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IN CONVERSATION

Research and Practice – A Conversation

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Introduction

Since the mid-20th century, Australia has gained recognition for its innovative approaches to archival practice and theory, including the Australian Series System and the Records Continuum Model. However, the relationship between archival work, records management, and contemporary theory and research is not always clear and can present challenges.

Mike Jones and Rachel Tropea invited a group of colleagues to explore these ideas in a recorded Zoom conversation on Monday, January 22, 2024. The participants then edited the transcript for clarity.

The conversation features the following participants, in order of speaking:

Moderator – Dr Mike Jones (Naarm/Melbourne, and lutruwita/Tasmania) is an archivist, historian, and researcher at the University of Tasmania, and inaugural Convenor of the Australian Society of Archivists' Research and Education Special Interest Group (REDSIG).

Dr Rose Barrowcliffe is the inaugural First Nations Archives Advisor to Queensland State Archives, and a Macquarie University Fellowship for Indigenous Researchers (MUFIR) post-doctoral research fellow in the Department of Critical Indigenous Studies at Macquarie University who researches the rights and representation of Indigenous peoples in archives.

Dr Eva Samaras (Naarm/Melbourne) is a records and information Senior Analyst at the University of Melbourne and an information studies Sessional Academic at Charles Sturt University.

Elliot Freeman (Naarm/Melbourne) is an archivist at La Trobe University, a doctoral candidate at Monash University, and a committee member of both the Australian Queer Archives (AQuA) and the Australian Society of Archivists' Victorian Branch.

Duncan Loxton is an archivist and the Senior Specialist in Data Curation at the UTS Library (University of Technology Sydney).

Annie Cameron is a non-indigenous linguist and archivist who works supporting Aboriginal language activities in the Pilbara region of Western Australia, and a PhD candidate in Information Systems at Charles Darwin University.

Dr James Lowry (Tandanya/Adelaide, settler on Matinecock land) is an Associate Professor at Queens College, City University of New York, where he is Chair of the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies.

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Moderator – Rachel Tropea (Naarm/Melbourne) is an archivist and the Senior Coordinator at RMIT University Archives, and a Co-organiser of Australasia Preserves and the Critical Archives Reading Group (Melb).

Conversation

Mike Jones: Thank you everyone for joining us today. We would like to start by asking about research and practice in your own work. Do you see a distinction between the two? What's the value of combining these elements, what are some of the challenges or barriers involved, and how have the different institutional contexts you have worked in shaped your response?

Rose Barrowcliffe: It's interesting, when I started working in archives my head was very much in a research space and I was surprised by how little awareness there was about what was happening in the research world around archives. I try to bring current work and current publications into the conversations with my work in archives, so obviously I think there's huge value in bringing those two elements together. The whole idea of scholarship is that it is the leading edge of knowledge. You're creating new knowledge, and if that's not being conveyed across into practice then there's not really much point.

MJ: Have you found any resistance from an institutional point of view?

RB: Not to the ideas, but there are funding timelines, and there are already things in the works, like the task list for the year. For example, we just went through a legislative review process here in Queensland. We have a new Public Records Act and through the stakeholder engagement workshops – which included Indigenous people, most of them working in government, and a lot of Queensland Government workers – we were trying to talk to them about, for example, Indigenous data, data sovereignty, and Indigenous cultural and intellectual property.

There's a lot of lip service around those issues in the government and in the archive. But when you try to talk about practical ways that they can be implemented, you hear a lot of 'Oh, well, we couldn't possibly do that', or 'That wouldn't work within the legislation'. I don't think that they would think they're resistant, but I think that the adoption of these sorts of principles (that can be quite esoteric in some ways) is quite minimal. People still hold on to the idea that 'In practice, we do it this way, because we've always done it this way'.

MJ: Eva, how about the environments that you've worked in?

