In Search of an Archive: Methodological Issues in the Genealogical Analysis of the Popular Music Industry in Quebec

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“… it would be a mistake ever to think that there could be an archive without a politics of the archive” (Osborne, 1999, p. 55)

This research note is related to my ongoing research on Francophone mainstream popular music in Quebec, more precisely, to a project devoted to the development of the local music industry since the 1960s.¹

I undertook this project with a view to challenging an abundant yet highly standardized literature in which the history of québécois popular music is generally presented as a linear and internally directed phenomenon centred almost exclusively on artists, genres, and repertoires, that appear to be independent from any industrial mediations. The objective of the project was twofold. First, to better understand the conjunctural conditions which made the development of an indigenous music-related apparatus possible. Second, to account for the ways in which the latter has shaped the production of popular music as a cultural form which, more than any other, is deemed to conjure up the whole socio-political dynamic, particularly the nationalist movement, underlying the emergence of Quebec into modernity.

In order to do so, my initial plan was to conduct “archival research” as a means to document and study the insiders’ discourse, namely that of the individual and corporate agencies involved in the development of the French-language music industry in Quebec. What I ended up doing was, however, a pretty different thing as I conducted the analysis of what, following Foucault (1994a, 1994b), I call the chanson dispositif; that is, the historically contingent linkages of discourses and institutions which support and are supported by particular systems of musical action and knowledge, and which act to orient, guide, or affect the conduct of self and others—an ongoing analysis on which I have been working for the last several years.

The following comments focus not on the results of this analysis, but on the methodological and theoretical issues which arose in the course of the research.

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and prompted me to reorient the project. What I want to do is critically examine what it implies to look for an already existing, yet curiously absent archive.

**Looking for what? How?**

There are quite a few existing archives relevant to popular music in Quebec. In most cases, whether they are public or privately owned, they are comprised of radio programs, records, record sleeves, scores, lyrics, photographs of artists, and the like. While these various documents can be viewed as integral parts of the material musical cultures produced and supported by an industrial apparatus, they provide little information concerning the apparatus itself. I thus began, in collaboration with two research assistants, to look for any document which could tell us something about, among others: Who was involved in the popular music business? Who did business with whom? How was this business done? What types of companies existed and with what structure? Under what conditions were small, locally owned music-related enterprises created? How were the music-related trades learned?

With this undertaking, I had hoped to find what others before me had. For example, a group of sociologists working at l’Université de Montréal (under the direction of Professors Gilles Houle and Paul Sabourin) who had been involved in recording oral histories with heads of family-owned québécois businesses were given free and largely unconditional access to all of the archives of a company founded in the 1920s. This proved to be a goldmine of information which included accounting practices, worker unionization, and so forth. In another case, a graduate student working under my supervision on the Festival de la chanson de Granby, the oldest and most renowned national musical contest, was given boxes and boxes of jumbled papers (notes, press clippings, minutes from executive committee meetings) which were to be discarded by the new managing personnel. The volume of all of this information was so overwhelming that she in fact never ended up analyzing the archive.

Experiences such as those described above contributed to my initial assumptions going into my research project: (1) there had to be something somewhere, all we had to do was find out where, and (2) there had to be someone who had the information, all we had to do was find out who. These assumptions oriented how I decided to look for appropriate archival material in the music business milieu itself. That is, I assumed I would gain access either to corporate archives, or to the more or less systematically organized private papers of individuals.

Knowing that it would be more difficult to look for older documents, such as those pertaining to short-lived record companies of the 1960s or 1970s (of which there were many), individuals or corporate agents who have been involved in the industry since the early 1990s were our first targets. Rather than begin with a list of music-trade agents (such as the one presented in the magazine Qui Fait Quoi, a “who’s who” of the media and cultural industries in Quebec), we started with a list of some of the most “popular” recording artists and/or products, that is, those artists and products who appeared on sales/play charts, were critically acclaimed, or received awards. The latter categories was used as a means of locating industry
or corporate agents in their interconnectedness. This constituted a strategy in keeping with my broader interest in the Francophone mainstream by putting the accent on the corporate and individual agents who, by ensuring the widest possible circulation of products and artists, aid in delineating the changing boundaries of “the mainstream.” We thus looked at record labels, distributors, concert promoters, and others whose names were present with the greatest regularity.

