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Introduction. Heritage, Memory and Vitality of Linguistic Minorities

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Heritage, Memory and Vitality of Linguistic Minorities

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Introduction. Heritage, Memory and Vitality of Linguistic Minorities

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The articles in this issue stem from a conference entitled "Heritage, memory and vitality of linguistic minorities: Research advances, best practices, and critical approaches." This online event took place during the 88th Acfas Congress in May, 2021. The research papers, case studies, and personal testimonials at that event—and presented here—explore heritage and memory in relation to the vitality of Canada's official language minority communities (OLMCs).

In the present issue, the term heritage is used broadly. Over time, the meaning of the word has expanded from physical monuments and objects passed down through generations to intangible elements "such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe, or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts" (UNESCO, n.d.). The concept of memory is related to this but distinct. It refers to shared narratives within a community that draw on heritage to shape community identity and cohesion (Tallentire, 2001). In other words, heritage places, objects, and traditions have a memorial purpose.

The articles presented here offer a nuanced portrait of heritage and memory. On the one hand, they highlight ways in which heritage and memory shape the sense of identity and belonging within communities, helping to build the social cohesion that keeps communities strong and resilient. On the other hand, several also adopt a critical perspective revealing potential downsides to the uses of heritage and memory. For instance, discourses around identity that focus narrowly and disproportionately on the past can create collective memories that leave some newcomers feeling excluded; this plays against community building, particularly in a Canadian context defined by growing cultural plurality and cosmopolitanism. Lowenthal (1998) contrasts history, which aims to be objective and disinterested, and heritage, which can result in the manipulation of the past to meet the needs and values of the present: "We use heritage to improve the past, making it better (or worse) by modern lights" (p. 156). When a community prioritizes cohesion over strict truth through a selective use of history, it might manipulate the past and create mythologized memories.

The notion of vitality has long been used in relation to OLMCs. It was first introduced into ethnolinguistic studies in 1977 (Giles *et al.*) Over time, it came to be adopted by Canada's federal government. Attempts were made to measure the vitality of OLMCs using indicators relating to the number of speakers, language attitudes and practices, and the number of institutions serving the minority in each community. Government and community stakeholders used these indicators to better define policies and localized strategies for addressing vitality challenges. Alain Roy's article sums up this evolution and argues that the factors of history, heritage, and memory have not been sufficiently considered in measuring vitality. He introduces the concept of "vitality of memory," and stresses that understanding the past is important both to understanding the present, and "for communities to understand how memory plays a significant role in their future."[1]

The articles following Roy's theoretical piece present minority community heritage and collective memory case studies. While not focussed on vitality per se, they indirectly address this concept by weighing the impact of heritage and memory on communities. They explore questions such as: How do minority communities currently remember their past? What historical narratives do they construct? What factors influence the construction of these narratives? How do social connections within the community and within the majority population affect this process? Additionally, the articles speak to Roy's point above by examining the ways in which heritage and memory influence the future of minority communities.

Éric Forgues, Laurence Arrighi, and Tommy Berger look at how the Congrès mondial acadien (Acadian World Congress) has contributed to the formation of collective memory and a wider diasporic Acadian identity. The authors consider how the 1755 Acadian deportation has been repurposed as myth over time. Fact and fiction intersect in popular deportation narratives, such as Longfellow's fictional Evangeline character and biblical evocations of Acadians as an exiled nation

returning to the promised land. Based on their field research and interviews, the authors argue that the Congrès, held every five years, has played on these myths and helped create a diasporic identity. Forgues, Arrighi, and Berger raise questions by scholars about whether using history and genealogy to build a diasporic community may have drawbacks. Does it hinder the ability of Acadia to integrate Francophone newcomers who have no experience of the deportation? Should the Acadian nation define itself around constructed collective memories, or a present-day desire to live in French? The challenge of finding a balance between these two perspectives remains a point of concern.

Mathieu Wade also looks at Acadia, but from the perspective of its geographical heritage. Acadian territory has always straddled many borders. As just one of many communities living within them, Acadians hold an "ambivalent relationship with the notion of territory and border."[2] Wade focuses on Kent County in New Brunswick, a place where British, Acadian, and Mi'kma'ki place names overlap. In this place, formal municipal borders have shifted through time, many community institutions have disappeared, and some communities have been expropriated. Despite these changes, informal borders persist as phantoms in the Acadian collective memory, along with accompanying micro-local identities. This persistence of the past has had an impact on efforts to redefine territories and regroup municipalities, efforts that are either met with concern or lack of interest by local populations used to their own set of borders. Does the persistence of this morphological heritage hinder vitality by maintaining "a nostalgic and powerless memory" of territories currently devoid of the institutional support that could benefit these communities?

