

Translating Administrative Time: Data as Archive, Infrastructure as History in the Formation of Canadian Immigration

This project advances contemporary historiography by treating administrative data as active agents in knowledge production, showing how classification and archival practices shape what is knowable and who is visible. By integrating data-driven methods with historical inquiry, it expands methodological and epistemological approaches while highlighting the politics and contingencies of producing historical knowledge.

From the first moments I began working with immigration records, I was drawn not simply to their volume but to their structure, their silences, and the ways in which they delineate what counts as knowable. Administrative forms, legacy systems, and coding schemes do not merely record phenomena; they enact regimes of legibility that make certain lives, movements, and decisions visible while leaving others obscure. My historical purpose is to investigate immigration data as epistemological infrastructure; to trace the historical logics embedded within the records themselves; and to interrogate how these infrastructures have shaped the knowledge, governance, and social integration of migrants over time. In Canada, where immigration is central to demographic, social, and political life, this investigation carries particular significance. The distinctions embedded in administrative systems: temporary versus permanent, refugee versus economic, authorized versus unauthorized, are not neutral descriptors. They mark differential inclusion and exclusion, structure access to rights and opportunity, and channel life trajectories in ways that unfold across decades and even generations.

The conceptual lens I adopt situates this work within the contemporary *data turn*. Just as the [linguistic turn](#) revealed that language constitutes reality as much as it describes it, the data turn compels us to recognize that administrative records do not passively capture migration. They produce particular ways of seeing, categorizing, and governing mobility. The epistemological stakes of this shift are profound; knowledge is neither transparent nor self-evident. Databases, coding conventions, and legacy infrastructures act as mediators of understanding; they render some patterns readable, some phenomena legible, and others invisible. The

work of a historian in this context is to unpack the structures, logics, and assumptions embedded in these systems; to interrogate how these data infrastructures themselves constitute knowledge; and to render visible the historical processes through which knowledge has been produced.

In examining Canadian immigration records, I am attentive to the long-term genealogies of classification, policy, and bureaucratic logic.

Categories that distinguish temporary from permanent status, refugees from economic immigrants, or authorized from unauthorized presence are not merely operational tools. They are historically contingent constructs that reflect policy priorities, social anxieties, administrative conventions, and technical constraints. Each field, code, or administrative note carries traces of decisions made by analysts, clerks, and policymakers, whose choices shape both the legibility of migrants and the possibilities for historical reconstruction. By tracing the evolution of these categories, my research illuminates how the state has historically imagined migrants, structured opportunity, and mediated social belonging. In so doing, it foregrounds the interplay between administrative infrastructure, knowledge production, and the social experience of migration.

This project is informed by a dual sensibility that bridges analytic rigour and historical imagination. Administrative records are simultaneously precise and incomplete; they encode patterns yet leave gaps, silences, and ambiguities that demand interpretive work. The historian's task is therefore translational: to render administrative time legible to analytical and historical time, to preserve provenance and integrity, and to enable longitudinal reconstruction while remaining attuned to the contingencies and biases embedded in the source material. In practical terms, this involves the harmonization of legacy systems such as FOSS, CAIPS, LIDS, and VIDS into contemporary platforms such as GCMS and, in the future, DPM3, while maintaining awareness of the temporal, technical, and policy contexts that shaped their design and evolution. It also entails linking these administrative records to longitudinal datasets such as the IMDB, provincial vital statistics, and Statistics Canada holdings such as the Census, thereby enabling a historically grounded understanding of migration trajectories and outcomes.

A defining dimension of this work is its methodological reflexivity. Immigration data is produced for operational purposes; it emerges from

rhythms, constraints, and logics designed to facilitate case management rather than historical reconstruction. As such, the historian must engage in a form of translation that renders these operational temporities and structures legible to long-term analysis. This involves attending to provenance, documenting the evolution of codes, and creating linkages across disparate systems and historical periods. Such work is not merely technical; it is interpretive, epistemological, and historical. Every decision about how to harmonize, integrate, or interpret records is informed by an awareness that data is never neutral.

For instance, consider the historical distinction between temporary and permanent status in Canadian immigration records. These categories are operational; they guide processing, eligibility, and access. Yet they are also epistemic; they shape how analysts, researchers, and policymakers interpret migration flows, integrate newcomers, and assess policy outcomes. The thresholds, definitions, and coding conventions associated with these categories have shifted over time, reflecting evolving policy priorities, social pressures, and technical constraints. Reconstructing these categories longitudinally requires attention to their historical contingency and interpretive framing. It requires tracing not only what was recorded, but how it was recorded, and why it was recorded in particular ways. The historian must interrogate the temporal, institutional, and social processes that produced the data itself, and the consequences of those processes for what can be known and who can be represented.