We then conducted an exhaustive search of newspapers and magazines and, where available, legal documents pertaining to the registration or incorporation of companies, composition of the corporate executive, and so forth. These we used to gather background information and to identify potential “contact persons” for each “target.” These persons were isolated based on their having been involved in the industry for a relatively long period of time. Informal conversations with industry people lead me to believe that writing letters was not the best strategy, that we would need to “talk to people.” We planned to establish contact by phone, and follow up by meeting people face-to-face. This, needless to say, was easier said than done.

Attempting to contact these individuals became difficult and presented insurmountable problems which raised three distinct but related sets of issues. These problems were related to accessibility, reliability, and availability.

**Issues of accessibility**

Gaining access to potentially appropriate archives meant gaining access to those members of the industry who either owned them or at least were aware of their existence. This proved to be extremely difficult on both counts: both contacting the individuals, as well as gaining access to the archives. There seemed to be two main reasons for this. First, the people we spoke with were generally very “suspicious” of academics, and this, with good reason. Until recently, when academics in Quebec have paid attention to the industry, more often than not, its members were treated as “the bad guys” who were only in it for the money, who did not care about the music, and whose work distorted, perverted, and transformed music into a mere commodity—a position not unreminiscent of traditional approaches to culture industries and mass communication in general.

Second, the people we did speak with were surprised and often uneasy with questions that concerned neither record sales and concert attendance figures nor the life and career trajectories of artists. These were the questions they were more used to receiving from government agencies such as Revenue Canada or Quebec’s Ministère des finances, while our queries appeared to be beyond the realm of their experience. As a result, they were hesitant to give us information of any sort. Most of our questions were answered in one of the following ways: Evoking the “secret” or “private nature” of the information; repeatedly saying that they did not have the information; and suggesting that we try speaking to someone else. For example, some managers claimed it was up to their client to “reveal” (or not) the identity of their concert or music video producer; some individuals involved in record production told us they did not know or were reluctant to provide information concerning the editors with whom an artist worked with, and referred us to artist
management or public relations agencies when asked for the name of the individual(s) responsible for designing album covers. The latter response of non-stop referral engaged us in a game of musical chairs whereby we had the impression of going around in circles: from record label to manager to artist to record label to distributor to manager, and so forth.

**Issues of reliability**
When trying to get basic factual information (dates, names, etc.) the answers we got from the people we contacted were often inconsistent if not contradictory. For instance, has this or that artist been under contract with his/her record producer since 1990 or 1992? Was this album distributed by this company or a competitor? Was this particular label owned, or not by this record company? Since in most cases we were either denied access to written documentation or told that none existed, we had to rely on verbal information. Under the circumstances of suspicion, replying with, “are you sure?” or “we were told something different by …” did not help in establishing good rapport. We were continually forced to ask ourselves whose authority we were questioning. And more importantly, which contacts could we trust to provide informed, accurate information? As we came to identify a handful of people who had worked for various music-related companies in the course of their careers, they became especially important “gatekeepers.” What little information they did volunteer, they insisted resulted from hearsay or was common knowledge shared by people in the business; for example, before starting his own company X used to work for Y and has dealt exclusively with him since. The insistence on this source of knowledge we interpreted as, “there are things that we, in this relatively small and close-knit milieu don’t necessarily want to share with ‘outsiders.’” In other words, those who are part of the music business know what needs to be known about its past and this version of the story is the only one worth believing.

**Issues of availability**
In the face of these problems, my first reaction was to question the strategy we had adopted in our mostly unsuccessful search, and to acknowledge its inherent naiveté. I could not help but wonder what little piece of information I was missing which would lead to earning the trust of people and thus to my ability to continue with the research. I was convinced of three things, which left me perplexed.