Benoît Grenier's study examines heritage and memory as it relates to Quebec's Anglo-Protestant seigneurs and their descendants. By the time the seigneurial regime was abolished in the province in 1854, British settlers owned nearly half of its seigneurial properties. How do seigneurs' descendants look back on a feudal regime that is clearly incompatible with current democratic values? Through oral history interviews, Grenier finds that many descendants have an idealized view of the relationship that existed between English-speaking seigneurs and their mostly French-speaking tenants. Many interviewees emphasized that their ancestors were bilingual, perhaps to downplay and smooth over possible divisions. While the historiography certainly confirms that Quebec's elites were often bilingual (Tremblay Lamarche & Jaumain, 2017), historical records and archival evidence reveal a more acrimonious relationship among seigneurs and tenants. This highlights yet again how collective memories may use historical shortcuts that arguably support somewhat distorted interpretations of the past.

How does memory operate in contexts where communities are mostly composed of recent migrants? Marie-Hélène Comeau's study considers the Yukon's Francophone minority. Unlike the previous case studies focused on collective memories about the distant past, Comeau's piece examines first-generation female migrants constructing identities in the absence of a collective memory and heritage, using their own life experiences as a foundation. Through a series of eight creative workshops, study participants reflected on what it means to be part of a Franco-Yukonnais community. The article illustrates how artistic research interventions can promote self-awareness and cohesion, ultimately leading to a more vital and resilient community.

In addition to scholarly papers, this issue includes a Perspectives section of personal reflections from two established historians. These were the keynote addresses at the 2021 event, featuring one historian from each of Canada's two official language minority communities.

Yves Frenette's testimonial delves into the complexities of balancing his engagement in advocacy for Francophone minority communities with his need for objectivity and distance as a professional academic historian. He says historians face memorial pressures from communities, whose leaders may expect them to promote collective memories serving particular agendas. This can lead to historical shortcuts. Frenette posits that the primary goal of historical scholarship is to foster an enlightened citizenry capable of understanding differing views, nuance, and being more open to

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others. Despite this, and unlike historian Pierre Nora, who invented the concept of "places of memory," Frenette does not place history above memory, arguing that both are indispensable. Memory is essential for preserving marginalized communities and their identities, and it plays an emotional role that disinterested history cannot. History contextualizes and nuances the collective memory to ensure it does not lapse into caricature, bringing to light the role of class, generational differences, and gender, among other factors. Given how deeply rooted memory is, Frenette believes historians are unlikely to upset this balance, and can therefore play a useful role on the sidelines of community-building as engaged spectators.

Conversely, Dorothy Williams's piece reveals just how important and central the formal academic historical record is when building community. She reflects on her lifelong work in recovering and sharing the history of Quebec's English-speaking Black communities. For her, it has been a way "to counter [her] own invisibility in Canada's narrative." The history of English-speaking Blacks differs from that of other English-speaking Quebecers. It deals with people who have African heritage and experiences of slavery, and who continued to experience discrimination after Canada's abolition of slavery in 1834. Although Williams's own family has been in Quebec for seven generations, she includes more recent arrivals in the collective Black memory, stating, "as part of the African Diaspora, the history of Blacks in Montreal is the history of all Blacks in Montreal." Williams initially wrote about Montreal's Black population from a demographic perspective. She later examined the broader historical context, revealing the socioeconomic effects of racism on unemployment, social mobility, and inequality from generation to generation. Since then, she has been mobilizing this knowledge, giving lectures in public schools, and developing a kit to help Canadian educators become proficient and comfortable about incorporating Black history into their classes. Williams' work is a reminder of the importance of preserving and sharing the heritage and memory of minority communities through historical research and education. This helps ensure that their stories and experiences are included in the dominant narratives, so future generations do not suffer from "the negative fallout of a lack of belongingness that permeates their lives."

Through various approaches and perspectives, this issue explores the role of heritage and memory in Canada's minority language communities. The articles span the two extremities of the country, from the Acadian diaspora with its long and complex history to the emerging Franco-Yukonnais community that is beginning to construct its own collective memories. They also encompass different social classes and ethnocultural backgrounds, from the descendants of rural Anglo-Protestant seigneurs to the Black community in Montreal that rose up from exclusion. The articles show how heritage and memory shape the sense of identity and belonging within these communities, but also reveal potential downsides related to historical shortcuts, mythification, and the promotion of narrow discourses that exclude certain groups.

Although it can be difficult to quantify and measure, the articles in this journal suggest that heritage can have a positive impact on community vitality. Roy's concept of "vitality of memory" is a useful first step that can allow for measuring this impact. Looking beyond Canada, studies such as Monckton's (2022) have shown that heritage improves community well-being, thereby linking the seemingly disparate health and heritage sectors.

Heritage is particularly important for minority communities, which may have had their heritage erased or devalued by dominant cultures. It can help minorities assert their presence and value within society, counteract negative stereotypes, and promote the benefits of diversity. Academics can also play an important role in this process: research can help refine methods to measure heritage impact, and historians and other scholars can nuance public discourses to ensure collective memories are not reduced to clichés.

Notes

[1] “pour toute communauté, comment la mémoire joue un rôle marquant dans son devenir” (Roy, 2023).

[2] “une relation ambivalente avec la notion de territoire et de frontière” (Wade, 2023).

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