of custody or ownership. This associative evidence is used to add informational and monetary value to the individual item. Even more specifically *Provenance* is used to assign dates to undated books.⁵ Laura Millar has noted for that for curators, librarians, “Artistic provenance is not the history of the creator of the object but of the object itself.”⁶ Artistic *provenance* locates “owners” rather than “creators” at its functional core.

⁴ Ian Wilson et al, Canadian Archives: Report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada by the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives ,Ottawa: Canada: Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 1980, p. 15-16

⁵ David Pearson, Provenance Research in Book History: A handbook, The British Library, 1994, p.1
Pearson does allow an aggregate function for *Provenance* related to ownership patterns over time. p.2

⁶ Laura Millar, “The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time” Archivaria, 53, (add citation), p.10

Museologists and art curators faced with the legal and moral challenge posed by survivors of The Holocaust have admitted that in practice there are severe limits to a concept that is based on ownership. The authors of an American Museums Association report note that “Provenance research is intended to establish an unbroken chain of documented ownership from the moment of an object’s creation to the present. Even with unlimited time and resources, this goal is not easily achieved.... The explanations for gaps in documentation are so many that it comes as no surprise that an unbroken chain of ownership is the exception rather than the rule. ...”⁷

Archeologists employ the related concept of ‘provenience’ in describing the physical location of an artifact in three dimensional space in order to more precisely define its context. Laura Millar argues that “Rather than limit [archival] provenance to creatorship, we should expand the concept to incorporate the spatial and temporal qualities of archeological provenience and artistic provenance. She would expand provenance to include three related components: creator history, records history [similar to library provenance] and custodial history [similar to artistic and curatorial provenance].⁸ While I agree that an expanded principle of archival *provenance* is needed I would argue that an expansion of our understanding of the source/creator of archives rather than a reliance on the western concept of ownership of the object is a more promising way to approach the challenges we face.

Jeanette Allis Bastian’s study of “The Colonial Archives of the Danish Virgin Islands” is one of the very few studies of archival *provenance* from a post-colonial

⁷ Nancy H. Yeide, Konstantin Akinsha, Amy L. Walsh, The AAM Guide to Provenance Research, Washington D.C., 2001, p.49

⁸ Millar, op cit. pp 12-13. She also speculates whether a fourth component the history of the use of the records might be included in an enriched model of archival provenance. p.14

perspective.⁹ Following the model of the Wilson report, she clearly separates out the relationships between custody, access and provenance and unlike Millar does not try to combine custodial factors within an expanded definition of provenance. She urges archivist to adopt a post-custodial attitude providing access by favouring distributed custody and accountability.¹⁰ Bastien looks to the principle of provenance to offers an archival framework for include self determination where the creators (or more precisely their descendants in situ) assume a more prominent role in the context-creating process.¹¹

One of the problems often associated with ownership based provenance is that archives are divided in the course of acquisition by competing authorities. This was manifestly the case in the Danish Virgin Islands where the Danish and United States removed all by the narrowest of classes of land records to archival repositories that were completely inaccessible to the local populations.

Bastien argues that provenance based on “ownership” is an insufficient basis for effective archival practice. “When the custodial chain is broken and the records divided between jurisdictions, the major objective of custody, namely the protection of the integrity of the records for their use as evidence, is considerably weakened. The custodians, thousands of miles away from the point of records creation, are also unable to deliver on their other primary obligation, namely the provision of easy access. Each custodian can only provide access to a portion of the records without any idea of what else exists.” She urges archivists to look beyond western concepts of law, “While

⁹ Jeannette Allis Bastian, “A Question of Custody: The Colonial Archives of the Danish Virgin Islands” *The American Archivist*, vol. 64 (Spring/Summer 2001): 96-114

¹⁰ Gerald Ham ref.

