Archives and Manuscripts
Vol. 40, No. 2, July 2012, 98–105

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

REFLECTIONS

Indigenous memory, forgetting and the archives

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This article is about the contemporary issues facing Indigenous people in Australia, the emergence of a new politics of identity and who can count today as Indigenous. The important role of the archives for Indigenous people is positioned in this reflective piece, not just as a resource for rediscovering peoples' past, but also as the beginning point for leaving behind the negative historical tags of the 'disadvantaged' and moving towards a more grounded future on Indigenous terms.

Keywords: Aboriginality; Indigenous archives; memory; identity; community

I met Loris Williams on a few occasions at the time of the evaluation of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network (ATSILIRN) protocols in 2004. She was one of those we could not afford to lose and whose accumulated knowledge was an important resource to take important issues forward into the future. As an archivist, Loris was concerned with access to records first, with sensitivities a close second, but ideology and politics a long last. I have been told that what set Loris apart was an ability to listen, to reflect and to take in the larger context, before moving to find a way forward. A memorial lecture is a very appropriate way of continuing to recognise her contribution and of keeping her in our memories and her name alive in your archives.[1]

Today, I will be talking about the relation between collective and individual memory and about Indigenous knowledge and the archives. Archives, whether official, public or private, keep records that assist current and future generations to retrieve, reconstruct and make sense of the past. They reflect the human interest in remembering and our propensity to forget. I thought it might be time to talk again about the value of archives for Indigenous people. And I thought I might talk not just about memory but also about forgetting. And, just to stir things up, I particularly wanted to talk about Indigenous memory and Indigenous forgetting and about the way we are all involved in reconstructions of the past. But I am going to take the long way round to talk about archives. First, I would like to tell a story of something related.

One of my Aboriginal doctoral students has been writing a thesis on the politics of Aboriginal identity.[2] I read the final draft of it in October 2011, shortly before she submitted. It is a very interesting thesis, in which my student, Bronwyn Carlson, has taken a historical and discursive view of the construction and production of Aboriginal identity. She has considered these constructions and productions in interconnected webs of colonial, government, administrative, public and scholarly discourses about *who is* and

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ISSN 0157-6895 print/ISSN 2164-6058 online

http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2012.687129
http://www.tandfonline.com

what counts as being Aboriginal today. As part of her research, she has interviewed a range of Aboriginal people in one regional city. Her focus is on those Aboriginal people who have had an ambiguous status historically – those people of mixed heritage who are either not recognisably Aboriginal or who have been disconnected from family, kin or community over generations. These are people who, today, must prove they are Aboriginal – to both the Aboriginal community and to non-Indigenous organisations and agencies.

Bronwyn has presented evidence of the ways her participants construct and maintain positive Aboriginal identities today. These are positive stories: stories of coming home, of inclusion and of belonging. But in a considered and gentle way, Bronwyn has also presented quite powerful evidence of Aboriginal people regulating each other and surveilling themselves, in order to meet and police the definitional criteria of Aboriginal identity. These aspects of the participants' stories are not positive stories. They tell a story of how some people in the Indigenous community display a kind of ignorance and prejudice that inflicts harm and injustice on each other.

But what has really struck me is how most participants in this study accepted, without question, the current definition and the current meanings of Aboriginality and the current need to police it for official purposes. There are three parts to this definition:

- Indigenous descent,
- self-identification, and
- acceptance as Indigenous, in the community in which you live.

There was an analysis, by a few of Bronwyn's participants, of how the legal definition was a government requirement for the distribution of resources. There was some criticism of the community processes for officially confirming Aboriginality, but there was very little questioning of these criteria as measures of Aboriginality. Nor was there much questioning of the local community interpretation that an individual must be involved, participate and contribute to the community, in order to be known, recognised and ultimately accepted as being an Aboriginal person.

In her study, not one participant noted that Aboriginal people were doing to each other what the government once did – defining and dividing related people to maintain boundaries of inclusion and exclusion. Only one made a statement about the divisive effects of community processes for determining who was Aboriginal and who was not, by noting that 'we are doing it to ourselves'. But participants repeatedly talked about the hard work that was required to be recognised as Aboriginal in the community in which they lived.

