

Archiving the feminist self: reflections on the personal papers of Merle Thornton

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Over the last couple of decades, the modern Australian women’s movement has been the subject of history, which includes the creation of feminist archives in various locations. This essay analyses one particular collection – the personal papers of the feminist activist, Merle Thornton – as an account of the making and meaning of a feminist archive. I wish to explore the ways in which the feminist subject impacts on the archive. Accordingly, I analyse the archival process, as well as the contents of Thornton’s personal papers. What emerge are the difficulties of negotiating the public–private divide for this feminist activist.

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From its beginnings, the modern women’s movement realised the critical importance of writing women into the historical record and, hence, the importance of placing women’s records and manuscripts into the archives.¹ The movement also recognised the need to reconceptualise history itself to better encompass women’s experiences, including their restriction and association with the domestic and private spheres.² It is only recently, however, that the Australian women’s movement has itself gained a past – that is, become the subject of historical reflection, narrativisation and consciousness.³ As part of this historicisation, an Australian second wave feminist archives is currently under construction. I define archives here in the broad sense of various government and community repositories containing collections of personal and organisational documents and records relating to modern feminism.⁴ Such an archives occurs at an ideal time, forming part of, and able to benefit from, what Antoinette Burton describes as ‘a more democratic vision of the archive ... as different kinds of archival subjects and archive users proliferate, with their own archive stories to tell’,⁵ as the practices and purposes of archives are open to critique and revision.⁶ Significantly, for the purposes of this article, for feminism and contemporary archives, an expanded and, hence, more representative historical record relies on the movement of marginalised subjects – more specifically, the movement of their documents – from the private realm to the public sphere.

What follows is one particular set of archives stories: an analysis of the process of archiving the personal papers of the Australian feminist activist Merle Thornton, as an account of the making and meaning of a feminist archive. I examine two aspects: first,

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the journey of this feminist archives from the private realm to the public institution; and second, the form and content of the papers. This focus allows me to reflect upon the way in which the feminist subject impacts on the archival process, and the shape and contours of the personal archive. In the case of Thornton, 'the evidence of me' – to use Sue McKemmish's characterisation of the value of personal papers – is also evidence of the tensions arising from the divide between public and private for the feminist activist, whether replayed during the process of archiving or in the textual traces of the activist's life.⁷

The project, 'Archiving Australian feminism: the personal papers of Merle Thornton', was a research collaboration between Maryanne Dever and myself, in association with the National Library of Australia (NLA) during 2010–11. Maryanne and I, both literary and women's studies academics, gained external funding to have Thornton's papers professionally archived and deposited with the NLA and to conduct an oral history interview with Thornton (also for the NLA).⁸ But why did we choose an archival project centred on Thornton? Joanna Sassoon argues that archival institutions are active, rather than neutral agents in the shaping of collective memory and history.⁹ However, our previous research into scholarly accounts of the Australian women's movement and holdings of records pertaining to Australian feminism noted certain limitations and, therefore, limitations in the potential collective memory and historical narratives of Australian feminism.¹⁰ In the major historical accounts, the Sydney and Melbourne women's movements were generally the focus; thus, the metropolitan centres came to represent a geographically dispersed movement, while ideological diversity was also reduced. In the impressive oral history collection of interviews with Australian feminists at the NLA, many of the subjects share a similar geographical location or are high profile women. The autobiographies and memoirs repeated this pattern. There was a sense, then, that other stories of Australian feminism needed to be told, geographical diversity mattered and that the primary sources held in public archives and libraries required augmentation to allow a more diverse range of voices and narratives to emerge. Only through this expansion of the feminist archives and related rethinking of feminist historicity would we move beyond the pessimism underlying so many fictional and non-fictional accounts of the Australian women's movement's past.¹¹

The personal papers of feminists outside the centres (both ideological and geographical) of Australian feminism seemed suitable for this task. Sue McKemmish argues that the value of personal papers is twofold: as 'a narrative of self', as well as 'preserving society's memory, experiential knowledge and cultural identity'.¹² For Penny Russell, personal archives are 'the site of self-representation and evidence of the cultural narratives amongst which a sense of self may be forged'.¹³ In their very form, then, personal papers encompass the private and public, the personal and cultural, bringing these apparently separate spheres into dialogue and even conflict, consequently making them an invaluable type of feminist document.

Thornton, as a very early and high profile modern feminist active in Brisbane, seemed an ideal feminist archival subject. In the historical accounts of Australian women's liberation – both scholarly and popular – certain events and campaigns have acquired major symbolic importance, functioning as political turning points for the women's movement. Thornton's first and most renowned action, the Regatta Hotel Protest of 31 March 1965, is one such event. Significantly, given the tensions marking the archival process and papers, this protest directly addressed the pernicious effects of the public–private split for women. The Regatta Hotel Protest, which featured Thornton

and Rosalie Bognor and occurred four years before the first women's liberation group met in Australia, was protesting against the Queensland law that stopped women from being served alcohol in public bars. Thornton and Bognor chained themselves to the public bar and asked to be served alcohol. Thornton explains the protest thus: 'What we did at the Regatta represented an idea whose time had come. It was the idea of ending the confinement of women to the private domestic world.'¹⁴ Marilyn Lake interprets the event as a turning point in the transition to a new mode of women's movement: 'feminism [was] becoming brazen and intemperate.'¹⁵