This methodological reflexivity extends to the integration of legacy systems into contemporary analytical environments. FOSS, CAIPS, LIDS, and VIDS were designed to address discrete operational challenges; they did not anticipate integration into longitudinal analysis spanning decades. Harmonizing these records with GCMS, linking them to the IMDB and provincial datasets, and maintaining categorical integrity are acts of translation, mediation, and interpretation. Each harmonization decision carries epistemic consequences; categories may be redefined, temporal boundaries aligned, and linkages established in ways that preserve analytical fidelity while revealing the historical logic embedded in each system. The historian's role is to make these processes legible, to document the choices and contingencies involved, and to reflect on how the resulting data architecture shapes both historical interpretation and contemporary knowledge production.

The translational work I undertake is also inherently historical. Data does not exist in a vacuum; it is embedded in social, political, and institutional contexts. Categories, codes, and records encode assumptions about identity, status, and belonging. By tracing these assumptions, we can reconstruct not only patterns of migration, but the epistemic and moral frameworks that underlie them. Administrative distinctions such as refugee versus economic migrant, temporary versus permanent, for example, carry enduring effects on social integration, access to rights, and the life courses of migrants. Longitudinal reconstruction allows us to see these effects across decades and generations, revealing how knowledge infrastructures mediate both historical outcomes and contemporary understanding.

Knowledge production is inseparable from the infrastructures that enable it. In the case of immigration, the categories, fields, and codes embedded in administrative systems are themselves agents of historical formation; they shape what is recorded, what is legible, and what can be interrogated. They establish epistemic boundaries around human movement, differentiating between those whose lives are visible to the state and those who remain peripheral, undocumented, or hidden. To study these infrastructures historically is to recognize that knowledge is not merely extracted from reality; it is enacted, performed, and maintained through bureaucratic, technical, and policy frameworks. This insight compels a dual orientation: we must attend both to the lives documented within the records and to the processes, logics, and assumptions that produced those records in the first place. The two are inseparable; neither the data nor the lived experience can be understood in isolation from the historical infrastructures that mediate them.

Administrative records are themselves temporal objects; they emerge from operational time, which often diverges sharply from the temporalities required for historical analysis. Case processing, workflow cycles, and program deadlines produce rhythms that are not aligned with longitudinal reconstruction or historical comparison. My work seeks to bridge these temporalities by developing methods that translate operational time into analytical and historical time while preserving the provenance, logic, and integrity of the original records. This involves detailed documentation of how systems were designed, how codes were defined, and how processes evolved over time. It also entails creating linkages across disparate

datasets, jurisdictions, and decades, enabling historians and analysts to trace trajectories, reconstruct selection logics, and examine long-term outcomes. By treating administrative infrastructures as historical sources in their own right, I aim to render visible the processes through which knowledge is produced, structured, and constrained.

The historical significance of this work becomes clear when one considers the ways in which classification shapes social and political life. Categories such as temporary worker, refugee, or economic migrant do not merely reflect administrative convenience; they constitute frameworks for understanding social worth, civic belonging, and eligibility for rights. These distinctions operate over time, producing effects that extend far beyond the moment of record creation. A person classified as a member of a Designated Class in the 1980s experiences integration differently than an economic migrant in the same decade; their opportunities for settlement, access to services, and pathways to citizenship are shaped by policy, social perception, and the interpretive logic embedded in administrative systems. By reconstructing these categories longitudinally, historians can trace not only outcomes but the epistemic and moral frameworks that produced them. In this sense, administrative data is both archive and instrument: it preserves the historical record and simultaneously shapes the production of knowledge about social reality.

The Canadian context offers a particularly rich site for this inquiry. Immigration has been central to national identity and demographic transformation, and the Canadian state has maintained extensive administrative infrastructures for documenting and managing mobility. Legacy systems such as FOSS, CAIPS, LIDS, and VIDS reveal the historical layering of policy, technology, and bureaucratic practice; their integration into contemporary platforms such as GCMS illustrates the persistence and adaptation of epistemic structures over time. Linking these records to the IMDB, provincial vital statistics, and Statistics Canada holdings allows for the reconstruction of trajectories over decades, enabling scholars to examine long-term outcomes in settlement, health, education, and civic participation. It also allows us to interrogate the evolution of classificatory regimes, showing how policies, categories, and operational logics have shifted in response to political priorities, social anxieties, and technical constraints.

This approach is not merely technical; it is profoundly interpretive. Every choice in data harmonization, categorization, or linkage carries epistemic weight. To collapse temporal variation, reconcile divergent codes, or align fields across systems is to make an interpretive claim about continuity, equivalence, and historical meaning. The historian must therefore be reflexive about the assumptions and consequences embedded in these decisions. Translation is never neutral; it mediates between operational intent and analytical possibility, between past practices and present understanding. By foregrounding these processes, this work makes explicit the epistemic and moral stakes of historical reconstruction and demonstrates that data infrastructures are themselves sites of historical knowledge production.

At a conceptual level, this project challenges conventional understandings of knowledge and classification. The epistemology of state records is neither transparent nor self-evident; it is mediated, structured, and historically contingent. Administrative categories do not simply describe phenomena; they constitute them. To understand human mobility historically, we must therefore examine the processes through which it has been rendered knowable, the instruments through which it has been documented, and the assumptions through which it has been interpreted. This perspective situates my work within broader debates in the history of knowledge, the history of governance, and the emerging field of data studies, contributing to conversations about how epistemic infrastructures shape what can be known, acted upon, and remembered.