By reading participant data against what Bronwyn set out as the history of the construction of Aboriginal identity, the quite literal evidence of the contemporary confinement of Aboriginal people at their own hands was a sobering read. In their compliance with the definition and its policing, some of these participants were reporting what looked like the oppressive conditions of a police state. Some talked of the relief of going home to be themselves, after watching all day that they did not do anything wrong in the public spaces of the Indigenous community. People used words such as nervousness, anxiety, intimidation and inadequacy. Some felt guilty for living in a nice street or house, or enjoying café culture, or sending their children to private schools. Only one participant said she was not going to apologise to anyone for being successful. Here, I am saying un-sayable things. These are the things that cannot be

easily said in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. No one likes these things said in earshot of the non-Indigenous public domain; because to say them is to reinforce questions by the non-Indigenous community about many people's claims to be Indigenous. Because to say them is to undermine Indigenous solidarity by drawing attention to the fault lines that exist in contemporary Indigenous communities.

Bronwyn has written an interesting, thoughtful and courageous thesis, and she has given me permission to speak of her findings today. Even with all my experience of identity politics, I was confronted by the ready compliance of many of these participants with a regime that looked remarkably like the one that Indigenous people struggled to be free of. It got me thinking about how easily all human beings forget or fail to properly understand the personal lessons contained in our own history. And I realised how easily we, as Indigenous people, can come to know about the history of colonial administration and intentions, about the rationale of policy, of the absolute absurdities of attempts to define human beings according to degrees of blood admixture, without thinking how we might be implicated in similar practices of identity politics today.

Instead, in our justifiable anger about the past, we focus our analyses on the injustices of the Europeans. We draw our identities in a clean and simple counter-distinction to our perceptions and knowledge of what it means to be European. In the process, however, we distance ourselves from one very important part of our present inheritance, namely, the discursive antecedents that structure the limits of what it means to be Indigenous in our current world. Also, we forget the importance of examining and reflecting on what constitutes and shapes our own thinking, our own present rationales for defining and judging who we are and our own practices. And, most importantly of all, in the process, we forget to focus on the full range of possibilities we can shape, in the spaces of relative freedom that we now have, for the coming generations of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people.

However, I was not surprised by one thing that came through in Bronwyn's study. This was the extremely narrow prescription of Aboriginality, based on cultural and political modes of being. These modes and ways of being Aboriginal were shaping what these, mostly young, people did in their everyday life, in order to be recognised and accepted in the communities in which they lived – in order to have a sense of belonging.

Contemporary understandings of 'who and what Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are' have been constructed via understandings about what unites us all as Indigenous Australians – our shared cultural traditions, as well as our shared experience of colonisation. But anyone who understands something of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and something of colonial history also knows that much of these are only shared in a large and general sense. Much is not shared in the particular experiences of different Indigenous individuals and different local Indigenous groups in different parts of Australia, who were dispossessed and unsettled at different times during the possession, the settling and nation-building of this country.

And it is here, in the schisms between the generally shared experience and the particularities of the unshared experience, where there is a continuing struggle over what it means to be an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander today, and who can legitimately identify and be recognised as one. And here, as we struggle among ourselves, we now do to ourselves what was done to us in the past. We judge individuals, according to particular constructed meanings of what it is to be an Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander today.

Many of Bronwyn's participants were constructing their lives, as well as their psyches, out of a sort of generalised picture of Aboriginal culture and history, cobbled together through university and TAFE courses and through access to the knowledge and opinions of members of the local community. And these, for them, were the truths and the limits of their own Aboriginality. I find this quite sad, as someone who grew up immersed in a very vibrant and lived customary knowledge tradition in mid twentieth-century Torres Strait. I was able to grow up without ever feeling or learning that this customary knowledge and practice were the limits of who I could be or how I could think of myself. I have always felt free to move forward, to carry the past in me and with me, but I have never felt that I had to subscribe to someone else's story of our past, nor to someone else's view of who I should be. In fact, I only found out what it meant to be an *Islander* when I went to university and was told by an academic that I was not a very good Islander, because I did not think like one. That was news to me. But after three decades of city living, even *I* sometimes feel that I need to display some of my traditional Torres Strait cultural knowledge to indicate to people that I am still a *bona fide* Torres Strait Islander and not a coconut. It's absurd. But because I think beyond the accepted identity discourses, I sometimes feel the pressure to legitimise myself, according to the officially approved discourses.

