

REFLECTION ARTICLE

The Influence of Feminist Archival Theory on State Archival Exhibitions

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Abstract

It has been widely noted in academic scholarship that over the last few years there has been a significant shift within the heritage and cultural sector towards more inclusive and community focused practices. In particular, the transition towards community accountability and institutional participation in social justice has meant that state archives are currently more open to adopting feminist archival approaches than ever before. Through the examination of two case studies within an Australian context, this reflection will explore the ways in which feminist thought has begun to influence the curation of archival data in exhibitions by state-run archives.

Keywords: *Feminist archival theory; Community archives; state archives; archival activism.*

Introduction

It has been widely noted in academic scholarship that over the last few years there has been a significant shift within the heritage and cultural sector towards more inclusive and community focused practices. In particular, the transition towards community accountability and institutional participation in social justice has meant that state archives are currently more open to adopting feminist archival practices than before. The relationship between community and state archives has always been inherently influential, as community archives themselves are a response to the limitations and failures of state archives. State archives are now in turn starting to respond to the observed successes and innovations of community archives. Through the following case studies, it will be argued that feminist archival theory has begun to influence the curation of exhibitions by state-run archives and bring to light feminist content with these institutions.

Developments in feminist archival approaches

One of the earliest developments in community archiving was the establishment of women-run feminist archives. Although women comprise half the population, their voices have largely been excluded from archival records. As such, women's groups have sought to counter

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the historically male-dominated nature of archival institutions. As Rodney Carter has argued, 'Women, one of the groups who have been traditionally and consistently marginalised, have in recent history reacted against the patriarchy and the patriarchal nature of the logocentric archive, the "patriarchive"'.¹ As with many community archives, the very act of establishing an archive focused on women is itself an act of resistance against state archives which have sought to exclude them. However, the formation of women's archives in particular has been intrinsically linked to political movements. For example, both the Canadian Women's Movement Archives and the Australian Women's Archives Program were established in order to preserve documents of feminist women's movements which were in danger of being lost and forgotten.² In the case of the Canadian Women's Movement Archives, it was 'felt that the collection's credibility rested on the fact that it came out of the women's movement and was nurtured by feminists and operated in a manner consistent with those principles'.³ This feminist archival approach seeks to recognise women's history which has been ignored but its intention extends further than that. Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor conceptualised an 'archival approach based on the feminist ethics' as being 'guided by social justice concerns, that is, by attempts to use archival thinking and practice to enact a more just vision of society'.⁴ By highlighting and preserving the history of women's political movements in the past, these archives legitimise women's continued political struggle in the present.

Importantly, however, in reference to feminist archives, Kate Eichhorn has argued that, 'What makes the archive a potential site of resistance is arguably not simply its mandate or its location but rather how it is deployed in the present' and so archival collections must 'be *activated* in the present and for the future'.⁵ Therefore, the focus of this reflection is on the ways in which archives have 'activated' their feminist archival data through curating exhibitions. These exhibitions are inherently socially charged as they bring archival data out of the archives and into public discourse. In this section, a comparison will be made between two exhibitions which highlight feminist histories within Australian community and state archives.

'Putting skirts on the sacred benches' by the Australian Women's archives program

The first case study is the 'Putting Skirts on the Sacred Benches' exhibition by the Australian Women's Archives Program in 2006. According to their website, the Australian Women's Archives Program was 'created to build knowledge and recognition of the social, cultural, historical and economic contribution made by Australian women to public and private life'.⁶ It was originally established in 1999 by the National Foundation for Australian Women in collaboration with the University of Melbourne as a response to concerns at the time about the fate of the personal papers and organisational documents of first wave feminists which were needing to be preserved.⁷ Melbourne feminist Mary Owen, who had such archival material in her possession, 'galvanised the board to seek a sustainable solution to the mounting problem of what to do with Australian women's archival heritage'.⁸ The foundation's solution was firstly, 'to establish a fund to support the preservation of papers', secondly, 'to convene a reference group of experts representing a broad range of interests to advise on papers that should be preserved', thirdly, 'to establish state-based committees that brought together historians, archivists, librarians and volunteers to advise the community outside established repositories and administer funded projects', and lastly, 'to establish a web-based register to publicise the location and content of women's material'.⁹ Integral to this strategy is the concern not just with the preservation of women's archival material but also with ensuring the promotion and accessibility of this archival data to the public. Thus, 'activating' it as a tool of archival activism.

