

THE ROLE OF A MUNICIPAL CULTURAL INSTITUTION IN MOVING FROM HERITAGE TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF A PLURAL IDENTITY: THE CENTRE D'HISTOIRE DE MONTRÉAL

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Once marked by distinct ethnic neighbourhoods and relatively clear religious, social and linguistic boundaries, Montréal is now a city of diversity and permeable borders, where sharp edges have become blurred. Social, linguistic and ethnic internal migrations have transformed settlement patterns and mentalities have changed as well. As a result, the intimate identity connections between Montrealers and their streets or neighbourhoods have shifted. The urban environment overall has changed radically; the Portuguese Saint-Louis of the 1960s has become the gentrified Plateau, the Greek Park Extension of the 1950s is now an Indo-Pakistani district, the Petite Patrie, once French Canadian in character, is today more Latin American.

This is a time when the longest-standing immigrant communities are defined less and less by their visibility in a given area, by the presence of their people and organizations, their businesses and gathering places. Simultaneously, these same communities have begun expressing the need to carve out a place for themselves in a different kind of territory, the domain of memory, history and heritage—although this need shows itself in somewhat contradictory fashion. On the one hand, due to the mobility and international character of the immigrant experience, people want to register and preserve a community memory that transcends the boundaries not just of the old neighbourhoods, but also of cities or even provinces. On the other hand, there is a need to anchor this memory in concrete objects and places, situated within, and most importantly recognized by, the host society.

It is up to the host society, its culture and institutions, to respond to this challenge. The need is urgent if critical identity issues, so characteristic of our times, are to be resolved successfully. The Centre d'histoire de Montréal, a municipal museal institution created in 1983, has been working in this area for many years, more particularly since its new permanent exhibition was opened in 2001.

The museum was able to extend its diversified approach to the theme of immigrant communities through the 2002-2003 exhibition project on the Portuguese community. **THE CENTRE D'HISTOIRE DE MONTRÉAL** was inspired in this case by the practice of social museology, in which community animation and heritage awareness are part of the project design. The exhibition becomes one moment in the total experience of animation and awareness, not just a cultural end-product offered to the public for consumption. The project was developed in four successive stages: the memory clinics, guided tour of the Portuguese district, exhibition and educational activities for Saturday school students. The fifth stage, that we are working on now, will be the creation of an internet site called the "Montréal Museum

of the Person.” The focus of this virtual museum will be Montrealers’ memory and our site will be linked to a network of similar sites created by the Brazil Museum of the Person (Museu da pessoa), the inspiration for this project.

AN INSTRUCTIVE EXPERIENCE: MEMORY CLINICS IN THE PORTUGUESE AND HAITIAN COMMUNITIES

Recent experiences have prompted us to reflect on these questions, in particular the *memory clinics*, one organized to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the first wave of Portuguese immigration to Canada in 1953, and the other associated with the 200th anniversary of Haiti’s independence. The first set of *clinics* was set up in 2003 by the Centre d’histoire de Montréal, together with the Carrefour des jeunes lusophones du Québec. The clinics, four in all, were designed to provide a focus for collecting testimony and objects for the exhibition *Encontros: The Portuguese Community. Neighbours for 50 Years* (on display at the CHM, at the Portuguese Association of Canada and at the Mission Santa Cruz from September 2003 to April 2004). The Centre d’histoire’s aim was to collaborate with community organizations in pairing a memory-collection activity with a historical exhibition, as it had done for its preceding exhibitions on domestic workers (*Beyond the Call of Duty: Chronicles of Domestic Work in Private Homes*) and on the Syrian-Lebanese (*Min Zamaan. Since Long Ago. The Syrian-Lebanese Presence in Montreal between 1882 and 1940*). The same impetus led to the creation of a clinic at the La Perle retrouvée community center in the Saint-Michel district in February of 2004 (on the day President Aristide was deposed!), in the context of the summer exhibition *Tet ansanm. All together. Haiti Lives Here!*

Special attention was paid to the environment in which testimony and objects were collected. To reduce the level of formality, the sites were made to look like blood donor clinics, with partitioned spaces for interviews, hospital smocks, stethoscopes, registration cards and refreshments. All this created a festive atmosphere, during which participants donated their memories, as others would give blood, in order to save their history! Testimony was recorded by young people from the communities in question, who had been given basic training in interview techniques by the Centre d’histoire and dressed up in white smocks for the occasion.

The objects that people brought in were noted, digitally photographed and then projected for public viewing in a common rest area. Close to one hundred in-depth interviews were carried out and sixty historical objects identified and photographed for the Portuguese community, along with some twenty interviews for the Haitian community.