These identity pressures are not just the burden of the fair-skinned and disconnected. They are part of an identity story that has us all preoccupied with judging each other's legitimacy to call ourselves Indigenous Australians. And in our attempts to *strengthen* our own meanings of being Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, we inadvertently *narrow* the stories of what we were, what we are now and what we can be in the future. What is overlooked, in the struggle over identity, is the loss of, or the glossing over of, all those histories and heritages that make us who we are today. In the interests of political solidarity, we have narrowed the full creative range of possible expressions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identities to fit the very narrowly prescribed, government-instated modes of political representation and economic resource distribution.

In the interests of squabbling over the limits of government reparation for our dispossession, we squabble with each other over who we were, who we are now and, ultimately, who we can be. Today, it seems that the unity of something we have come to call the Indigenous 'community' is demanding singular political, cultural and historical narratives. And yet, there is a danger in holding people to a single story.

The singular narrative also continues to divide and fracture us from each other and, indeed, it often divides and fractures the psychic unity of individuals, as the colonial narrative once did. Many Indigenous individuals come under the collective pressure to construct stories of trauma, loss and disadvantage. Many are pressured to ditch one half of who they are, in order to call themselves Indigenous. This is the either/or choice, designed to overcome the ambiguities of the *part-Aboriginal* categories of the past. But the current, strict choices bring new ambiguities, new marginalities and new boundary policing.

Bronwyn drew various conclusions from her study. But it seemed to me that the participants in this study reflect a larger national problem. Increasing numbers of Indigenous Australians who come from, or grow up in or out of, other communities are being caught in the tensions between the meanings derived from their own histories, the generalised meanings of Aboriginality within current Indigenous studies courses and the meanings transmitted by community members with a particular and local experience of being Indigenous, which they privilege as the meaning of being Indigenous.

My first question is: why is it that the individual stories of the descendants of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people do not stand in their own right as stories of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander experience? The stories of all those people descended from the original inhabitants are the stories of dispossession, of colonial and subsequent policies, of forced or pragmatic choices of people under pressure and of the individual agency of Aboriginal people going back through generations. All these stories count, and all aspects of these stories make people who they are today. They should not be judged along a continuum of being *more* or *less* Indigenous, but as instances of the many different consequences of dispossession and colonisation.

My second question is: why do we still accept that something called 'the Indigenous community' can know, recognise or confirm who is Indigenous and who is not? We are not all interrelated; our memories are not infallible and cannot account for all people. Our histories are not just of connections but of disconnections. Indigenous people have been moved, or have been on the move, for more than 200 years. Who is in a position to adjudicate and verify the truth of all these experiences?

My third question is: why do we tolerate the need for proof of Aboriginality? Given that there can be no full reparation, why not proceed on good faith? Why is it not the case that *disproving* the claim to an Indigenous identity is the standard requirement, given the state of records and the impossibility for many people to document genealogies? Why is it not the case that a different regime for distributing resources is made possible, rather than requiring a group of people to define, surveil and police who they are? We are not a club, trying to restrict access to our activities and services to those who look or think like us. We are not a political party, trying to pre-select for representation purposes. We are not a religious cult, trying to force ways of living and believing on people as the condition of membership. Or are we? Are we, in fact, being asked to shape restricted identities on these grounds? We must ask ourselves what we are doing in our community spaces, and why we are doing it.

So, you may say, what does this story have to do with archives? The Indigenous story does not have an ending, as Bronwyn's thesis has reminded me. The past is not yet done with, but looms large over future generations. Her study has reminded me of the way that we humans fabricate our stories from what is available, from what can be retrieved and from what holds sway in the current discourse. That we humans elaborate and stretch our narratives to meet the expectations of those we seek approval from, or to impress those around us or to make us feel better. We take and remember the pieces we find that resonate with our own small sphere of knowledge and awareness of ourselves in the universe. We filter out, discard and forget the bits we do not like, the parts we do not understand or cannot make sense of. We forget that we do not, and cannot, know all there is to know.

