

FILLING GAPS IN OUR NATIONAL HISTORY

JACQUELINE HOÀNG NGUYỄN COLLECTS UNTOLD STORIES

BY LAURENCE BUTET-ROCH

In our closets or on our bookshelves are treasures of immense personal significance: family photo albums. Their pictures contain memories of loved ones, of momentous events, of daily delights. In short, they are repositories of our histories. The celebrated American photographer Nan Goldin, who made her mark documenting her life and the lives of those around her, once said of snapshots: “People take them out of love, and they take them to remember—people, places and times. They’re about creating a history by recording a history.” But apart from, and in many ways because of, their intimate nature, these images can also prove to hold meaning for a much larger community than those portrayed and their descendants.

While Montreal-born artist Jacqueline Hoàng Nguyễn doesn’t use her own images in her work, like Goldin, she is convinced that snapshots contain valuable information. Since 2014, she’s been asking immigrants to Canada to share their family photo albums with her for the project *The Making of an Archive*. “Looking at archives is not only a way of finding traces of the past, but also studying how the past has been constructed by surveying what has been deemed worthy of preserving, what is part of our national history and questioning how these institutions behold and perpetuate a certain narrative, and exactly what narrative that is,” she explains.

The idea for this collection partly came from her work on a different artistic endeavour. In 2012, Nguyễn was working on *Space Fiction & the Archives*, which uses the construction of the world’s first UFO Landing Pad in St. Paul, Alberta, during the country’s centennial to speak about hospitality and diversity in Canada, as well as what we remember and what we forget. Most people, for example, remember Expo 1967, not the monuments that were built across the nation at the time. She spent much of her time digging for material in the archives of several institutions, including Library and Archives Canada, the National Film Board of

Canada and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and noticed that “while Canada prides itself to be multicultural and is known internationally for being open to diversity, there were next to no entries that actually showed what multiculturalism looked like.” She found this extremely concerning because “if no efforts of archiving visual representation of multiculturalism are made, it then becomes difficult to historicize the changes that happened over time in, say, our immigration policies.” For instance, how many people know that 1967 was also a turning point in how the national government assesses immigration requests? Indeed, that’s when the point-based system was introduced as a way to evaluate applications according to “objective” criteria such as the candidates’ potential for entering the labor force, their age, their language skills and so on, as opposed to their place of origin or skin colour.

More or less at the same time, she came across one of her dad’s photo albums chronicling his first years in Canada. Fleeing the Vietnam War, he had come to Montreal to pursue his studies. “These images not only showed him as a young immigrant but also how actively engaged he was. He took part in the student body and university community; organized dinners, parties, camping trips; and can also be seen protesting in front of Parliament,” she recalls. These photographs, she felt, did not correspond to the representations of the immigrant experience reported by mainstream media, where immigrants are largely depicted in the private sphere. Here was proof that her father was active in public life and that he belonged to and cared for different communities. She also noticed that other pictures from that period were damaged due to a flood. “I realized how delicate and vulnerable those documents were. If no efforts are made to document, archive and preserve them properly, then these objects are, in fact, ephemeral,” she adds.

Frustrated by the dearth of diversity in institutional archives and knowing that the images that could fill those gaps were accumulating dust and at risk



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of disappearing, she made plans to start building a community-based archive. Partnering with Gendai Gallery in Toronto, an artist-run centre emphasizing East Asian perspectives, and Grunt Gallery in Vancouver, an artist-run centre committed to diversity, she came up with the idea of having digitization workshops where people could have their photo albums scanned and share the stories behind the images.

To rally participants, Nguyễn relies on the relationships these cultural centres and others have with members of the Asian-Canadian community. Early on, she held a session at the Art Gallery of Ontario, just metres from Toronto's bustling Chinatown. However, the geographic proximity didn't prove to be a sufficient draw. "The AGO is primarily visited and appreciated by a completely different demographic than the one I was targeting. Even though they're just next door, they don't traverse the threshold of its doors," she observed, adding that the outreach aspect is quite a challenge. "Many members of the immigrant community have assimilated this notion that their history isn't important, that what they lived is not worth preserving. This stems, in part, from the current make up of our

national archives. While it's not uncommon to have the diaries of the aristocrats kept for perpetuity, there's little representation of the lives of migrants. Hence, newcomers ask 'Why bother archiving my story?'"

To date, nearly fifty people have participated. A copy of each file goes to the archive and another to the donor, which Nguyễn hopes will then be shared with friends and family, "reactivating" what otherwise might have remained unseen, forgotten on a shelf. On her end, with the permission of the donors, she makes a small part available on the dedicated website (themakingofanarchive.com) and has plans for a book this summer. She's also considering the question of where the collection, currently cared for by Grunt Gallery, will live for posterity. Usually, elevating images to national prominence requires integrating them into an official archive, but doing so might contradict the initial aim of the project, which was to confront dominant narratives. Hopefully, a time will come when these institutions will acknowledge their biases that elevate certain communities while reducing others to the shadows, see the undeniable value of vernacular photos, and give projects like of *The Making of an Archive* the attention they deserves. ●