The desire to “think outside the box” was inspired by the playful spirit of commemoration generated in 2001 by the Association des aides familiales du Québec and the artist Raphaëlle de Groot (a joyful tour of the houses where domestic workers were employed in the 1940s), in preparing the exhibition *Beyond the Call of Duty*, and in 2002 by the artists from Galerie Dare-Dare as part of the CHM exhibition/laboratory *Memory Alive*.

An evaluation of the four memory clinics carried out so far among Portuguese associations and community groups shows that they left a deep impression, both on the interviewers and on the participants. The clinic in the Haitian community would seem to confirm these impressions. All clinics have enabled us to get a better sense of the challenge that faces those who, in the years to come, will be working to help the communities create new identity markers.

THE FIRST CHALLENGE: TO ALLOW MEMORY TO SURFACE BY BREAKING THROUGH SELECTIVE FORGETTING

The first challenge in constructing new imaginative territory among communities that have dispersed around the city is to break through the selective forgetting that affects memories of the immigrant experience.

Immigrant communities believe they are making it easier for their children to integrate by not telling them about parts of the past that negate the image of settlement in a foreign land as dream-come-true. During the memory clinics in the Portuguese community, old men broken by hard work were unable to hold back their tears as they told the story of their gruelling beginnings as farm and forest workers. Those most surprised by the emotional intensity of these memories were the young interviewers, of whom only a few knew this aspect of their history and even for these few, the knowledge was primarily theoretical.

The awakening of memory thus begins with the awakening of emotion that had previously been deadened or repressed. Constructing the heritage of memory thus entails much more than simply recording testimony. For many people, the process itself becomes an important event, symbolically and psychologically, whose impact must not be minimized.

THE SECOND CHALLENGE: TO INVENT NEW WAYS OF WORKING WITH HERITAGE

The first generations of immigrants are keen to pass on traditions, experiences and values to their children and grandchildren but these latter, too often, are occupied elsewhere. This is also the case in the host society, although the consequences are less serious. In fact, the institutions (schools, museums, etc.) and people who are responsible for culture in the host society can usually take over from the family and transmit the collective markers.

Immigrant communities do not always have the means to offer intergenerational community activities, gathering places and recreation or cultural products that reflect their identity. Under these conditions, the inevitable period of rupture and rejection may be prolonged. When the time comes to re-connect with their community, the young generations are missing the memory markers and materials on which to found a contemporary expression of their mixed identity as Québécois of Portuguese origin.

One of the surprises of the memory clinics was the enthusiasm the young Portuguese brought to organizing the collection activities. These same young people also participated in organizing, training and guiding the Haitian community clinic, thus passing on the expertise they had acquired to a new set of young interviewers from another community.

The playful, festive, unexpected nature of this event was certainly attractive, as was the engagement of extra-community institutions and the prospect of meeting the older generation in a framework less formal than the family or than traditional activities hosted by community organizations. The clinics probably offered the possibility of reconnecting with community memory without being confined by it. This shows that in order to be effective catalysts for heritage awareness, institutions must dare to invent new ways of working with heritage and not be afraid to inject fantasy, emotion and creativity.

THE THIRD CHALLENGE: TO REVEAL THE DIVERSITY BEHIND THE STEREOTYPE

Every immigrant or minority community, in addition to hiding its wounds, often tries to plaster over its social, economic, cultural and political differences. Conflicts and opposing opinions from the countries of origin are swept under the carpet of uniformity and good will. The reductionist image that results affects the image that community members and the younger generations have of their heritage. In addition, the host society fails to appreciate the community's varied contributions. How many Montrealers, for example, know that the Syrian-Lebanese community built and managed the Outremont and Château cinemas and other landmark institutions of their city? Who would have guessed that the first Haitian immigration was made up of professionals who helped bring Québec into the modern age, particularly in the areas of health and education? Or that the Haitian taxi drivers so often associated in the public mind with this community since the 1980s, played a major role in arguing taxi drivers' demands and improving their working conditions?

Discovering that a community contains the diversity that is associated with all modern societies can have a positive impact on the ability of the younger generations to identify. They can then turn to the community for inspiration, bringing with them their current opinions and the challenges of the moment. It is important to demonstrate that a range of histories are remembered and values held, for example, by left-wing political refugees, economic refugees,

entrepreneurs, or by young Portuguese pushed by their parents into clandestine immigration to avoid the tragic consequences of colonial wars.

THE FOURTH CHALLENGE: TO COLLECT, CONSERVE AND RECOGNIZE THREATENED *MICROHERITAGE*

As we well know, no community's identity can rest on its fallible and selective memory alone. But as the projects in the Syrian-Lebanese, Portuguese and Haitian communities have shown us, the memorial and material heritage of immigrant communities is often modest, and so well integrated into the host society that it is easy to pass it by.