Thornton's actions therefore provide an important moment of proto-second wave feminism: ahead of its time in terms of direct action and media-friendliness and occurring far from the supposed centres of feminism or radical politics. As feminist researchers who live or have lived in Brisbane, we were curious about the event and the woman behind it and were keen to see Brisbane included in the record of Australian feminism. Given the conservatism of Brisbane in 1965, what led to the protest? How was it organised? How did the Brisbane public respond? Further, the usual accounts of the origins of the women's movement locate it within women's dissatisfaction with the male New Left and the sexism of the anti-Vietnam War movement. Was there another source of Australian second wave feminism suggested by the Regatta Hotel protest? Was there a factor that might add to our understanding of political and social change?

Her papers reveal, however, that Thornton is much more than this one event. Throughout her life, her activism focused on challenging and theorising the constraints of the public-private divide on women's lives. She went on to campaign for a number of women's issues, such as removing the marriage bar for women in public service and demanding equal pay for women, as well as pursuing intellectual and creative pursuits as an academic, novelist, playwright and screenwriter. Yet, as her papers suggest, at certain crucial points, Thornton's own life was circumscribed by this divide – a dynamic that was replayed in the archival process.

The tensions between the public and private have particular resonances for feminist politics and for the feminist activist. One of the core insights guiding feminism is recognition of the gendered nature of the divide between public and private realms.¹⁶ Further, the public-private divide marking Western social formations and resultant association of women with the less valued private sphere (in real and imaginative terms) play a crucial role in producing and maintaining the second-class status of women: 'The separation of the private domestic life of women from the public world of men has been constitutive of patriarchal-liberalism since its origins.'¹⁷ Consequently, modern feminism critiques the public-private dichotomy in at least three (not always non-contradictory) ways: it challenges women's traditional association with, and relegation to, the private; it calls for a revaluation of the importance of the private sphere – that the private and domestic are culturally valuable and significant; and it rejects the supposed separate nature of the two spheres. The separation of private and public is seen as artificial, a ploy that benefits men by limiting women's roles and removing the personal, domestic and intimate from political critique. From this analysis arises the feminist position and slogan of 'the personal is political'. And, as this slogan suggests, feminism is not only critique or theory, it is activism. In their overtly political acts and everyday lives, feminists attempt to reject the private-public split.

This account is instructive on a number of levels. While there has been much work on problematising the objective and neutral status of archives, accounts of the actual production of archives, from the first phase of 'archivalisation' – 'the conscious or unconscious choice to consider something worth archiving' – up to deposit at a

collecting institution, are rare.¹⁸ This broader focus, however, can offer invaluable insights regarding cultural and social values and ideologies, as well as the individual archiving subject's interaction with these.¹⁹ Similarly, analyses of the emotional dimension of the archival process, an acknowledged element of archiving personal papers, are infrequent.²⁰ What occurs when the marginal (and, in this case, political) subject's documents embark on the transition from the private to the public realm?²¹

Furthermore, although there are reasonable collections of the personal papers of modern Australian feminists held in various repositories, their recent nature means that there has been little work that examines the personal papers of Australian second wave feminists. Thornton's geographical location, vanguard status, rich and varied life in modern feminism and large collection of papers make her an ideal figure with which to enrich the historical record of Australian feminism and social history. Her personal papers provide an invaluable perspective on the placement of a feminist subject into the archives and an example of the modern Australian feminist self.

The archival is personal, as well as political

As with much research, serendipity played its part in the origins of this project. Before the project had even been conceptualised, I had a telephone conversation with Thornton, who now resides in Melbourne, regarding a related project that I was working on – the compilation of an Australian women's movement museum collection. I had telephoned her to see if she would donate the chain and padlock used in the Regatta Hotel protest to this collection of feminist artifacts. Thornton had not kept these objects, but, in her typically generous manner, she did try to find other items that might be suitable. Her suggested list of objects, her colourful anecdotes from a life involved in the cause of feminism and her penchant for recordkeeping made it clear that here was an invaluable source of material for the feminist archive; material that was, as yet, uncollected and largely unrecorded. Indeed, she estimated that she possessed eight filing cabinets of personal papers, including scripts, manuscripts, press clippings, videotapes, organisational records, photographs, letters and speeches. Thornton is, however, elderly and cares for her ill husband, Neil. The less-than-orderly state of her papers was causing her some anxiety, and it was beyond her ability and resources to sort. Yet, she was deeply aware of the value of her papers as a record of a lifetime of political activism.

Having used archives for various projects and with research interests in women's autobiography and memoir, we appreciated the value of these types of primary sources. As a consequence, we decided that Thornton's papers needed preservation by the NLA; her life story should be recorded and form part of the NLA oral history collection, and we would seek external funding for the project. We preferred the NLA to the John Oxley Library or the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland, because we wanted Thornton and, hence, Brisbane to be a presence in the national archive, not 'sidelined' to a regional collection, thereby continuing the geographical imbalance in the record of Australian feminism. And we wished to make this a feminist archival project, as well as a feminist archive. We wanted to collect the papers in a way that enacted our feminist principles as far as possible: to be self-reflexive regarding our position as academic researchers, non-hierarchical and consultative in terms of personnel and to treat Thornton as the subject, rather than the object, of the archive – that is, for her to have a sense of control and input in the archival process.