¹¹ Bastien, 2001, p.111 see esp. It could also be argued, therefore, that the entire colonial society within the specific locale of the Danish West Indian islands, rather than the colonial offices in Denmark, constitutes the larger context of the records. Equally, it could be argued that the chain of custody does not begin with the Central Colonial Office in Copenhagen but possibly with a small records-creating function in St. Thomas, St. Croix, or St. John.

physical and legal custody, judiciously applied, may be sufficient to protect the evidential values of records, such protection of the records satisfies only part of the archival obligation. An additional and equally compelling obligation is surely to enable these records to fulfill their function as the building blocks of personal history and collective memory.”¹²

Content – the subject/object dichotomy

Archivists, unlike librarians, have usually ended up in a dead end when they attempt to expand provenance using content analysis. The common method has been to construct mediated finding aids to provide subject based access to archival fonds and collections.¹³ In the case of the archives of First Nations communities, these finding aids are often not simply incomplete or inaccurate. By relying on annotations or occasionally on supplied subjects from authority, e.g. Library of Congress subject headings or an institutional thesaurus, we perpetuate the culture bound stereotypes of the sources and even of the archivists themselves. One of the contributions that academic Native Studies has made is to clearly name this problem in the context of the lived experience of researchers’ interactions with communities.¹⁴

Archivists themselves have critiqued this work. Normand Charbonneau has argued that the real danger of the supplied content analysis through description using controlled vocabulary subjects is that the archives fonds will be reduced to functioning as an image

¹² Bastien, 2001, p.114

¹³ Nesmith, 1993, p.2

¹⁴ For example, see Christopher G. Trott, “Photo-Solicitation: methods and Cultural Issues”, November, 2000 (unpublished), p. 4 “One of the problems with archival collections is that while the provenance (date, place and photographer) of the photograph is known, there is usually little information in the captions that tells anything about the people in the photograph or the circumstances under which it was taken. The captions usually take the form of “Savage Woman Admiralty Inlet” (C88353) or “Natives at Arctic Bay, [N.W.T.] 1926” (PA-102658) which does not provide much useful information save to reinforce the colonial stereotypes of the “savage other”. Quallunaat (whites) within the photographs are usually clearly identified. “

bank that does not satisfy the needs of users and only reflects the particularist mandate of an archival repository.¹⁵

Karen Collins has proposed a radical reorientation of content based analysis which I believe has some possibilities for reforming the development of finding aids and may have provide possibilities for the extension of provenance. Collins accepts the real limitations of descriptive systems particularly as applied to pictorial materials saying that “No matter how many words are used to describe an image, the *visual* information contained will never be completely captured.”¹⁶ She notes after reporting on an extensive user survey, “What is really needed is access to images in terms of their generic content, so patrons from any discipline can find images for purposes not predictable by the cataloger.”¹⁷

Because I accept the critiques offered by Trott and Charbonneau, I am skeptical about adding to the “subject indexing” mess but I do see in Collins’ adaptation of Ervin Panofsky’s methodology for the history of art possibilities for a reform of archival theory. The direction is to acknowledge that provenance can be expressed not just as singular but also as multiple points of origin. While the language of Panofsky’s system is clearly reflective of colonialist times it has the merit of locating meaning in everyday experience and the living culture of the participants in the archival project. Simply put Panofsky’s system would lead archivists to look at the origin of a fonds or archival collection from three related perspectives:

¹⁵ Normand Charbonneau, “Le tri des photographies”, *Archives*, volume 30, numero 2, 1998-1999, p.33

¹⁶ Karen Collins, “Providing Subject Access to Images: A study of User Queries “ *The American Archivist*, vol. 61, (Spring 1998): 36-55, p.42

¹⁷ Collins,1998, p. 51

1. Pre-iconographic description. This corresponds to the identification of forms as representations of objects and events, and it requires only the knowledge gained from everyday experience. This “primary subject matter” can be either factual or expressional.
2. Iconographical analysis “secondary subject matter”, knowledge of the literary sources, customs, and cultural traditions peculiar to a certain civilization.
3. Iconological interpretation. The identification of the underlying principles which reveal the basic attitude of a nation, period, religion, class, or philosophical persuasion.¹⁸

According to Panofsky “we have to distinguish between the three strata of subject matter or meaning ... In whichever stratum we move, our identifications and interpretations will depend on our subjective equipment, and for this very reason will have to be corrected and controlled by an insight into historical processes the sum total of which may be called tradition.”¹⁹

Creators/ Source

Archivists are very much immersed in hierarchy in our daily work. We use relational data bases to construct modern finding aids and most often work in and for hierarchically organized corporate structures. But the networked based fluidity of modern life has prompted some of us to look more closely at the possibilities for improving our knowledge of archives by studying and documenting authorship and

¹⁸ Collins, 1998, p.38-39 see note 6 derives her model from the work of Sara Shatford, Karen Markey passim.