The intellectual trajectory that informs this research is itself interdisciplinary, bridging historical inquiry, archival practice, and the analytical rigour of data science. My engagement with legacy systems and contemporary databases has cultivated an understanding of both the technical and interpretive dimensions of knowledge production. It has taught me that precision in coding, integration, and harmonization must be paired with sensitivity to historical contingency, social meaning, and the ethical implications of classification. This dual perspective enables a historically grounded approach to longitudinal research, in which empirical analysis and conceptual reflection are inseparable. By combining these sensibilities, my work seeks to expand the methodological possibilities of immigration history and data-driven social research alike.

Historical examples illustrate the stakes of this approach. Consider the treatment of refugees in Canada during the late twentieth century: administrative categories codified notions of vulnerability, eligibility, and deservingness; they also reflected broader social and political anxieties, such as attitudes toward asylum seekers or debates over labour market needs. By tracing how these categories evolved across decades, one can reconstruct not only the patterns of settlement and integration but also the underlying epistemic frameworks that shaped public perception, policy design, and bureaucratic practice. Similarly, distinctions between temporary foreign workers and permanent residents reveal how labour needs, migration policy, and social hierarchies were encoded within administrative systems. These cases demonstrate that administrative infrastructures are not neutral repositories; they are active participants in the historical processes that structure human life, belonging, and opportunity.

The broader significance of this research extends beyond historical reconstruction. In an era dominated by the data turn, understanding the historical formation of epistemic infrastructures is essential for evaluating contemporary policy, governance, and social practice. By revealing how knowledge has been produced, mediated, and constrained, this work offers insight into the ethical and analytical responsibilities of researchers, policymakers, and institutions. It highlights the ways in which administrative categories can reproduce inequality, shape opportunity, and influence social perception. At the same time, it provides tools for rigorous longitudinal analysis, allowing scholars to reconstruct trajectories, interrogate selection logics, and examine long-term outcomes in ways that are both historically grounded and analytically robust.

Ultimately, my historical purpose is to make visible the infrastructures through which migration has been rendered knowable, to interrogate the epistemic and moral assumptions embedded within administrative systems, and to explore the consequences of these structures for both scholarship and social life. This work bridges empirical analysis, historical reflection, and methodological innovation, demonstrating that administrative data is not merely a technical tool but a site of historical knowledge production. By tracing the evolution of categories, codes, and systems, I aim to illuminate the interplay between policy, bureaucracy, and human experience; to reveal how knowledge infrastructures structure

both possibility and constraint; and to contribute to a more nuanced, reflexive, and ethically aware understanding of migration in Canada and beyond.

Through this research, I seek to advance historical methodology, deepen understanding of Canadian immigration, and expand the conceptual frameworks through which data and history intersect. It is a project that integrates technical expertise with historical imagination, methodological rigour with interpretive sensitivity, and archival practice with theoretical reflection. By engaging with the infrastructures of knowledge themselves, I aim to demonstrate that history is not only about events, people, and policies; it is also about the instruments, categories, and processes through which the past becomes knowable, legible, and meaningful. In pursuing this purpose, I hope to contribute to a scholarly tradition that is attentive to the ethical, epistemological, and social dimensions of research, while offering new tools for understanding the complex interplay between data, governance, and human experience.

Relevant published works:

[**The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences**](#) by Michel Foucault

Foucault's work examines the historical formation of epistemes, the underlying structures that make knowledge possible within a given era. For this project, it provides a conceptual foundation for understanding immigration data as historically contingent knowledge; administrative categories, coding schemes, and legacy systems are not neutral reflections of reality, but products of specific epistemic frameworks. Foucault's analysis supports my argument that data infrastructures themselves enact knowledge, determining who and what is legible within the bureaucratic archive.

[**How We Think: Digital Media and the Future of the Humanities**](#) by N. Katherine Hayles

Hayles foregrounds the materiality and mediation of knowledge in digital and computational contexts, emphasizing how coding, databases, and technical infrastructures shape human understanding. This perspective is directly relevant to the translational and harmonization work in my project: legacy immigration records do not naturally yield historical insight. They must be interpreted, linked, and rendered legible across

temporal and technical boundaries. Hayles' emphasis on the interaction between human interpretive work and infrastructural mediation informs the project's methodological approach and justifies a reflexive stance toward data as both archive and instrument of knowledge.

The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures and Their Consequences

edited by Rob Kitchin – this work situates data infrastructures within social, technical, and institutional contexts, highlighting that design choices, governance structures, and classification systems actively shape what can be known and what remains invisible. This aligns with my project's focus on immigration records as epistemic infrastructure: coding schemes, legacy systems, and administrative categories not only organize information but constitute the very possibilities of knowledge about migration. Kitchin's work provides conceptual tools for thinking about longitudinal linkages, interoperability, and the politics of classification, directly supporting my methodological and epistemological aims.

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