The two main functions of the Australian Women's Archives Program are firstly the Australian Women's Register, a searchable online archival database on Australian women and

Australian women's organisations, and secondly their online exhibitions.¹⁰ The register is an example of a 'non-custodial' approach to archive curation as it is intended to 'link existing catalogues of women's papers in national, state and university libraries with the records of individuals and smaller, more marginal organisations often overlooked by major repositories'.¹¹ Unlike some community archives which resist any collaboration with state archives, this project seeks to bring state archival institutions and disparate community archives together in one place. The collections of both community and state archives are made more accessible as a result of the distribution of their archival metadata online. As Nikki Henningham and Helen Morgan have argued, the program 'as a digital, non-custodial model of curation, is designed to offer solutions relating to the dispersed and fragmentary nature of women's records'.¹² The project was always intended to be digital, and although there is now a growing trend of digitisation in the museum and heritage sector, at this time the digital space was still developing and not widely used by state archives. It has been a long-term characteristic of community archives to embrace the use of online digital formats, as a way of enabling public participation and enhancing community accessibility. Furthermore, as a digital format the register is not a static space, it is being continually updated and edited. It is a realisation of Stuart Hall's concept of the 'living archive' which he described as 'present, on-going, continuing, unfinished, open-ended'.¹³

This 'digital, non-custodian' approach is similarly apparent in the program's online exhibitions. They are an important part of the program's work not only for raising awareness about women's history but also for the opportunities they offer for external funding.¹⁴ The reception of these online exhibitions has been highly successful and led funding bodies to see the value in publishing online in order to reach wider audiences.¹⁵ As a result, the program has been awarded numerous grants by individuals, Commonwealth, State and Local governments, non-government organisations, and academic institutions to create thematic exhibitions on women's history.¹⁶ As Henningham and Morgan have pointed out, 'Fifteen of the 20 exhibitions currently accessible via the Register were made possible by local committee fundraising'. One such exhibition is the 'Putting Skirts on the Sacred Benches' researched by Emma Grahame and Rachel Grahame which was funded in '2005–6 by the Sesquicentenary of Responsible Government Committee, an initiative of the New South Wales Government Premier's Department'.¹⁷ The aim of this exhibition was to recognise the significant contributions and achievements of over 700 women who stood for New South Wales Parliament.¹⁸ The political content and title of the exhibition are the clearest indicators of its activist agenda. Its title is a reference to a quote by Millicent Preston-Stanley in 1926, the first woman elected to the New South Wales Parliament, in which she stated, 'I'm not fool enough to suppose my going into the House is going to make any sweeping alteration. The heavens won't fall because a woman's skirts rustle on the sacred benches, so long the sacrosanct seats of the lords of creation'.¹⁹ Although downplaying the extent of her impact in parliament, Preston-Stanley's words nevertheless draw attention to the fact that her mere presence in such a male-dominated sphere of power was a ground-breaking act and disrupted the established power structures of parliament. This sentiment underscores the ideology behind community archives, that the presence of groups in history where they have been ignored or silenced is itself powerful.

However, what is truly significant about the curation of this exhibition is the research methods that were used by the archivists. The exhibition's introduction acknowledges that,

The challenges associated with research for this project were significant Many of the stories of unsuccessful candidates are no less interesting, but they are much harder to trace. Drawing upon a range of archival and web-based sources, the project team have managed

to track down over seven hundred names, and write biographical notes for over half that number.²⁰

By using a non-custodial approach and researching a wider range of archival and non-archival sources the exhibition is able to uncover material and raise awareness about women's history which would have been easily overlooked in state archives. These resources include internet sources such as the Trove online database by the National Library of Australia and the online Australian Dictionary of Biography by the Australian National University as well as parliamentary scrapbooks from the New South Wales (NSW) Parliamentary Archives. By using a variety of historical resources, these women are put back into history and public memory where they were excluded before. However, it is apparent in this exhibition that there are ultimately limitations with the Australian Women's Archives Program which are common in community archives, namely a lack of funding and resources. Many of the 700 entries are very brief, some including only a name, political party, and the year they stood for election. Due to their status as a community archive, there is limited staff to research and compile entries and limited facilities to house physical material which narrows the scope they are able to achieve as an archive.

