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## Archives and Colonialism: Reflections on the SLAIS Archives Core

Salma Berrada

[salmaberradaea@gmail.com](mailto:salmaberradaea@gmail.com)

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### Abstract

A discussion of the role of archives in sustaining the heritage and living memory of Indigenous communities.

For the spring break of my second term as a freshman at Bowdoin College, my best friend and I decided to spend a weekend exploring Boston. Over the previous winter, we had become inseparable—the cheery, ever-smiling Rastafarian New Yorker and me, the Moroccan ingénue still struggling with spoken English and Maine’s slippery iciness. We didn’t have any particular plans, except that I had insisted we visit the Boston Fine Arts Museum; over the previous months, I had spent infinite hours probing into every nook and cranny of the institution’s website and now finally I could admire the Vermeer and Veronese paintings in person. There was a new exhibition titled, *Rivals in Renaissance Venice* that was starting that very Sunday, which also happened to be my birthday. Upon arrival to the museum, I was naturally ecstatic; I didn’t know which way to look anymore, pointing at this masterpiece and then the other, offering a fascinating fact or two about each masterpiece on display, trying desperately to elicit my friend’s interest. But her eyes, usually so bright, spoke of such apathy as I dragged her along the grand hallways of the exhibit. Later, as we sat at the steps of the museum, she cried and cried heavily while confiding her sense of alienation to a friend from home on the phone. Her feelings left me at sea; how could she not find Western art inspiring? What was so wrong with the permeating Whiteness of both the representations painted with great finesse and the public in rapt admiration?

Our friendship fell apart even as I embarked on a long, difficult learning process that continues to this day. Why draw such a sad, shameful portrait of my appalling naïveté that seems to amount to little more than a distant digression from the subject proper, archives? Quite simply because the theoretical and methodological knowledge that has been inculcated over the past

couple months of core Archives courses at SLAIS brought me closer to understanding my friend's distress that Sunday. Then again, I will never know what it is like to grow up black in America, nor will I ever fully grasp the grief of those whose loved ones suffered as victims of the residential school system in Canada, no matter how deep I delve into the writings of Frantz Fanon, Toni Morrison, and Marie Ann Battiste. Still, the courage and grit of these same intellectuals—among many other who advocate for the dignity—opened my eyes to a sad but undeniable fact that marked my upbringing in Morocco, namely the blind reverence for the Western canon above all else. Mastering the languages of our former colonial powers, French and Spanish, took precedence over both the local dialect spoken in the streets and the written language of Islamic scripture. Our national education system perpetuates the status quo to this day. As different as the Canadian context may be from that of my home country, the profound issues facing the archives field and memory institutions worldwide know no borders.

How do we properly provide for the recognition of the oral histories of Indigenous peoples? How can archives help correct longstanding biases about minorities and native communities? Now, the Archives core courses at UBC completed, I am left with more questions than answers. To what extent can archival practice evolve to promote democratic accountability and social justice when information professionals are bound by ethical guidelines to corporate bodies or state authorities? Our assigned readings ranged from orthodox theory of the European patriarchy to prescriptive recommendations for reformation in the current information age. To be honest, I expected neither the French Revolution to have played such a defining role in modern archival thinking nor ethnocentrism to be so entrenched in archival theory. Where does archival learning end and indoctrination begin? Despite my doubts, I am not demanding *dis-respect des fonds* in the digital era. Instead, I am more determined than at the beginning of this term to develop a better understanding of how archivists can contribute to decolonizing and generating spaces of recovery and mutual respect among people. Dr. Spencer Lilley's last talk, *Ki te Ao Marama – Towards the Light*, as a visiting professor tackling these challenging issues was truly inspiring. Unlike Krista McCracken or Shauna McRanor, whose studies we were assigned to read for ARST 515, here was a discussion being held at UBC to consider the profession's active role at the forefront of collective endeavors to decolonize library and information institutions. Whereas born-digital records necessitate a reevaluation of essential archival principles and preservation methods, broader accessibility and accountability involve breaking down the colonial construct of established knowledge and heritage networks.

As this Information Age unfolds, we face both critical challenges and new opportunities in the field of archives. The ubiquity of the Internet can only facilitate connections between different actors, including indigenous colleagues and student volunteers. Indeed, as McCracken remarked in her case study focusing on the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre (SRSC), "Traditional archival organizations and Aboriginal communities can greatly benefit from open communication and active collaboration."<sup>1</sup> Cross-cultural policies at one archival repository can potentially serve as an elemental framework for other institutions in an effort to promote inclusive, participatory archives program initiatives. As McCracken notes, with "the SRSC's

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<sup>1</sup> McCracken, Krista. "Community Archival Practice: Indigenous Grassroots Collaboration at the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre." *American Archivist* 78 (Spring/Summer 2015). 190.

inclusion of survivor perspectives in description, arrangement, and outreach practices,”<sup>2</sup> we can easily identify the participation of local communities as a key factor for each and every step of archival methodology. Dr. Lilley had underscored the fact that these processes inevitably require “negotiation” to foster “cooperation”<sup>3</sup> among indigenous communities and non-indigenous organizations.