In our initial discussions, Thornton was enthusiastic about the project, but had some justifiable concerns. Being in the process of writing her memoirs, she was

understandably anxious that our project not detract from, or interfere with, the production of the memoir. Her memoir was her priority, and she needed access to her records. At the same time, she also realised that professional archiving of her papers would benefit the research and writing of her memoir. The timing of the archival process would need to be carefully managed, so that Thornton's, the NLA's, our funding bodies and the researchers' needs could be met. There was also some discussion with Thornton regarding the NLA as an eventual destination for the papers. Many Brisbane radicals have deposited material with the John Oxley and the Fryer libraries, and Thornton was also interested in these institutions as options. She did, however, accept the importance of having her papers in the nation's premier library, alongside important figures of Australian feminism, such as Anne Summers and Elizabeth Reid, and she appreciated the NLA's accessibility for researchers.

Once agreement on the institution was reached, we contacted the NLA with our proposal, detailing the scope and historical value of Thornton's papers. Regardless of whether our grant applications were successful, the NLA expressed interest in accepting Thornton's papers and for us to conduct an oral history interview with her. Obtaining external funding would, however, allow more detailed archiving to occur. Rather than a basic pack, listing of the contents using Thornton's file names and uplift to Canberra, the minimum six days of labour that we had budgeted for would make the contents immediately useable for researchers. Our project would include: removal of files from hanging folders, packing files, listing contents at box and file level, creating a series structure and box listing and creating an accession record.

The NLA conducted an initial site visit to ascertain the amount, nature and worth of Thornton's papers. They agreed with our view that the papers and interview would be suitable additions to the collection, augmenting its existing strengths in feminist and women's history. During this visit, however, some of the complications surrounding the journey of feminist records from the private realm to a public domain emerged. Thornton stated that she could not release the archives until her memoir was completed. Understandably, her record of her life, rather than the generalised archival one, was the top priority. Robert McGill notes that it is only a recent phenomenon to possess the archives of living authors, yet '[a]t the same time, archives effect a manner of death for authors, insofar as they consolidate the formation of textual figures who become substitute objects of investigation, apparently static and confined to the page'.²² Or as Jacques Derrida colourfully summarises: 'the structure of the archive is spectral'.²³ One passes over a life to an archival collection, leading to a deeply ambivalent state: there is the satisfaction of closure and sense of loss. As well as this existential concern, in Thornton's case, there is an additional, specifically feminist issue: who controls the narrative of self enabled by the archive? A crucial element of feminist politics is recognition of the constitutive role played by narrative and representation – including self-representation – in ideologies of womanhood and femininity. Although there are obvious individual and collective benefits from placing one's records in a public institution – putting it on the historical record, as it were – it also entails a loss of control over the use and interpretation of those records. Or, as Pamela Banting observes, '[i]n the archive the text spills over in excess of the author. The text is beyond control'.²⁴ To write one's memoirs before the 'raw material' of the archives enters a large and anonymous public institution is a strategic gesture for a feminist and claims authorship over one's life. Witness, for example, the considerable numbers of British, American and Australian second wave feminists who have published memoirs from the 1990s onwards.²⁵ For a feminist who has spent much of her adult life working for the rights

of women to control their lives, this desire for control over the public record, to give a personal account of the public persona 'Merle Thornton', is entirely understandable. As the memoirs of feminists illustrate, memoir allows the author to negotiate the public-private divide on her own terms – how much personal information will be provided to the public and what motivated the public actions and persona of the feminist in question.

The NLA, being experienced in dealing with the acquisition of personal papers, came up with a solution: the papers could be archived *in situ*, and, once completed, the papers would remain at Thornton's residence and could be deposited at a later date, to be decided on by her. This apparent setback to the project made us reflect upon our position in the process. It made clear to us that the researcher, as well as the subject of the archives, has specific emotional investment in the process. Indeed, McGill argues that the role of desire in the archival process constitutes a love triangle among the scholar(s), donor and text, with the object of desire being the text or archive. As McGill explains: 'one might view the conflict over archives as resulting from the question of which party – author or scholar – will have control over shaping the author function's portrait'.²⁶ To some extent, as the researchers and supervisors of the project, we were also attempting to be the authors of Thornton's narrative – a position that we had to acknowledge, before being able to further negotiate how the project could proceed.

