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Diverse worlds and the collective archive at the University of Melbourne

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Diverse Worlds and the Collective Archive at the University of Melbourne. A reflection based on a paper given at the Australian Society of Archivists National Conference, Melbourne, 26 September 2017

In August 2016, a piece of graffiti appeared on the wall of the University of Melbourne Archives repository saying 'Selected Archive Lies'. That it appeared on the day after I had talked to a large class of third-year history students seemed more than coincidental. After reading Michelle Caswell's observation that historical scholars rarely understand the intellectual work of archivists, I had talked to the students on the themes of their course, weaving in archival ideas and mentioning appraisal and selection.[1] Although I finished by explaining how to find material in our catalogue, it seems the idea of selection struck more of a chord and, I assume, resulted in the graffiti – much to the amusement of my colleagues.

Nevertheless, I understand where the shaky graffiti protester was coming from. In recent strands of historical and archival discourse influenced by postmodernism, archives stand for the place where the powerful subvert the cultural narrative to exclude the powerless: the place where what is selected – lies. In Alana Kumbier's book on queering the archive she says:

> It may seem like a stretch to conceptualise archives and archival practices as *abusive systems of power* – especially when we are used to thinking of them in neutral, benign and instrumental terms. But I assert that we can agree that archives are produced in particular social and historical contexts; that they are capable of reflecting dominant discourses, values and ideologies; and that they have been instrumental in widespread, … abuses of power …[2]

citing here the South African archives under apartheid.

The undeniable idea that archives are produced in particular social and historical contexts has been discussed for a decade and a half in archival literature. Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook wrote on archives, records and power in 2002 and agreed that while many postmodern reflections on 'the archive' have been made without reference to archival theory and practice,[3] they have nevertheless made it clear that archival institutions wield power over government and corporate accountability, Freedom of Information and the right to know. Archives as records wield power over historical scholarship, collective memory and national identity.

For Schwartz and Cook, archivists and manuscript curators need to use their power to widen their practice to genuinely include records of marginalised members of society in the archive, and not just those records of interest to historians. There are many versions in the literature of how this might be done. Kumbier, for example, argues for archiving from the ground up: community-initiated documentation strategies for people to gather their own 'legacy worth preserving'. This might or might not involve professional archivists or librarians as support personnel or consultants.[4]

This idea of archivists acknowledging their power and facilitating community memory and identity is a turn towards justice and inclusion, but also a necessity in our digital future. Laura Millar insists archivists must transform our practices and the culture we live in. We need to ensure that people understand that the digital objects they hold in their electronic devices are the basis of their current digital memory, but also potentially their future documentary legacy. People need to know how to manage and preserve digital records right now and they need to hear from us about why it is important and how to do it.[5]

These ideas are calling our profession to self-knowledge and forms of activism. And so, I want to reflect on the origins of the University of Melbourne Archives and, briefly, other collecting programs in the 1950s and 1960s within the framework of these insights.

Post-World War II saw a period of intense development of powerful archival and collecting institutions in Australia. In 1944, the first Commonwealth Archivist, Ian Maclean, was appointed to deal with Commonwealth Government records; custodial responsibility for this program was given to the War Memorial and the Commonwealth National Library, the latter under the direction of Harold White. The employment of professional archivists began to expand as this program grew. The Library's Archives Division was eventually separated from the National Library as recommended by the 1956 National Library Inquiry Committee, chaired by Professor George Paton.[6]

Simultaneously, there was a fierce competition starting between the universities and the state and national libraries over 'private' or non-government records as primary sources for historical research. In postwar Australia, professional historians challenged the pre-war narrative of Australia's identity. What was once a British outpost was now seen as an independent nation and historians wanted to examine what Australia had achieved.[7]

The discipline of history was booming; at the University of Melbourne, Max Crawford built the largest history department in Australia. The study of economic history entered a new phase with Noel Butlin examining Australia's economic history from the records of actual companies. Finding no records in the national or state libraries, he contacted companies directly and convinced them to send their older records to Canberra where he set up an archive at the Australian National University.[8] His colleagues interested in labour history soon followed suit and began collecting trade union records.

This development prompted a challenge by the National Library. Harold White re-evaluated the collecting policy of the Library to embrace the collection of manuscripts and archives as a record of all Australian life; and to increase the status of the National Library as a nationally significant institution.

