



## Hear Greer: voices in the archive

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### ABSTRACT

In the 1990s Germaine Greer began recording her audio diaries. At the same time the author was attempting to find a suitable buyer for her archive. While the intention of the audio diaries was to record Greer's past doings, she was also revealing a more private domestic side of her everyday life. The Germaine Greer Archive sits at the intersection of history and invention and tells the many stories of Germaine Greer, herself stating, 'The archive will put matters right for posterity... supposing posterity should be interested'.

### KEYWORDS

Personal archives; Germaine Greer Archive; audio diaries; University of Melbourne Archives

### A new departure

In the mid 1990s Germaine Greer began consciously recording her audio diaries. In an early inventory of her archive, which is now in the collection of the University of Melbourne Archives, the author wrote, 'A new departure is an audio diary, at present 20 tapes.'<sup>1</sup> In a 1996 entry, recorded on a handheld tape recorder, Greer explained, 'Dear Diary. This is an attempt to keep track of my days by recording something about my past doings as I walk the dogs. In case you can hear panting in the background, it's a flying dog occasionally passing.'<sup>2</sup> Greer's regular early morning walks with her poodles Molly and Margot provide the routine setting for the audio diaries of this period, as Greer recorded her 'past doings' alongside spontaneous monologues of her thoughts, feelings and immediate surroundings. The audio diaries complement other materials in the archive, giving evidence of Greer's domestic, private character with nuances of personality and idiosyncrasies. The voice of Germaine Greer embodies and humanises these records, contributing to the narrative of the personal archive.

### Not about me

According to Greer, her archive began as an accumulation of items that were 'lugged from one lodging to another'<sup>3</sup>. By the time Greer visited Australia in 1971 the archive had acquired a more defined purpose to her, as a record of cultural identity and social change.<sup>4</sup> On International Women's Day, 8 March 2017, at a public event to celebrate the launch of the Germaine Greer Archive, Greer insisted that the archive is not about her, stating simply,

‘The archive is not about me. It was never about me.’ Greer went on to describe the early development of her archive as being more important than anything else that she was working on at the time, stating, ‘The point about the whole archive is that it is a portrait of a moment, of a time, not a portrait of me.’<sup>5</sup>

### How to sell this thing

While the Germaine Greer Archive was purchased by the University of Melbourne in 2013, Greer had begun preparing the collection for its sale much earlier. On an audio cassette labelled *Diary – 27 March 1997* Greer sizes up the archive against renovations of her Stump Cross library: ‘It is going to be a very nice place to sit and read. But how many places does a woman need to sit and read? I think we are going to have to concentrate on the sale of the archive, get it moving.’<sup>6</sup> The entry continues with Greer musing over her new incubator containing 75 goose eggs, and her plans to construct a scarecrow to save her artichokes from hungry pigeons. A little later Greer returns to the niggling frustrations of finances: ‘Money, money, money... Well, we will just have to sell the archive’, and a few minutes later, ‘I’ll have to think hard about how to sell this thing. I mean, I think it sells most on the author drawer.’<sup>7</sup>

### A future listener

Greer’s inclusion of the audio diaries in the early inventory suggests that they were recorded specifically for the archive, perhaps with the purpose of contextualising other records such as date books and wall calendars, or to claim a space for the more private moments of her everyday existence for posterity.

While early audio diaries may come across as ‘off the record’, any impression that the recordings were intended to be private is abolished in the later recordings as Greer addresses a new type of listener. No longer referring to her tape recorder as ‘Diary dearest’, ‘My little machine’ or ‘Notebook’, Greer begins an entry: ‘Just for whoever happens to get her paws on this tape, it is being recorded in the year 2008, on the 22nd of February.’<sup>8</sup> If the audio cassette was ever a loyal confidant it had since transformed into the ears of a future listener, and the archive had become a place for stories yet recorded.

### Voices in the archive

The 1997 inventory describes the audio diaries as ‘a new departure’; however, by that time Greer was well accustomed to the use of personal tape recorders.<sup>9</sup> While recorded under the umbrella of journalistic inquiry, Greer’s audio recordings of friends, acquaintances and strangers are now in many ways autobiographical source material.

In 1989 Greer interviewed long-time friend Gita Mehta for an article in British literary and society journal *The Tatler*.<sup>10</sup> The recorded conversation, now part of the Germaine Greer Audio Series, begins with Greer stating, ‘Let’s start sitting up or I’ll go to sleep’ and then, ‘What did we do with the rest of that champagne?... Let’s gobble it up.’ After a lengthy conversation about Mehta’s marriage, upbringing and family, Greer announces, ‘I must go to bed Gita-ji, I am getting extremely stupid.’ End tape.<sup>11</sup>

A single cassette tape can reveal many sides of Germaine Greer’s character. In an audio diary dated 29 June 1996 we hear Greer with a tremble in her voice announce, ‘I was

thinking, when I had this machine off, that I am happy. Undeservedly, thoroughly, bone deeply happy.' On side B of the same cassette and just four days later, under a grey sky Greer's mood has shifted: 'We are in the middle of a deep, deep depression, as typical of winter weather, which nobody can understand.'<sup>12</sup>