Further, while we were all feminists, our type of feminist subjectivity was somewhat different to Thornton's. We were marked by the pragmatism and objectivity of the academic researcher, desiring linearity and clearly defined and contained (and measurable) outcomes. We were determined by the budget, project timeline, desire for results, grant acquittal report and the ways in which the papers might fit within a broader, impersonal set of frames and narratives relating to the Australian women's movement. For us, then, the emotional dimensions of the archives were a different shape. In a way, we were replicating the public-private split, overvaluing the public at the expense of the private by trying to make the personal papers fit a larger, utilitarian framework. We therefore had to accept the subjective element of the process for both author and researcher and the primacy of the archival subject's personal needs over our specific institutional requirements. Moreover, we had to recognise the ambivalences generated by the shift of the papers from the personal to the public and hence that the divide between public and private is not easily overcome by a feminist activist.

The practical constraints of the project meant that the choice of archivist was critical. Although the archiving would occur in Thornton's residence, Thornton's age and the demands of caring for her ill husband limited the time that could be allocated to the project. In consultation with Thornton, we envisaged allocating one or two days per week over a three-month period would allow the project to progress, while minimising the disruption to the Thorntons' lives. Neither researcher resided in Melbourne, so we would have to supervise the project from interstate, with a couple of site visits at the start and towards the conclusion of the project. We experienced a second moment of serendipity when we called an archivist who worked in the area of women's records to ask where we could find a consultant archivist. Our contact was about to retire from full-time archival work and was happy to work on the project herself. She was the ideal candidate: mature, willing to work part-time, located in Melbourne and with a strong background in feminist archives. Thornton and our archivist met for lunch, and they decided that they could work together. Without this personal dimension – or, what we term, the element of emotional labour – the move from the private to the public would not be possible. The requirements of the archival process were negotiated during a

teleconference with the NLA, researchers and our archivist; archival boxes and labels were ordered; and a work schedule was mutually agreed upon. Ironically, it would be in the private and domestic space of Thornton's home that the sources for the public self and, hence, feminist history would be created; the home functioning as a nurturing and productive, rather than restrictive, space for this feminist. This location bears out Burton's observation that the home, for women, functions as a foundation for history, both metaphorically and literally: a site where memory resides, historical consciousness and critique are forged and archives are created.²⁷

The importance of emotional labour to the project is symbolised by the telephone conversations that we had with Thornton throughout the project. The calls highlight the slightly spectral nature of running a project from afar, made ironic by the fact that so much of the project was about the subjective and required large amounts of emotional labour. The idea of constructing an archives or archiving papers appears technical, contained and a highly textual exercise, helping to explain the archives' appeal to the researcher: a life is turned into unique words and documents;²⁸ the 'flotsam of the individual life' is ordered, listed and boxed.²⁹ In reality, the process is not so unilinear and clear-cut: if a life is to be metamorphosed into archives, both parties must do much emotional work. Working with an author meant that it was not the best argument or the neat stages of the project timeline that made the project progress; rather, it was the rapport and trust that was built over time and the sense of a shared political position, even though the phone conversation might feature misunderstandings, prevarications, digressions and doubts on both sides. Unavoidably, bonds of empathy between researchers, archivist and author formed,³⁰ with our understanding of archives, second wave feminism and feminist subjectivity unsettled and complicated. The mobilisation of the personal was necessary by all parties to ensure the public record of 'Merle Thornton' eventuated.

The archiving process made evident, however, the differing perspectives of Thornton, the researchers and the collecting institution, specifically in terms of what is considered valuable to the public record and, thus, the types of collective memory and histories of feminism that can potentially be constructed from the resources deposited. Indeed, Terry Cook argues that: 'The major act of historical interpretation occurs not when historians open boxes but when archivists fill the boxes, by implication destroying the 98 percent of records that do not make it into those or any other archival boxes.'³¹ The appraisal of Thornton's records was nowhere near Cook's percentage, although the point remains salient. The initial site visit drew an estimation of 11 filing-cabinet drawers of material, equating to approximately 40–50 archives boxes; at the project's end, there were a total of 25 archives boxes to be transported to the NLA. Material deemed out of scope by the NLA included Neil Thornton's files, household files, a large trunk of family photographs, family history documents, audiovisual materials – including videotapes made by Thornton as part of her work for the Equal Opportunity Unit at the University of Melbourne – and letters between Thornton and her mother (spanning a number of decades). Thornton, however, considered much of this material important and thought that it should be included in the archives. It was explained to Thornton that the photographs, for instance, required captions by her and would entail another separate and major project and copies of the videotapes should be held in alternative repositories. Fortunately, at the suggestion of the consultant archivist, the letters were included, as these formed a cohesive historical record of two women's lives across a number of decades.

While selection of materials is unavoidable because of practical limitations and is not necessarily attributable to a nefarious agenda, this archival process highlights the

chimera that personal papers (and archives in general) offer a stable collection of factual documents gathered together in a systematic and holistic manner – ‘hard archival evidence’, as Mary Lindemann terms it – thereby providing access to the most authentic account of the subject.³² Rather, ‘the voices of the past preserved in the archives will be mediated by the decisions of a series of archivists, experts, and academics’; indeed, more so than the archival subject herself and regardless of our feminist intentions for the project.³³ As later detailed in this article, given that Thornton’s papers do not feature personal diaries (only appointment diaries) and there is a strong emphasis on documents associated with the public sphere of work and education, wouldn’t these features make the preservation of the personal traces even more important? How potentially different could our reading of Thornton be if, for instance, a significant number of photographs were included? Many of these were of friends and family, and their inclusion would add another dimension to the archived Thornton, ‘fleshing out’ and personalising her life. Moreover, the appraisal process does bear out the value of Cook’s and Sassoon’s suggestion that what is excluded in the archives should be listed and the reasons behind their exclusion given.³⁴ This practice would act as a caution to users of personal papers: that the archives can also say what it cannot include.³⁵ This stage also reiterated the importance of Thornton’s memoir as a supplement to the public archival record: the personal account will be equally important as the seemingly objective, factual archival record to gain a sense of the feminist self and her times.