Ambitious to collect business records, Harold White joined with Melbourne University economic historian, William Woodruff, to form a Business Archives Council (BAC) in Victoria. White paid for Frank Strahan, a former employee of the Archives Division and graduate of Melbourne University, to do a business records survey in Melbourne. Strahan found plenty of business records, many of which were at risk of destruction in sheds and

basements. When the BAC was offered these records, they were taken into temporary storage in the University's Baillieu Library.[9]

University of Melbourne historians immediately urged the Vice-Chancellor, Sir George Paton, to appoint a University archivist. Frank Strahan was employed as the foundation Archivist on 29 June 1960, tasked with working with the BAC and collecting business and University records.

Melbourne University historians and Sir George were all privately averse to more 'primary research sources' going to Canberra; Paton believed that the State Library was in no situation to collect 'private records' although they were developing a program to do so. Within a month, he had widened Frank Strahan's authority to collect all 'private' records, saying to the Chair of History, John La Nauze, that the University should collect all it could and pass records to the LaTrobe Library later if necessary. 'We want archives in an area where there are likely to be a number of students.' At the University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) Frank Strahan proved to be a collector to his core, passionate about heritage and worthy of Paton's trust.[10]

At UMA, Strahan and his colleagues collected widely for 35 years. Within the University this included student clubs and societies, the records of academics and the official records of the University. Their management of official records was augmented after the Public Records Act 1973 by a Records Officer working in the University's administration.[11] Strahan showed a similar eclecticism with business records, collecting records of business people, professional associations and the Liberal Party of Victoria. He travelled Victoria collecting the records of pastoralists and old established families. Despite producing a disposal and retention schedule for business records with the BAC, he selected everything when he could, including the typewriters in the offices and the portraits on the walls.

I would not blame a twenty-first-century audience for questioning me right now – where are the diverse worlds in all of this? This is still an Australian history which celebrates the identity of European Australians; of pastoralists, miners, manufacturers, workers and the like. Where are the Indigenous Australians, the women, the poor, the queer? Our 1950s identities and narratives might have been of Australia as an independent nation, but our university and library archives were about to collect records which participated in the dominant discourses, values and ideologies of European triumph in Australia.

The twenty-first century is a long way from the postwar era though, and histories of Australia have contested and multiplied away from these postwar narratives. In particular we have had the 'history wars', an intense conservative backlash against historians who have written on the genocide of Indigenous Australians following the European invasion of Australia.[12] Years of documentary and archaeological research by Lyndall Ryan and others have now gathered the evidence of European savaging of Indigenous Australians into a 'Massacre Map', which is irrefutable.[13]

While archival records remain important to some historians, they are no longer the dominant users of collecting archives such as UMA. Historians' interests have moved on and other communities have found relevance in the records collected for them. At UMA, the initial collection focus evolved as Australian society changed in subsequent decades, and so too have the collection focuses of other institutions collecting archives and manuscripts.

The 1960s was an era of protest, change and liberation. Frank, his team and his academic colleagues had the social networks within and beyond the University which were vital for the Archives in building its collections. Katrina Dean has discussed how Strahan and his

team collected the records of protest from this era. They collected the records of the Students Representative Council, which later played a role in student protest over conscription in conjunction with the Victorian anti-war movement. Later, the Campaign for International Cooperation and Disarmament and the Vietnam Moratorium Committee also deposited their records at UMA.[14]

UMA collected the papers of academics such as Kenneth Rivett and Hume Dow which evidenced their academic careers and their part in the campaign to change the White Australia policy. The papers of Julian Phillips, law academic and advocate for decriminalisation of homosexuality, were deposited in the archives alongside evidence of the University's Gay Liberation Front.[15]

When UMA began collecting evidence of working-class activism in Victorian trade union records in the 1970s, true to form, this expanded to include people and political organisations associated with the labour movement such as the Victorian branch of the Communist Party of Australia and its Women's Committee. Records of the second-wave women's movement were offered by graduates and associates of the University starting with the records of the Women's Electoral Lobby, which played such a decisive role in the Whitlam Labor Government coming to federal office in 1972.

I am reminded of a quote adapted from the movie *Field of Dreams*, 'If you build it, they will come.' Once established, UMA combined deliberate collecting of business, trade union and University records with records offered for donation by people who wanted their documentary legacy preserved and researched, or the lives of their loved ones remembered. UMA became a kind of 'collective' as well as a 'collecting archive', where more likely than not records would be accepted from donors if they were appraised as valuable and had a tangent to the core collection policy.