The cathartic intimacy of these audio recordings may seem to contradict Greer's insistence that the archive is not about her; however, at the opening event to launch the archive in March 2017 the author did acknowledge the autobiographical qualities present in the audio series: 'If you use the archive at any length, you will be puzzled by my absence from it. At least that's, in a way, what I hope for. And there are other things where I am all too present.'<sup>13</sup> The specific recording Greer was referring to was a recording of herself taken while reporting on the Ethiopian famine for *The Observer* newspaper in 1985. At the event Greer described the recording as follows: 'A meditation on the Ethiopian famine... which was actually recorded while I was lying on the mortuary slab... most people never made it to the mortuary. Because they died so fast they went straight into the ground.'<sup>14</sup> I had listened to every second of this recording while staring intensely at the floor beside my desk. I had hung on every word as Greer whispered into the recorder about what she had seen and experienced at the resettlement camp. In the recording Greer's voice is so quiet that the loudest sound is the clicking of the tape going through the machine, click, click, click, like a clock, an ominous reminder of our own mortality.'<sup>15</sup>

The Ethiopia recordings are some of the most affecting in the audio series but there are others too, such as Greer's retrospective reportage on the Bangladesh Liberation War. Greer went to Dhaka in 2005 to interview medical workers who had volunteered during the war's aftermath to help the thousands of women and girls who were raped and impregnated as an act of warfare.<sup>16</sup> In some regards, Greer is right, these records are not all about her, but her response to these situations and her tone in their reporting do show Greer in a different and perhaps more intimate way than we may find elsewhere.

### Set matters right for posterity

Greer's disdain for biography is well known and while she insists that she would never write an autobiography in an effort to defend her side of the story, she understands that the archive does just that.<sup>17</sup> When Greer came across a copy of Anne Coomb's book *The Life and the Death of the Sydney Push*, she took Molly and Margot and her trusty recorder for a walk and reported her frustrations: 'According to this book I took Roeloff off Rosanne Bonney... This doesn't make sense to me.' Later Greer discusses plans to annotate the book and keep it in her archive.<sup>18</sup> True to her word, the book is in the archive and it is annotated by Greer's hand. Greer noted what she cannot remember, disagrees with or denies: 'Untrue (I think)' and 'Surely not – no recollection, nothing in archive' are two annotations found in the book's margins.<sup>19</sup>

In a different audio-diary entry Greer discusses another book, this time Charlotte Chandler's *I Fellini*. Greer comments on her exclusion from the biography and, while she is pleased about her absence from it, she finds comfort in knowing that her side of the story is documented elsewhere, stating, 'The archive will put matters right for posterity... supposing posterity should be interested.'<sup>20</sup>

Greer has no plans to explain herself and insists that she will never write an autobiography but is tired of the falsification of her story by others.<sup>21</sup> Greer has found posterity in her

own archive, at her own discretion. Returning to the 1997 inventory, the document reads, 'Before I relinquish possession of this material, I will check off all items and annotate them, giving dates and context or cross reference, to assist eventual cataloguer.'

The Germaine Greer Archive sits at the intersection of history and invention. Greer not only kept and collected for the archive, but in the case of the audio diaries she created for it. In an undated audio diary, recorded while driving through the country roads of Victoria, Greer remarks:

I am going to stop at the very next petrol station and get new tapes so they can be properly identified, and I can do them in the right sequence because it's a bit unsatisfactory working on this old tape that is in here now. I don't even know if I am being recorded. Could be all these golden words, lost to posterity?<sup>22</sup>

Posterity shall be interested.

## Endnotes

1. [The Greer Archive – Black Notebook and typescript summary inventory], c.1997. Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0045.00603.
2. Diary – 24/6, Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, 2014.0040.00104.
3. 'Germaine Greer Meets the Archivists', public event, available at <<https://events.unimelb.edu.au/recordings/1590-germaine-greer-meets-the-archivists>>, accessed 30 September 2017.
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*
6. Diary – 27 March 1997, Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, The University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00099.
7. *ibid.*
8. Audio Diary: 22.2.08 – 7 March 08, Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00180.
9. [The Greer Archive – Black Notebook and typescript summary inventory], c.1997. Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0045.00603.
10. Profile of Gita Mehta, *The Tatler*, ii. 1989. Print Series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0046.00202.
11. GG Self Record – India, 1989. Audio Series, The Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00069.
12. Diary – 29 June 1996, Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, The University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00103.
13. 'Germaine Greer Meets the Archivists'.
14. *ibid.*
15. Ethiopia I, 1985. Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, The University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00082.
16. BRUNGLE Travel Diary: Bangladesh – Interview with Geoffrey Davis 2005, Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00024; GG in Dhaka Xmas 2005, Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00161.
17. Radio: Speaking of English 19.03.95. BBC World Service. Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00163.
18. Diary 17.viii.96, 1996, Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00110.
19. *Sex and Anarchy: The Life and Death of the Sydney Push*, 1996. Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0056.00089.
20. Diary – 29 June 1996, Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00103.

21. 'Germaine Greer Meets the Archivists.'
22. Audio Diary, undated. Audio Series, Germaine Greer Archive, University of Melbourne Archives, 2014.0040.00121.

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## **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## **Notes on contributor**

*Kate Hodgetts* is an assistant archivist at the University of Melbourne Archives. Working with the Germaine Greer Archive, she has spent many hours listening to and creating time-coded summaries for the audio series. Recently Kate completed the photographic series, housing and cataloguing the hundreds of images in that collection, and she has now moved on to Greer's correspondence with radio stations. Kate has a Masters of Cultural Material Conservation (UoM 2013) and a Bachelor of Fine Arts, Honours (VCA 2007).