'Blaze: Working women, public leaders' by the state archives and records authority of New South Wales

The second case study is the 'Blaze: Working Women, Public Leaders' exhibition by the State Archives and Records Authority of New South Wales in 2018. It was originally held at the Whitlam Institute, Western Sydney University and is currently available as a touring exhibition from 2022 to 2025. The exhibition's catalogue has also been digitised online. In contrast to the Australian Women's Archives Program, the State Archives and Records Authority is the official archive for the state of New South Wales documenting 'the daily work of the NSW Government and its agencies from 1788 to today'.²¹ The current iteration of the archives was established in 1998 by the State Records Act which renamed it the State Records Authority of New South Wales and defined its purview as 'to make provision for the creation, management and protection of the records of public offices of the State and to provide for public access to those records'.²² It is prime example of the traditional purpose of state archives which was to preserve the juridical evidence of government agencies. The jurisdiction of their enabling legislation limits the perspective of its collection to those in state power. However, the influence of the 'archival turn' on their operations is apparent in their most recent 2022–2023 strategic plan. It claimed that their purpose is 'To ensure the people and government of NSW have ready access to archives and records that support good and accountable government, illuminate history and enrich the life of the people of NSW and their communities' and that their aim is 'to be a best practice regulator that is transparent in its operations and accountable to the people of NSW'.²³ In contrast, their 2017–2021 strategic plan did not have any focus on 'accountability', 'transparency' or 'public trust'. Instead, their purpose was to 'Preserve the records of the State of enduring value in perpetuity', reflecting the traditional role of archives.²⁴ We can see therefore, that there has been a recent shift over last few years within the state archive towards being a more community orientated institution with a greater sense of service to society.

This approach is seen in the 'Blaze: Working Women, Public Leaders' exhibition. The subject of the exhibition was an examination of over 150 years of a 'selection of women from the past who were trailblazers in carving out roles for females in the NSW public sphere'.²⁵ The similarity of the exhibition's theme to that of the Australian Women's Archives Program's is evident yet the latter was developed over 12 years earlier. The delay between exhibitions

reflects the gradual influence that community archival theory is beginning to have on state archives. This change is made apparent in the exhibition curator Penny Stannard's acknowledgment that women's history has been omitted from official history and it is the role of archivists in state archival institutions to rectify this. According to the exhibition catalogue's foreword, 'Historical research within and beyond the State Archives Collection has uncovered stories of women whose achievements have, until now, been 'lost' to history. In other cases, new chapters have been written into the stories of well-known trailblazers'.²⁶ Although it is not an overt admission of the role state archives have played in this history being 'lost', it is still progress for a state archival institution.

The most significant element of this exhibition is its forward-looking activist agenda. As it claims in the foreword, 'Blaze aims to contribute towards current discussions concerning women in leadership roles and to generate a greater awareness of the trail that women in NSW's past blazed for those who followed. This unique exhibition melds past and present, and in doing so, enables greater clarity in the future thinking about women, the public sphere and leadership'.²⁷ There is a clear awareness in the exhibition of the effect that a lack of representation has had on women's lives in the past. This lack of representation has been conceptualised by feminist scholars as 'Symbolic Annihilation'. In 1978 Gaye Tuchman discussed the impact of symbolic annihilation in terms of media representation, specifically that 'They lead girls, in particular, to believe that their social horizons and alternatives are more limited than is actually the case'.²⁸ This is equally applicable to the representations of women in state archives and the public histories that are produced from them.

The exhibition openly addresses these issues. The questions that lie at the heart of the exhibition are 'What is known about the work of women in such leadership roles? And does a lack of knowledge and awareness about their work contribute to the underrepresentation of women as the statistics indicate?'.²⁹ These questions are strikingly similar to those posed by Caswell in her 'feminist standpoint appraisal' approach. Her suggested methodology for appraising archival material is to ask,

- 'Do these particular records under consideration give us the perspectives of those who are oppressed? Do they give the perspective of those groups who are even further marginalised within an oppressed community?'
- Can these particular records be activated by oppressed communities for more robust representation, for efforts to achieve justice or reparation, or for inspiration to imagine different futures?'
- What is the affective impact of my appraisal decision on oppressed communities?'
- Who is left out of archives generally and the records collected by this institution or organisation more specifically? If we are to acquire this particular collection, who is left out? What is our position towards that omission?'³⁰

The traditional attitude within the archival profession that archivists must remain 'neutral' and 'impassive' would have previously prevented such an activist driven discussion of archival data in a state archive exhibition. However, it is now becoming a more acceptable practice because the shift towards social justice in the archive sector has superseded the expectation to remain 'neutral'.

