

CONFERENCE REVIEW

**Australian Society of Archivists, *Diverse Worlds*, Annual Conference, 25–28
September 2017, Melbourne, The University of Melbourne**

Associations organise themselves around common goals. Their membership contributes to those goals through fees, volunteer labour, setting and upholding standards of practice, educating and advocating, among other things. A healthy association has robust, respectful debate that ensures all of those activities remain relevant in contemporary society.

So it's interesting that the opening and closing keynote speakers of the 2017 ASA conference, *Diverse Worlds*, had both recently rejected their professional associations and withdrawn their membership. Yet, here they were, centre stage, bookending the discourse of an annual archival conference. The tension between their obvious personal passion for the potential of good archival practice and their frustration with the structures of professional practice and discourse was evident.

Verne Harris is Director of Archive and Dialogue at the Nelson Mandela Foundation in South Africa. His opening keynote reiterated and extended his well-known theses. He challenged archivists to understand the power structures of archival institutions and acknowledge that it's predominantly a power of whiteness. He told stories of memory dialogue he's been involved in where archives were at the centre of transformational change. He invoked Derrida and challenged archival institutions to invert the guest/host relationship, reminding us that such action is the work of social justice.

Jarret Drake, former digital archivist at Princeton and now PhD student in the Department of Anthropology at Harvard University and advisory archivist for A People's Archive of Police Violence in Cleveland, closed the conference with a keynote on one knee, in solidarity with the movement highlighting police brutality against black people in America. It was an impressive symbol and physical feat. His challenge was similar to Verne's, but more direct. He stated that prevalent archival practice is an instrument of white supremacy and must be eradicated. Diversity as a label and as a program, he argued, is a mechanism for white supremacy to control the archive of other. It was challenging stuff, thoughtfully crafted, and delivered with power and authenticity. The tension between his passion for archives and his frustration with professional structures was evident. I hope a lot of people invoke it when they contribute to their own personal, professional or institutional efforts to break down prevailing power structures.

Like most conferences, the Australian Society of Archivists' 2017 *Diverse World* conference had hits and misses. The misses were mostly where there was an obvious disconnect with the theme. There were only a couple of these that I saw.

The conferences I like the most are where the contemporary tensions of our profession are explored. Like the two keynotes, the tensions between personal and professional were evident in the Jean Whyte Memorial Lecture, 'Affect in the Archive: Trauma, Grief and Text, Some Personal Reflections', by Lynette Russell. Her reflections reminded me that the conceptual nature of my work means I often lose my relationship with the actual archives in my institution. I wrote in my notebook: *Spend more time with collections. Ask people what they're working on. Sit in the reading room and read.*

The session that made the biggest impact on me was 'Addressing Separation Loss and Trauma'. Michaela Hart and Nicola Laurent chaired the session well, creating a safe space for archivists to discuss their experiences of trauma and affect with their practice. I was reminded that being affected by archives can take many forms (from records both present and absent), and it's not

often discussed in our profession. This session affected me. I thank the many archivists, often working as sole archivists, who shared their experiences with providing services to former students in the contexts of the South Australian Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry and the Commonwealth Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The trust evident in the room means I cannot share the stories. I was not the only one with tears in my eyes.


The ASA conference was held in conjunction with the two-day Information Technologies Indigenous Communities (ITIC) symposium. It didn't feel like a joint conference as there wasn't much dialogue being exchanged between the two communities. It wasn't until afterwards that I realised maybe it wasn't supposed to be. I went to the final day that was exclusive to ITIC and really appreciated the presentation on digital repatriation, as it's a topic I've been thinking a lot about recently.

We all experience conferences differently. I did three things when I returned to my workplace that make me appreciate the role that archival associations play in my life. Firstly, I checked with my staff whether anyone had been negatively affected with their recent work and made sure we had mechanisms in place for regular checks. Secondly, I worked with my colleague to generate a discussion on the role of care in the archive, using the article by Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives',¹ as recommended in the previously mentioned trauma session. And finally, I renewed my membership of the Australian Society of Archivists.

So, unlike Verne Harris and Jarret Drake, I'm prepared to sign up to my professional association, even when it's not in my country. The work they do to bring us together, share our experiences, challenge our practice and direct paths forward is critical work. Many thanks to the organisers for influencing my practice through *Diverse Worlds*.

Endnote

1. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor, 'From Human Rights to Feminist Ethics: Radical Empathy in Archives', *Archivaria*, vol. 81, Spring 2016, available at <<https://archivaria.ca/index.php/archivaria/article/view/13557>>, accessed 4 April 2018.

Mark Crookston
National Library of New Zealand
 mark.crookston@dia.govt.nz

© 2018 Mark Crookston
<https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2018.1464244>