McRanor’s article focusing on Aboriginal oral records is equally useful in pointing to “the pervasive problem of ethnocentrism”<sup>4</sup> and exploring the implications for the appraisal of native oral accounts. Yet even such positive developments can sometimes leave a stale after-taste. The following assertion from the same introductory passage includes a problematic term: “[this article] is designed to encourage archivists along a path toward greater understanding and *tolerance* [my italics] of cultural differences.”<sup>5</sup> Using the word “tolerance” to characterize social acceptance among ethnicities cannot possibly be the solution if we’re aiming for social equity. Though power dynamics heavily impact archives as repositories of human records, we must relentlessly aspire toward social justice. I firmly believe that open archival institutions allow different communities to understand and respect one another and to celebrate what we share. Diversity is certainly enriching and meaningful, but it is also unsettling, and rightfully so. Paying lip service to Indigenous topics with a single session for discussion of a couple readings unfortunately means that we are sorely unequipped as future professionals. It’s only by overcoming our ignorance that we can actually be part of the solution. To complement the optional First Nations Curriculum Concentration, the iSchool should launch an Indigenous course requirement or at the very least a workshop; “tolerance” is not the adequate answer.

The optional visit for ARST 515 to the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs offered living proof of the potential for “community-based archives to provide a voice for marginalized groups, add new viewpoints to the traditional historical record, and preserve heritage that has been left out of traditional archives and museums”<sup>6</sup> as McCracken had outlined in the SRSC case study. The librarian and archivist Melissa Adams showed us around the archive’s premises where a number of unfinished projects lay around waiting for her attention and proper funds. To say the place is understaffed would be an understatement. I realized for the first time that community-based archives are no less a locus for dynamic organization and action than their larger counterparts. More importantly, they sustain closer connections between users, donors, researchers and staff, and thus, “Grassroots archives that actively involve communities... complement traditional archival collections.”<sup>7</sup> Participating as a volunteer at UBCIC starting January has allowed me to look into these spaces of both struggle and solidarity because as Jean-Pierre Wallot so aptly put it almost two decades ago, “Our work is too complex, too rich,

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<sup>2</sup> McCracken, 190.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Spencer Lilley, “Decolonize or indigenize?: Transitioning for the information profession” (presentation, UBC, Vancouver, BC, December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> McRanor, Shauna. “Maintaining the Reliability of Aboriginal Oral Records and Their Material Manifestations: Implications for Archival Practice.” *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997). 66

<sup>5</sup> McRanor, 66

<sup>6</sup> McCracken, 181

<sup>7</sup> McCracken, 182

too diverse, to permit the enshrining of a single orthodoxy...We must, above all else, remember our humanity—our cultural role in the collective memory of peoples.”<sup>8</sup>

What troubles me most about archives as a profession is the stark lack of diversity within our own ranks. *The New York Times* recently published yet another piece arguing that diversity benefits minorities and the majority alike: “By disrupting conformity, racial and ethnic diversity prompts people to scrutinize facts, think more deeply and develop their own opinions.”<sup>9</sup> Needless to say that the Archives core term has been grueling but I am grateful for the new bonds of solidarity among minority students who are equally, if not even more concerned about Indigenous issues and always willing to fill in the gaps of my knowledge of Canadian history. Our collective work will involve probing further into archival methodology and strengthening the voice of community-based archives. McRanor’s “short answer”<sup>10</sup> for maintaining Aboriginal oral records “by letting First Nations continue to create, transmit, preserve, and thus represent their records how they wish, as do all other nations” (80) is unconvincing. Instead of “letting,” our mandate as archivists requires us to fully engage and offer innovative archival practices to sustain the heritage and living memory of different communities.

*Salma Berrada is a dual MAS/MLIS Candidate at the University of British Columbia.*

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Pierre Wallot. “Archival Oneness in the Midst of Diversity: A Personal Perspective.” *American Archivist*, Vol.59. Winter 1996. 28-29

<sup>9</sup> Sheen S. Levine and David Stark. “Diversity Makes You Brighter.” *The New York Times*. Dec 9<sup>th</sup> 2015 (<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/09/opinion/diversity-makes-you-brighter.html>) Last Accessed Dec. 9<sup>th</sup> 2015.

<sup>10</sup> McRanor, 80.