By late 2011, the project was completed on time, on budget and to a high standard. Twenty-five boxes – all labelled and neatly ordered – are now lined up in Thornton’s front room, awaiting transportation to Canberra. This state, however, is not so much a limbo, but rather it encapsulates the ambivalences and tensions of the public–private divide for the feminist activist. Further, the archives’ current location in Thornton’s home highlights, at least in symbolic and literal terms, the critical role that the private and the personal plays for the production of a public feminist self and, therefore, history.

Feminist traces

Do the tensions between public and private that emerged in the archiving of Thornton’s papers recur in the contents of the papers? And do we find a specifically feminist method of documenting one’s life, as can be the case in feminist life writing, where, for instance, the rigid borders between fact and fiction, private life and public history, are transgressed? Does the personal archives’ quality of being ‘direct evidence neither of the world nor of the self, but a product of continual engagement between the two’ seem clearly apparent in Thornton’s collection? And if present, does this quality, which aligns with the feminist challenge to the public–private split, work to reduce those tensions?³⁶

First, and as recommended by Eric Ketelaar, I consider the form of the papers – their arrangement and emphases – for ‘[t]he form and structure of the reports and their classification reveal contextual information, giving meaning to the documents’.³⁷ As noted earlier, Thornton was a systematic and meticulous recordkeeper; she accurately titled her files and created her own subject-based series, which thus formed the basis for the fonds:

the arrangement of the papers here reflects the original series and file titles created by her except for three series, called Feminism, Literary files, and Subject files, which were created by the archivist to bring together disparate files of material relating to those subject areas.³⁸

So the papers are arranged within Thornton's system, rather than an imposed one, making its organisational structure a sign of its creator: 20 series filling 25 archives boxes. To analyse the contours of her papers, I group the various series into the following major and self-evident categories: personal, creative, education, work and political activism. To begin with, we have the personal kept as a discrete realm. Contents within this category include correspondence with family (particularly with Thornton's mother) and from friends and acquaintances; some genealogy material; travel memorabilia; and childhood memorabilia, largely centred on school (although this also fits within the educational category). Significantly, and as noted above, the category of the personal is a relatively minor presence in the papers; there are no diaries, for instance. Rather, we find an emphasis on a life lived in the public realm of work and the political, as well as a strong presence of the academic and creative (including scripts, screenplays, stories and manuscripts). Thornton's papers are, therefore, a record of activities, projects and work. This aligns with feminist activism as being in the moment, outward-oriented and looking to a transformed future,³⁹ although perhaps we could interpret the personal as located, to an extent, in the creative realm.

Apart from the prominence of certain (and public-oriented) categories, two other features are noteworthy. With the exception of the personal, categories overlap and intersect. To look at the contents within the categories, it becomes apparent that the creative is a form of Thornton's work – as in her work for the Melbourne Writers Theatre – and that the creative is also political – whether located within the themes and content of her scripts and novel or found within her advocacy for cultural workers. Moreover, work and education strongly intersect, such as in Thornton's academic work. In all categories (again, except the personal), the political intersects, signifying that this is, indeed, an activist's life. While she participated in a diverse range of activities and projects, ranging from her feminist activism of the mid-1960s onwards, her inauguration of the Women's Studies department at the University of Queensland in 1973 through to her work for Women in Film and Television (WIFT) in the 1980s and 1990s, there is a common thread linking them: a commitment to the rights of women and social justice.

Second, the papers are marked by the prominence of organisational records: minutes, meeting agenda, flyers, reports and official correspondence are prevalent across the categories. These documents represent a major mode of Thornton's activism: although famous for the direct action of the Regatta Hotel protest; in reality, most of her work followed more conventional means of political activism, including forming an organisation based on a particular issue and administering it along conventional lines of meetings, constitutions, lobbying and so on. Even though she was a member of the Brisbane women's liberation movement in the early 1970s, there is little evidence in the papers of the more radical forms of political organisation associated with the second wave women's movement: most notably, the collective and women's only organisations. Thornton was, for example, determined to see that her first organisation, Equal Opportunity for Women (EOW), which was formed immediately after the Regatta Protest, included men as members.

Thus, Thornton's papers manage to be both conventional and feminist. They are conventional in terms of the form, organisation and style of documents that are included and in the separation of the personal from the public domains. At the same time, they are feminist in the content, specifically in the way in which all of her public activities have a political impetus and the fact that these activities often overlap. The personal is only a faint presence, perhaps attributable to what Thornton wished to see kept for the public record – the personal may be political, but it may also be kept private. Thus, it

suggests a strategic approach to the public self and the way in which Thornton conceptualised the public record: she is a feminist using inherited, and possibly restrictive, categories.