¹⁹ For the first exposition of Panofsky’s method in English see Erwin Panofsky, Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Age of the Renaissance New York, Harper Torchbooks, (1939) rev. 1962, 1967, pp.5-7, 14-16

creatorship. I am arguing that if we can understand who really authored or created archives using a 360 degree analysis we will have the opportunity to deepen our understanding of archival provenance.²⁰ This most certainly means moving beyond any framework of intellectual control of archives that mimics our arrangements for physical custody.²¹ I suspect though that as essentially tidy people archivists are always tempted by opportunities to make history look neat.

The last ten years have seen a major effort of Canadian archivists to provide researchers and the general public with the results, however imperfect, of their provenance based work. Archives Canada <http://www.archivescanada.ca/> is the most comprehensive listing of Canadian archives available to date. Laura Millar's research has shown that archival provenance located as single source or point of origin is less and less defensible. This is partly because as archivists we are still working with a mind set that says archives can only retain their integrity if they are located in one place for all time. We have not yet pushed through to the opportunities that new forms of communication offer in what is termed the 'post custodial era'. As Terry Cook has stated, "in the older world of archival physical arrangement, each record could only be stored in one place; in the newer world of intellectual control of archives the notion still survives that each records should only be described in one place."²² I agree that we need to develop a new and more inclusive process for the naming of provenance. Where I depart from Cook is that I think we ignore the physical reality of archives, the real stuff, at our peril because it

²⁰ Terry Cook, "The Impact of David Bearman on Modern Archival thinking: An Essay of Personal Reflection and Critique", Archives and Museum Informatics 11, Kluwer, 1997, p. 20 esp. "Understand the creatorship and authorship of records, their animating functions and activity, their transmission he [Bearman] advised, and the importance or value of the resulting records will almost be self-evident".

²¹ David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, "The Power of the Principle of Provenance", Archivaria 21. Winter 1985-86. pp. 14-27

²² *ibid.*, p. 20-21

may take us away from the ground that archives were created by and for the use of real people.

How can a community identify, recover and re-acquire the holdings of libraries and archives that exist in a variety of locations and formats and make use of this knowledge in its own contemporary social and cultural context? Much can be learned from lived experience within communities. To take one example: reports from field work conducted by Pilz 2003 and Cowall-Farrell 2003 and 2004 suggest that among the elders in Pangnirtung there is an interest in collecting and preserving a community archives. In the past, a local documentary archive had been collected at the school by one of the Inuit teacher/elders, Daisy Diabo, but the entire collection was lost in a fire in 1998. An intervention at the 14th International Inuit Studies Conference by an Inuit college student stated, “how come all you academics know more about my history than I do?” His plea for access to historical sources illustrates that the knowledge gap occasioned in part by the loss of records in a school fire is keenly felt. Pilz and Cowall-Farrell have demonstrated that elders can contribute significant new knowledge (metadata) to recovered archives.

I am interested in learning not only the content, the context and format(s) that a community archive should take. I believe that the contributions to expanding our understanding and validation of archival sources gained from listening to and recording the narratives of three groups: elders, community leaders and youth will add significantly to the metadata associated with the selected archives and point to those items and collections that can form the basis of a comprehensive community archive.

Returning archives to their origins in community presents archivists with the opportunity of deepening our understanding of the origins of collections and their co-creators. I would argue that we need to search for and recognize all participants in the creation of an archive as authors and sources of provenance. This may require acknowledging the multiple points of origins for our collections. We are already used to string archives in different places in differing formats. We may well agree to describe records differently in different physical and virtual locations to more accurately reflect their multiple contexts. The challenge is to locate an enriched archival provenance in the local context and the embedded tradition.

As we find new ways to accomplish this goal we will come closer to the wisdom of Pauloosie Angmarlik, “I never say what I have heard, I only tell what I have experienced, because I do not want to lie.”²³

²³ Peter Kulchyski, Don McCaskill, David Newhouse editors, In the Words of the Elders: Aboriginal Cultures in Transition, University of Toronto, Toronto, 1999, p. 273.