The full content and history of who we were does not lie in your archives. Nor does it lie fully in the memories and knowledge passed down by generations of Indigenous people in their local regions and communities. And nor do the future possibilities for Indigenous people rely on our access to these archives and our access to these community reference points. Our futures do not even rely on knowing any 'truth' of what we were or can now become. We all have material out of which to construct valid identities and lives. It is how we recognise contemporary lives and identities as the continuation of Indigenous histories that is at stake.

It is 20 years since the handing down of the *Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* report. In five years' time, it will be 20 years since the handing down of the *Bringing them Home* report. Recommendations in these reports have brought funding to Indigenous

services and brought forth incredible goodwill in the libraries and archives sector. I move across a lot of different Indigenous sectors, and I have to note the goodwill and genuine interest in yours. I know that a lot of intensive indexing has been done. I know that there is never enough money. But we need to keep a rolling agenda to ensure that archives are not just storehouses, but access points for quite valuable Indigenous materials – materials that can make a real difference in individual lives. Materials that, in time, can be the basis of deeper, more varied, more complex analyses of what it means to be Aboriginal or a Torres Strait Islander. Materials that are the building blocks of a much more complicated and complex collective Indigenous memory that can legitimise much more complex Indigenous identities and histories.

So the archives continue to be important in two main ways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people: first, as a source for building individual histories; and, second, as a source from which to generate a more complicated analysis to broaden collective memories. Archives continue to be extremely important in personal ways for individuals. Every day, people are discovering they have Indigenous heritage and many are interested to pursue it. While Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descendants keep trying to make sense of their pasts, access to archives is critical.

If Bronwyn's thesis demonstrates one thing, it is that the Indigenous community requires as many stories to be known as possible, in order to appreciate the diversity of Indigenous experience. Currently, there is a privileging of certain histories that are more well-known and better documented. Reserve and mission histories, documented stolen histories, remote groups studied by anthropologists, stories from longer-settled areas, in which a range of historical accounts have been left behind – these are histories more easily recovered.

Indigenous individuals and families are seeking to know their histories, even if only through the gaps in the historical records. They seek to know their histories, even if it only means knowing where the family line ceases or begins, or means finding a more authoritative account of the extent of the disconnectedness of many Indigenous descendants. Sometimes, knowing their history may only mean coming to a better understanding of the reasons for disconnection. Legitimising their stories as stories of Aboriginal experience can give those currently caught outside the accepted and acceptable discourses of Aboriginality permission to be all that they have become over time and still acknowledge their Indigenous heritage. This still does depend on building better trails through the material in archives.

I will never forget the Indigenous academic Lynette Russell talking of her experience of trawling through the archives in search of information about her grandmother. She had been a patient in a mental institution. The information she found in the records made great sense against the family story, which involved the removal of children. Her grandmother took to talking with people who were not present, but the family believed she was holding on to herself through a communion with spirits and those lost to her. Lynette had a great urge to annotate the records to give an augmented account of her grandmother. I actually think this is a very useful idea, even if it is sacrilege to an archivist's ears. I think it is useful, because it is helpful to those who come next to the records. It provides a counter-reading, or an extended reading, of the record. It places a trace on an impersonal record for future generations. And who is anyone to judge the counter-reading. The doctor's records were, no doubt, a particular view of this Aboriginal woman, limited according to his good knowledge. Lynette Russell's annotations would have been no more and no less than this, but would have enriched the record for those viewing it in the future.

So I am a supporter of Lynette Russell's view, and I am sure that figuring out how to monitor and implement this is not beyond the archivist's implementation skills. But not all those researching their family history are academics, so I think it is also critical that the outreach services and the in-house services advocated by Indigenous archivists are taken seriously and supported by the profession in all archival institutions, including libraries and museums, and those collections in private hands or privately restricted by the terms of donation.

But the personal needs of individuals and families are only one reason why the archives are critical. One of the things that stood out to me as an academic, when reading Bronwyn's thesis, was how implicated the current approaches and content of Indigenous studies courses are in the way that many people construct their sense of what it means to be Aboriginal. As one participant said, it was scary, if that was what they were relying on. And I agree.