One of the two most important women's movement collections deposited with UMA came because a community group could no longer hold its own archive. The Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archives (VWLLFA)[16] started in 1983 as the type of ground-up archive to which Kumbier aspires: a community-initiated documentation strategy to preserve a legacy. It was managed and added to by a collective including Jean Taylor until 2000 when all avenues to establish a women's archive had failed and she could no longer store it in her home. UMA agreed to house this rich collection with T-shirts, posters, banners, photographs, publications and more documenting women's liberation and lesbian feminism. Volunteers from the VWLLFA have worked at the repository describing their collection for many years, often alongside volunteer peace activists and businessmen.

While UMA became a collecting hub and built relationships with external community groups, its collection policy had one large omission. It did not, for example, collect records of Indigenous protest movements or civil rights activism in this important period which included the 1967 referendum finally authorising inclusion of Indigenous Australians in the census. Its collecting focus remained on the dominating culture. Evidence of the lives of some Indigenous Australians exists in the collections at UMA although the records may not have been collected for this purpose. An audit undertaken as part of the University's Indigenous cultural heritage policy has documented traces of Indigenous lives in the records of pastoralists, travellers and academic anthropologists. Some records are photographs; some are texts in Aboriginal languages; and some are evidence of inhumanity towards Indigenous Australians. Our task now is to make these records more visible to Indigenous Australian

communities and make them available for their purposes, as Dr Sharon Huebner has with the Strathfieldsaye Estate photographs.[17]

A similar opportunity to assist a traumatised community has come through the actions of our colleagues in the eScholarship Research Centre and the Find and Connect project. This is an online resource for Forgotten Australians, Former Child Migrants and other care leavers. It documents the location of records across Australia which might inform care leavers in their search for justice, identity and meaning.[18] UMA has evidence of care leavers' lives in the records of academic social workers and social welfare agencies and is working towards making them more visible.

Sometimes the selected archive lies heavily on our shoulders as we try to manage it. But, eclectic as it is, it contains some important records of diverse worlds. And so, I have come to where the UMA is now, and the lessons learnt from these experiences, which might be helpful in our diverse worlds and our digital future.

UMA is deeply embedded in the University with both its collection scope and its digital future dependent upon the University's needs. We are currently collaborating in pilot projects and committees to build a digital preservation capacity at the University encompassing records and archives, research data and cultural collections. This is a University-wide project taking its first steps to develop the infrastructure of digital preservation and to change the culture of the University to understand it and engage in it.

The University needs to build digital preservation for records compliance, accountability and the continuity of its research program. Whether we can continue to engage with our established collective communities in digital form is dependent upon shrinking resources and on the University seeing the need. We have much listening and talking to do to update our direction for the digital future.

I would like to finish with three things that I have learnt from working at the UMA to take with me into the digital future.

First, UMA collected records of the social movements which were active then and there in the postwar era. Current archivists need to concentrate on identifying and reaching out to diverse communities here and now, even if it is just when assistance is sought, because digital records will not survive neglect.

Second, communities which document their legacy worth preserving will not always be able to sustain them in the longer term in digital form. Institutions with the capacity and funding for sustainable digital preservation must be available to back community records just as for their own corporate records. This will not be an easy social undertaking.

Finally, if they are serious, archivists need to look more inclusively at diverse worlds and communities than we have so far. In the last few weeks of 2017 the state and national libraries have been documenting the same-sex marriage debate, one of the most important social issues of our time. But who is helping document and preserve evidence of the plight of Australia's refugees, or our Islamic communities under siege from haters, or agricultural communities active against fracking, to name just a few? Who is documenting the opposition to refugees and Islamic communities – equally a part of the Australian conversation right now? Laura Millar has some important suggestions about how archivists might assist decentralised community archiving.[19] If we are happily convinced we are more inclusive now, we must stop, concentrate on our peripheral vision and ask who we are also missing.

Endnotes

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17. Andrew Trounson, 'Aboriginal Voices in the Afterlife of Photographs', *Pursuit*, 30 November 2016, available at <*https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/aboriginal-voices-in-the-afterlife-of-photographs*>, accessed 30 March 2018.
18. Available at <*https://www.findandconnect.gov.au/*>, accessed 30 March 2018.
19. Millar, pp. 61–73.