First, despite what people told me, I was sure that they must have kept some trace of their career trajectory, or of the history of their company. Does not everyone, to some extent? Could it be that the documents that people did keep, gather, and secure differed from the ones I expected them to collect based on what I thought was worthy of being “archived” (for example, business correspondence that might have helped me document networking practices and interrelations within the local milieu)?

Second, the “common sense” knowledge of the history of the industry to which members referred was not as clear-cut and unproblematic as they made it sound. Some episodes and events such as the early years of ADISQ (Association
du disque, de la vidéo et du spectacle du Québec), the local music trade organization, appeared to have been left out all together. Others pertaining, for instance, to the ideological debates that divided the music milieu throughout the 1970s seemed to me to be told only in part. To top this off, there were widely divergent versions of the same events, from the conditions that lead to the creation of one record company to the declaration of bankruptcy by another one.

Third, while I never got the impression that people cared a great deal about the absence of a history of the industry, I did feel that they were concerned with the importance of learning from past experiences and that these had to be remembered. Often the sense was that, however important, much of the minute detail of the past was forgotten.

My assumptions and their limits
Months had passed and there was no clear indication that I would ever find, much less gain access to, the kind of archival materials I hoped to research. This of course lead to frustration and disappointment and raised the possibility that the search was futile and the project might need to be abandoned in favour of more realistic goals. In many ways, I blamed the industry for the failures we had experienced. Was it not their responsibility to keep track of the business’ development? Should they not be making sure that their past was not lost or forgotten? Reflecting on this “blame the industry” attitude made me acknowledge some of the assumptions that I had been making.

I was assuming that the industry operated as a “community” defined by what its members had in common. The walls I was coming up against might then be explained by the symbolic management of the community’s boundaries (Cohen, 1985), that is, the community as defined from within might be different from what was presented to the outside. What if, on the other hand, the industry was less a “community,” and more a diffused and dispersed social grouping?

A second assumption was that there was a causal or even organic link between community and memory. Memory in this case would be a repository for, or an unmediated capturing of, the unproblematic lived past of a community—a past which has its own independent existence. Given my assumption that the industry did function as a community, I further assumed that there were traces of this past that told the story of their common history.

The issues of accessibility, reliability, and availability were inextricably linked to these assumptions and the “logic of inscription” (Frow, 1997) they articulate. A logic inherent to a nostalgia-oriented search for the traces of the lived past of the music business community which has two important limits. The first is its inability to account for forgetting as anything other than a fault or a mere incident. The second is the inherent view of memory as a community-based and organic solidarity-driven activity independent from its material and institutional conditions of existence.
Changing direction ...
I have now stopped looking for an archive to be researched and reoriented the project according to a different assumption, namely, that issues of public memory as an unmediated capturing of the past can be productively displaced into a critical examination of what, drawing from Frow (1997), I call *memorialization activities*. That is, regulated, materially, and institutionally contingent forms of activities (biographical writing, panegyric production, and testimonials, for example) through which, to borrow a phrase from Martin Allor’s (1997) work on the location of cultural activities; the “present-past” of private experiences is conjuncturally linked to particular collective trajectories and specific sets of local resources. My “failed experiment” has lead me to think that an empirically based understanding of the genealogy of the local Francophone music industry can best be produced by interrogating how individual and corporate agents publicly articulate their milieu and its past; what musical subjects (artists, enterprises, etc.) and objects are deemed memorable and why; and what they consider to be worthy of being remembered is linked to other facets of the québécois social formation and its history.

This new focus on memorialization activities has come to be combined with another, more abstract approach to the “archive.” Drawing from Foucault, I now use the notion to refer not to “conserved” texts or “immortal traces” of a forever gone past but, rather, to the rules which determine, in a given social formation, the appearance or disappearance of statements in their paradoxical existence as events and things. The archive to be constituted is no longer the starting point of the research. Rather, it becomes a product of the research in so far as it is instrumental in the politicization of the memories constitutive of the field of popular music in Quebec, particularly its mainstream. While its orientation has been largely redefined, the new direction I have given to the research project does not evacuate the industry and its history but rather problematizes how “things” get remembered, how some “memories” are preserved and why, and how this orders “what” is history.

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