From these types of feminist traces, we start to gain the outlines of the type of feminist self that can be read from the collection and the ways in which these papers contribute to our understanding of the Australian women's movement. The porous boundaries between the categories suggest that Thornton moved easily between the creative, intellectual and organisational – a testimony to her capabilities and energy and part of a broader feminist way of operating, of being in the world. Her politics and her life can be characterised as a life lived in the world and, without doubt, a committed life. Her two driving forces appear to be academic–intellectual work and creative work, but surrounding these two forces are the traits of the organiser and administrator (a rare combination). In contrast, her role as wife and mother are minor presences in her papers – a significant feature, considering the decades covered.

The large number of *curricula vitae*, documents pertaining to enrolment and employment in the university sector and notes relating to her work with the Equal Opportunity Unit at the University of Melbourne suggest a woman who valued work and the identity of the worker, specifically the identity of the academic–intellectual. These documents, however, also suggest the difficulties faced by Thornton in completing postgraduate qualifications and gaining secure employment in the university sector. Instead, Thornton remained employed in short-term contract lecturing and tutoring positions for many years – not an unusual situation for women in Australian universities during the 1970s. This situation can be explained through Thornton's incomplete postgraduate qualifications. Reading between the lines of the letters exchanged between Thornton and various universities and academics, a female student with serious aspirations seemed to have her postgraduate studies interrupted at crucial moments by the demands of having to move for her husband's academic career and raising her children. So the outlines of the wife and mother roles do emerge, as well as their impact on her participation in the public sphere, but only indirectly.

Like her first gesture of feminist activism, the feminist self that emerges from these papers is, therefore, someone who is both ahead and symptomatic of her time: a transitional feminist activist – a bridge between modes of being feminist. This transitional status is also a source of the tensions between public and private that mark her papers. In her use of the media and tactics of direct action at the Regatta Hotel protest and in her campaign against the Public Service Marriage Bar, she foreshadowed the shape and some major concerns of the modern Australian women's movement. Her work to establish one of the first women's studies courses in Australia shows a similar prescience. Yet her use of conventional forms of political work, as denoted by the minutes, meeting papers, agendas and so on, marks her both as pre-women's liberation movement and as part of one strand of the Australian women's movement typified by feminist organisations, such as the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL).

Her typicality as a second wave feminist is shown in the trajectory of her activities by a move from a central focus on feminist activism to activism in the cultural spheres and for Indigenous rights – a trajectory that was followed by many feminist activists, once the grassroots women's movement waned during the 1980s. This suggests the ongoing influence of the women's movement far beyond feminist circles.

Being both ahead and part of her times meant that, unfortunately, Thornton did not reap the benefits of her activism, and her life, even with its feminist politics, becomes marked by the difficulties of negotiating the public–private divide to participate fully in

the public realm. This is tellingly symbolised by Thornton hiding her married status from her employer, the Australian Broadcasting Commission, during the 1950s, in order to keep her job. Further, these difficulties are made painfully clear in the reactions to the Regatta Hotel Protest. Her papers document the letters to the editor, newspaper articles and the hate-mail letters – some signed, some anonymous – that she received from members of the public. In these, she is accused of being a communist or has aspersions cast on her morality, temperance and mothering capabilities: ‘Don’t you look cheap and mannish instead of being home looking after your children ... Why don’t you pull your big ugly head in’;⁴⁰ ‘Why don’t you do something to uplift the status of womanhood which has slipped so badly in latter years, than to downgrade it even further.’⁴¹ These letters attempt to relocate Thornton back into the private realm and her proper role as wife and mother, signifying the cultural climate in which Thornton’s activism took place. Unfortunately, the papers’ relatively small amounts of personal material make it difficult to ascertain the private cost of this struggle.

Conclusion: the divided archives

The archival processing and contents of Thornton’s papers reveal the contradictions that mark this feminist subject, symptomatic of the difficulties involved in her negotiation of the public–private split in post–World War II Australia, difficulties which were exacerbated by a feminist subjectivity. This *feminist* archival subject has a particular political analysis: as a writer, intellectual and activist, she deeply understands the power of representation, textuality and historical evidence in constructing ‘woman’ as ideological construct and social fact. She understands, on both a subjective and intellectual level, the operations of the public–private split on women’s lives. And she is cautious regarding the role and power of the state, here symbolised by the NLA. The state can enable progressive social reform, but it is a disciplinary mechanism of gender as well. The making of a feminist’s archives will, therefore, contain an added and complicating political dimension. Producing archives is not perceived as a neutral exercise in adding to the historical record; accordingly, there will be a critical and questioning approach throughout the process.

Significantly, the role of the public and private varies between the archival process and contents of her papers. In the archival process, we can observe a deep ambivalence regarding the transfer of private papers to the public realm: there is a justified desire for recognition, but also control over the historical record. This is expressed through the importance of private and personal elements to mitigate the potentially negative elements of the archival institution as public and anonymous space. Thus, Thornton’s memoir – that is, the individual’s personal and, hence, controllable story; the home as the feminist’s space of nurturing and control; and emotional labour – all play critical roles in the making of the archives.