The extent, and ultimately the limitations, of the influence of feminist archival theory on the state archive is evident by the types of resources that were used in their exhibitions. A significant feature of this exhibition was its use of women's living testimonies, a common trend in community archives. Testimonies enable women to tell their and their female ancestors' experiences in their own voices. This is especially significant because women have been 'voiceless' in

state archives for so long. By using their own words, the curator enables women to ‘write their own stories’ within the archive rather than speak for them.³¹ As a result, women are able to exercise autonomy over their own representations while also lending authenticity to the state archive’s narrative. This casual form of storytelling through personal memories and anecdotes reflects the more community and identity focused approach in recent archival scholarship which ‘aims to recover and reassert the voices of record subjects in the archival process’.³²

This influence, however, ultimately only reaches so far. Despite the claim that historical research for the exhibition was conducted from ‘within and beyond’ the state archives’ collection, the resources referenced in the exhibition catalogue were mainly limited to material from the state archive’s own collection and some collaboration with Australian universities and government departments. For this particular exhibition, the curator did not branch out to collaborate with any community archives and instead followed a custodial approach to their collection. This is not surprising as archival exhibitions such as these are often intended to showcase the archival data within their collections. In comparison to the Australian Women’s Archives Program, the exhibition demonstrates that the state archive does have a much larger depth of archival material and resources at their disposal. The exhibition’s catalogue is over 140 pages with dedicated sections on 35 women, and in-depth historical context provided throughout. While the Australian Women’s Archives Program’s digital exhibition included entries on over 700 different women, their entries go into much less depth. The state archives are able to use a variety of archival materials that the Australian Women’s Archives Program simply do not have access to such as personal letters, newspaper articles, personal testimonies, and photographs from their collection. Their funding is also supported by the government, rather than relying on external funding. However, the curator herself highlights the absence of feminist archival records within their collection. Yet, the exhibition fails to interrogate the power structures that have led to this and the archive’s own role in shaping the content of their collection. They do not take the opportunity to ‘rethink both the process by which archival value is determined and the archivists’ role in that process’.³³ Therefore, while this exhibition showcases the influence feminist archival theory and the ‘archival turn’ has had on the state archive’s curation of their archival data, it still operates according to traditional archival principles.

Conclusion and the future of archive practice

As has been shown in the case studies above, there are strengths and weaknesses to both state and community archives. While community archives address many of the limitations of state archives by using more inclusive practices and focusing on marginalised groups, they often have a lack of resources and more limited collections than state institutions. There are often opportunities in state archives for a deeper perspective because of the larger scope of their collections and their access to more secure funding. As Caswell has argued, ‘records created by people in power can serve the needs of oppressed communities, and in fact, are crucial for legal, cultural, and political efforts for justice and reparation’. Yet, as she points out, ‘the explicit aim and orientation of feminist standpoint appraisal [is] to serve the needs of the oppressed rather than those from dominant groups, or, as in most appraisal epistemologies, to no one in particular’. This is why it is important for community and state archives to work together. There is a growing trend in archive scholarship towards increased cooperation between community and state archives. Cook described this concept in 2012 as ‘community archiving’ in which archives seek to be ‘more democratic, inclusive, holistic archives, collectively, listening much more to citizens than the state, as well as respecting indigenous ways of knowing, evidence, and memory’.³⁴ This development is important because while community archives

are valuable, it is also vital for state archives to evolve and incorporate broader perspectives into their archival approaches. From the case studies discussed, it is clear that state archives are starting to emulate feminist archival theory in their exhibition curation and that this has already begun to enrich the histories that they are able to produce. The future of archives is therefore for community and state archives to work together, which requires state archives to continue to evolve.

Notes

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31. Hall, p. 7.
32. Caswell and Cifor, p. 36.
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34. Cook, p. 115.