This heritage is often made up of family memories, objects with symbolic or sentimental value, family, private or organizational archives, religious or organization-related buildings or perhaps homes or businesses decorated in the style of the country of origin. This heritage is very difficult to pass on when inter-cultural marriage, departures or other events break the chain of family transmission.

Institutions must then take up the challenge. All too few communities, however, having immigrated 50 or 100 years ago, can turn to institutions whose role it is to preserve their memories, their objects and their archives. Museums and archives in Montréal and in Québec continue to bear very imperfect witness to the historical presence of these communities, often due to lack of acquisitions budgets or connections with possible donors from the communities.

In the case of the Syrian-Lebanese community, which arrived in the city at the beginning of the 20th century, the exhibition at the Centre d'histoire de Montréal showed that many objects and photographs remained in family archives. Brian Aboud, a member of the community and a sociologist associated with the Centre d'histoire was in charge of the project. His work in identifying material and the contacts he made sparked a new awareness in the community itself as well as on the part of the major conservation institutions, the museums of civilization, which had to date paid little attention to this heritage. The Estates-General of Montréal Museums stressed the importance of heritage conservation in the city. The case of Montréal's cultural heritage is a good opportunity to test this will and constitutes an invitation to institutions to make a concerted effort.

THE FIFTH CHALLENGE: TO FIND CREATIVE WAYS TO ANCHOR THE COMMUNITIES' CULTURAL HERITAGE IN MONTRÉAL

The immigration that has contributed so much to the profile of urban North American culture since the end of the 19th century was and is experienced first in the heart and the memory, before becoming associated with the buildings, businesses and streets of a specific neighbourhood. As the memory of these communities illustrates, their histories transcend borders. If the “old neighbourhoods” still exist, it is more thanks to their commercial than their residential functions, as is very much the case for the Portuguese on the Plateau Mont-Royal. Many communities are like the long-established Syrian-Lebanese, which has completely vacated the district it first settled in (eastern Old Montreal).

Nonetheless, in most communities, the need for recognition and for historical and cultural anchors in the urban landscape is powerful. One needs only to work for a municipal cultural institution such as the Centre d'histoire de Montréal or for a government office such as the Bureau des relations interculturelles to appreciate the symbolic and emotional importance of institutional gestures recognizing the presence of these communities in the city. The depth of emotion generated by such gestures corresponds to a powerful need to be seen, respected and included. The need tangibly to anchor community memory can be met on the symbolic plane, through exhibitions or commemorative events, or on the territorial plane, by officially designating ethnocultural districts, or by using toponomy, or public art. As the prime site for civic representation, the city is the focus for the communities' desires for public recognition of their existence. This is where they want to see visible markers woven into the texture and cultural life of the city.

For example, even though the Portuguese community is increasingly present in sectors such as Villeray, Ahuntsic, Rosemont, Côte-des-Neiges and Laval, it still feels the need to refer to its historic “birthplace,” Saint-Louis on the Plateau, where a portion of the community still lives amidst its businesses and religious institutions. The former inhabitants return there regularly to stroll around, to nourish their memories and to show their children the mark that the Portuguese have left on this neighbourhood that they saved, renovated and painted up in the colours of their country of origin.

Municipal recognition of historical status must clearly be approached with tact. How to make visible but not to immobilize the memory of a neighbourhood that is in constant evolution, that belongs as much to those who have lived there in the past as to those who have moved in to take their place, bringing with them their own history and culture?

In addition to the traditional answers – place names, monuments, parks, we must imagine new forms of territorial marking and commemorating that suit both the more traditional sensibilities of a segment of the communities, and at the same time offer the modernity and adaptability that will ensure continuity. This imaginative work must be carried out in collaboration with artists, heritage workers, stage designers, cultural animators and members of the community.

**MONTREAL AT THE BEGINNING OF THE 21ST CENTURY: A HERITAGE CONSTRUCTION
SITE
OPEN TO ALL**

The 21st century in has dawned Montréal with new plans for cultural and heritage policies at the municipal level. The moment is ripe for opening up a construction site where all will participate in the building of a new, inclusive identity for Montréal. A site where listening and sensitivity to needs, to popular means of expression and to traditional methods of honouring memory join forces with new forms, new ways to mark and commemorate heritage, typified by Montréal-style creativity and imagination.

As expressions of the collectivity, cultural institutions and the municipality itself must be in the forefront. If we want to work in depth, we need more than occasional consultations and memory depositaries that reach only the few accustomed to such exercises, often a tiny minority in the communities. It is here that the experience of the memory clinics, flexible, empathetic and playful, taking place where people actually live, may have blazed a trail worth taking again.

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