In the contents of the papers, however, the relative importance of the public and private are reversed, with prioritisation of the public self over the private. This emphasis arises from two sources: the appraisal process and the author’s decisions throughout her years of recordkeeping, as to what is perceived to be worth preserving and documenting. Thus, in addition to suggesting the parameters of current archival practice, the papers also signify what a feminist subject desires to be, desires to be thought of by posterity and the categories that she must use in order to be recognised by the public record. She must negotiate existing categories of self and recordkeeping to attempt to bring into being a comparatively new subjectivity: the modern feminist

activist. As a consequence, the papers reveal the contradictions surrounding this specific feminist subject. The times and places of Thornton's life produced a typical and atypical feminist subject – one that was both slightly early and, hence, almost too late for the women's movement. Being a proto-second wave feminist, Thornton appears to have maintained the divide between public and private and concentrated her energies on increasing women's participation in the public domain; indeed, justifiably so. However, it seems that her own participation in this realm was seriously hampered by the responsibilities of the private. Yet, Thornton's later work is typically second wave feminist in its emphasis on cultural activism – via novels, stories, film and television – as well as recognition that all fields, including the private, have a political dimension, as her novel, *After Moonlight*, with its emphasis on sexual politics, attests.⁴² Her papers thereby demonstrate the development of second wave feminist practice and ideology.

The Merle Thornton Papers offer not only diverse insights that can be gained from the papers – such as those relating to early feminist organisations, the feminist self and the cultural climate of early second wave feminist activism – but also suggest the limitations of these not-so-personal papers. No archives can ever completely represent the self, as they are 'a fragmentary piece of knowledge, or an unfixd and changing piece of knowledge'.⁴³ However, as Andrew Flinn argues in relation to the strongly digital activism and archives of anti-globalisation protesters, it does seem that when archiving marginalised or atypical subjects, who make their lives in diverse sites and practices, a broader range of documents and items are necessary.⁴⁴ In a similar manner to the different process of archiving, methods and types of documentation of the self need to be rethought by both the author and institution. New categories of documents should be included as records, and the artifact could join the written record. In addition, the materials that are not included in the archives and the rationale behind their exclusion should be noted for the user of the archives. There is another 'Merle Thornton' somewhere, but not, as yet, circulating on the public record.

Although the feminist archival subject can represent particular challenges to archiving, it was a feminist politics that allowed the project to be completed successfully. A shared analysis of the tensions of the public–private, an understanding of the role of the personal to archival labour and a common objective of a collective good meant that the archive, divided as it is, could be materialised.

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Endnotes

1. Sue Morgan, 'Introduction: Writing Feminist History: Theoretical Debates and Critical Practices', in Sue Morgan (ed.), *The Feminist History Reader*, Routledge, London, 2006, p. 5.
2. Joan W Scott, 'Feminism's History', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 16, no. 2, Summer 2004, p. 10.
3. See, for example, the ABC television series, *Simone de Beauvoir's Babies*; the feature film, *The Last Days of Chez Nous*; memoirs by both Anne Summers and Wendy McCarthy; and historical accounts, such as *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* and *The Meagre Harvest*.
4. One of the best examples of the impulse to archive Australian feminism is the Australian Women's Archives Project, which set up the Australian Women's Register – an online searchable database of women's organisational and personal records held across Australia. It is joined by smaller projects, such as the Brisbane Women's House Archives (deposited with