There has been, for the past couple of decades, a strong decolonising approach to teaching Indigenous studies, which builds an Indigenous anti-position to all things European, Western and white. This anti-position is both political and cultural. I do not think this analysis is wrong. I do think it is useful, in critical terms, to understand the past. But this approach is not sufficient to grasp the complexity of our position today. And nor is it sufficient to work our way through the current mess we find ourselves in. Likewise, it is insufficient for developing analytical arguments on which to innovate and develop better and more creative and responsive practices in the future. Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people are learning, in TAFE and in universities, the language and content for simple analysis. Yes, they might be learning how complex the issues are, but not the language and argument to enable them to work through these complexities.

The colonising world that we deconstruct and seek emancipation from no longer exists in the historical forms which we describe and rail against. There is no strict Indigenous and non-Indigenous separation, but overlays, intersections, multiplicities and contested meanings. The world will never be undone and righted in our favour. We have to understand the world we live in, make sense of what it means for us and learn how to operate in it to produce better futures for our children. That means developing a much more complicated analysis of our position and of who we are and who we can become. For example, we cannot rail against Indigenous disadvantage and then, with the other hand, seek to exclude our own people on the grounds that if they are not disadvantaged, they have now forgotten what it means to be Indigenous. To understand what it means in the twenty-first century to be advantaged or disadvantaged, we have to enter the world of knowledge that constructs those concepts and understand its terms – those terms. Then we have to reflect on the way we use these meanings to describe and analyse our own position. One of the ways of doing this is to appreciate how huge chunks of the knowledge and language we use to assist us to describe and analyse our position have been constructed in the Western corpus and how that positions us when we take it up as the truth or the anti-truth of what we were or are. The archives, thus, have an important part to play as the source of more complicated Indigenous analysis and research to support the evolution of Indigenous studies. For this reason, the ongoing identification and awareness-raising of Indigenous materials remains a most pressing task.

There is room for concerted ongoing projects for assembling overviews and detailed descriptions of the relations between Indigenous materials in different places. There is also room for ongoing outreach to communities, but also for in-house involvement or

collaborative projects with Indigenous academics and students and non-Indigenous ones. We do not have enough skilled Indigenous people to pursue such agendas but this does not mean the agenda is not useful or needed. If this sounds like an imposition on the profession, then, I think, we are sunk.

Sometimes, as I listen to the cases that Indigenous people make, I can see how easily it can be read that we act as if our concerns are the most important and central thing to this nation, when, of course, we all know that we are 3% of the population. But I urge the profession to support the Indigenous agenda, and I urge the Indigenous archivists to develop a coherent agenda for the profession to support. These agendas need to be built not just from the standpoint of grassroots community interests, but in conversation with Indigenous academia, the research community and their needs. More than anything, Indigenous archivists need support with advocacy to other funding agencies to secure their agenda. Given what we know of the Indigenous story and the legacy of colonial history for Indigenous communities, families and individuals, future layers of archival work should not require inquiries, reports and recommendations, but should be able to emerge from the concerns of Indigenous archivists and their knowledge of ongoing Indigenous needs.

Our own stories of ourselves are never just our own memories. They are never just our individual stories. Our own stories are never just Indigenous stories. Our own stories are always the stories of ourselves in our relation with others. None of us can ever know the full story of ourselves, but we can always extend those stories we already have to include those we have not yet discovered. We can always open our minds to what we do not yet know or have not yet thought about.

Bronwyn's thesis signalled to me that many Indigenous Australians are not yet secure enough to be all they could be, nor to allow others to be what they want to be and still remain Indigenous. To feel secure, policing of the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion has become more important to some, than opening them up to include those with ambiguous histories. And yet, once, many of these same people were themselves of ambiguous status. Yes, there is more for us to learn from history. Indigenous identity is too central to inner well-being for us to be content to shape young people through the discourses of victimhood, disadvantage and the cultural meanings of doubtful origins. These may be the stories of our colonial history, but it is important they do not remain the story of our futures. And I know Loris Williams would have said that the archives are crucially important in this agenda.

Endnotes

1. This article is based on an address delivered at the Australian Society of Archivists symposium, held at Luna Park in Sydney on 20 October 2011. It was an honour to be invited to give this memorial lecture in memory of Loris Williams, and I would like to thank the Australian Society of Archivists' Indigenous Issues Special Interest Group for inviting me to deliver this address.
2. Bronwyn Carlson, 'Politics of Identity: Who Counts Today?' PhD thesis, The University of New South Wales, October 2011.