- the University of Queensland's Fryer Library) and the Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archive (held by the University of Melbourne Archives).
5. Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories', in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2005, p. 5.
 6. On this democratisation of the archives, see also Andrew Flinn, 'Other Ways of Thinking, Other Ways of Being. Documenting the Margins and the Transitory: What to Preserve, How to Collect', in Louise Craven (ed.), *What are Archives?: Cultural and Theoretical Perspectives – A Reader*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2008, pp. 109–28. For critiques and revisionings of archives, see, for instance, Andrew Flinn, 'Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 28, no. 2, October 2007, pp. 151–76; Sue McKemmish, Anne Gilliland-Swetland and Eric Ketelaar, "'Communities of Memory": Pluralising Archival Research and Education Agendas', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 33, no. 1, May 2005, pp. 146–75; Eric Ketelaar, 'The Panoptical Archive', in Francis X Blouin Jr and William G Rosenberg (eds), *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2006, pp. 144–50.
 7. Sue McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me ...', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 24, no. 1, November 1996, pp. 28–45.
 8. The project was funded by the Sidney Myer Fund and the Queensland Government. Our archivist was Ms Jane Ellen.
 9. Joanna Sassoon, 'Phantoms of Remembrance: Libraries and Archives as "The Collective Memory"', *Public History Review*, vol. 10, 2003, p. 41.
 10. Alison Bartlett, Maryanne Dever and Margaret Henderson, 'Notes Towards an Archive of Australian Feminist Activism', *Outskirts*, vol. 16, May 2007, n.p., available at <<http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-16/bartlett>>, accessed 8 May 2013.
 11. For a full account, see Margaret Henderson, *Marking Feminist Times: Remembering the Longest Revolution in Australia*, Peter Lang, Bern, 2006.
 12. Anthony Giddens, cited in Sue McKemmish, 'Evidence', pp. 31, 39.
 13. Penny Russell, 'Life's Illusions: The "Art" of Critical Biography', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 21, no. 4, Winter 2009, p. 153.
 14. Merle Thornton, 'Our Chains: Rear View Reflections', *Queensland Review*, vol. 14, no. 1, 2007, p. 51.
 15. Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards, 1999, p. 214.
 16. Carole Pateman, 'Feminist Critiques of the Public/Private Dichotomy', in SI Benn and GF Gauss (eds), *Public and Private in Social Life*, Croom Helm, London, 1983, p. 281.
 17. *ibid.*, pp. 295–6.
 18. For example, see Eric Ketelaar, 'Tacit Narratives: The Meaning of Archives', *Archival Science*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 2001, pp. 131–41; Elisabeth Kaplan, 'We are What We Collect, We Collect What We Are: Archives and the Construction of Identity', *The American Archivist*, vol. 63, no. 1, Spring-Summer 2000, pp. 126–51; Mark A Greene, 'The Power of Meaning: The Archival Mission in the Postmodern Age', *The American Archivist*, vol. 65, no. 1, Spring-Summer 2002, pp. 42–55.
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 20. Catherine Hobbs, 'Personal Archives: The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections on the Value of Records of Individuals', *Archivaria*, vol. 52, Fall 2001, p. 127; Maryanne Dever, Sally Newman and Ann Vickery, *The Intimate Archive: Journeys through Private Papers*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2009, p. 16. Some accounts of the emotional dimension include Mary Lindemann, 'Confessions of an Archive Junkie', in Peter Karsten and John Modell (eds), *Theory, Method, and Practice in Social and Cultural History*, New York University Press, New York, 1992, pp. 152–80; Robert McGill, 'Biographical Desire and the Archives of Living Authors', *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, vol. 24, no. 1, Summer 2009, pp. 129–45.
 21. Ketelaar, 'Tacit', p. 133.
 22. McGill, 'Biographical Desire', p. 129.

23. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 1996, p. 84.
24. Pamela Banting, 'The Archive as a Literary Genre: Some Theoretical Speculations', *Archivaria*, vol. 23, Winter 1986–87, p. 120.
25. For example, Andrea Dworkin, *Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant*, Basic Books, New York, 2002; Sheila Rowbotham, *Promise of a Dream: Remembering the Sixties*, Verso, New York, 2001; Susan Ryan, *Catching the Waves: Life In and Out of Politics*, HarperCollins, Pymble, 1999.
26. McGill, 'Biographical Desire', p. 134.
27. Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, p. 4.
28. Helen Freshwater, 'The Allure of the Archive', *Poetics Today*, vol. 24, no. 4, Winter 2003, pp. 732–3.
29. Hobbs, 'Personal Archives', p. 131.
30. *ibid.*, p. 132.
31. Terry Cook, 'Remembering the Future: Appraisal of Records and the Role of Archives in Constructing Social Memory', in Francis X Blouin Jr and William G Rosenberg (eds), *Archives, Documentation, and Institutions of Social Memory: Essays from the Sawyer Seminar*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2006, p. 171.
32. Lindemann, 'Confessions of an Archive Junkie', p. 169.
33. Freshwater, 'The Allure of the Archive', p. 734.
34. Cook, 'Remembering the Future', p. 178; Sassoon, 'Phantoms of Remembrance', p. 45.
35. In her study of progressive era socialist-feminists, Sherry J Katz notes a similar absence of personal documents in their personal papers. She comments that: '[i]n particular, I have been hindered in adequately developing the dynamic connections between their personal lives and their political activism (between the private and public). How did personal experiences influence their political choices and vice versa?' See Sherry J Katz, "'Researching Around Our Subjects': Excavating Radical Women', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 20, no. 1, Spring 2008, pp. 179–80.
36. Russell, 'Life's Illusions', p. 153.
37. Ketelaar, 'Archivalisation', p. 56.
38. Guide to the Merle Thornton Papers, 2012, p. 2.
39. This orientation of Thornton's papers parallels and thus helps to explain the particular shape, indeed weakness, of feminist cultural memory. Luisa Passerini argues that feminism has 'at best, ... an episodic memory, subordinate to action and unable to survive the ephemeral organisations of the movement'. See Luisa Passerini, 'A Memory for Women's History: Problems of Method and Interpretation', *Social Science History*, vol. 16, no. 4, Winter 1992, pp. 671–2.
40. Letter, 'Disgusted', 24 April 1965.
41. Letter, Owen Smith, n.d.
42. Merle Thornton, *After Moonlight*, Interactive Press, Carindale, 2004.
43. Marlene Kadar, 'Afterword', in Helen M Buss and Marlene Kadar (eds), *Working in Women's Archives: Researching Women's Private Literature and Archival Documents*, Wilfred Laurier University Press, Ontario, 2001, p. 115.
44. Flinn, 'Other Ways', p. 125.