Eva Samaras: I think I've been fortunate to end up in fairly research-based roles when I was in government. I found that they embraced and wanted more rigorous, evidence-based approaches, which was good because I didn't want to spend time working on something if it wasn't going to be effective. At the National Archives, they embrace research, and I was in a research-focussed department when I was working there. But at the same time, many government archives are grossly underfunded. I could roll out a program or do a piece of research, but they couldn't sufficiently fund the work. For example, often the projects I worked on would rely on my ability to access literature using my university logins. So, it's this situation where they really want it, but they are not always able to fund it properly.

That was something I found in the government space. Now, I'm in a university space, and I have more means to do the research. But I'm very much in a practitioner-focussed role right now, and my business as usual (BAU) takes up most of my time. In my current role, I am kept very busy advising people across the university. Digital processes and systems are the focus, making sure they are compliant with legislation and standards, so I don't really get to bring research into that space very often.

Presently in my work, I would say research is more like a side thing. Although, that being said, I've been recently working on a review project to examine a key information system at the University of Melbourne. I'm doing that with my manager who identified the opportunity to heavily draw upon my formal research experience in the review's undertaking. I designed

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the data collection and analysis approach, drafted the interview questionnaire and I wrote up the report that will go to the University Executive. So, because of my research background, they've been really happy to have me on board and help with that side of things. Overall, I'd say research is embraced but it's very much reliant on adequate resourcing and funding, which in my experience has not always been that great.

MJ: And in your BAU role, do you still see the research work that you've done as informing your day-to-day practice? Or is it something that only exists in roles that are explicitly identified as research-based?

ES: I think it's more the latter. It comes into play if I'm trying to communicate with stakeholders and explain, for example, 'what is an archive?' to try and help them understand the value of their records. They are thinking, 'why do we care about this?' and I have to try and explain. But it's like a simplified version of archival theory and principles. So, I don't really get into the research and theory much in my recent roles. I can't have those conversations now like I used to be able to have at Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) where you can have discussions to get right into the theory behind provenance or appraisal and share recently published academic papers around. I haven't been able to do things like that for a while.

MJ: Elliot, how would you respond to this wearing both your La Trobe University hat and your AQuA hat?

Elliot Freeman: I was working in archives even when I was doing my Master's, so I've been practising throughout my entire research career and all through my PhD. Research and practice have always sat side-by-side in my work.

It's really interesting actually, contrasting a community archive space versus an institutional archive space in terms of how research is applied or engaged with. Both are often very limited in what they can implement because of resource issues. It's been really interesting to see how little of the research being done in the community archives space actually comes into the day-to-day praxis, because it is a matter of just trying to do as much as you can as quickly as possible with so few resources – particularly with relatively few people volunteering who are trained archivists.

In the university space, we're an archive in a library. Much like Eva, I've done a lot of very bare bones education – 'Welcome to archives. We have boxes of stuff!' – as a way of trying to advocate for our work on the one hand, and then to push best practice on the other. When we redeveloped our collection development framework, I think we ended up putting in maybe three paragraphs about our participatory approach to our work, and we were asked why we'd included it. It seemed like such a valuable thing to include in the documentation: our perspective, our viewpoint, and the theoretical foundation for our work. And there was a little bit of, not resistance, but *uncertainty* as to the relevance of these sections and why we dedicated ink to it. That's been an ongoing discussion. I think it's important for us to explain that there is value in engaging with new thinking, and in reflecting on *why* we do the things we do, and not just *what* we do. And that's something I'm trying to implement more proactively in my own work in the community archives space – the why, as well as the what.

MJ: And in the community archives space do you see the relevance of theories of community archiving? Or is there a gap between practice and existing theoretical discussions around community archiving?

EF: In my experience, I think there's definitely a gap between that research and practice. A lot of the focus (as it should be) has been on broader issues of inclusion – for instance, around First Nations inclusion and disability inclusion – and that's been more the focus than archival theoretical perspectives. Looking to queer archival research specifically, as we continue working towards a digital collection management system at AQuA, I can see the relevance of some of that research coming in. For instance, that's when we tap into some of those broader

international discussions, like the work that's been done at the Digital Transgender Archive,[1] the Homosaurus[2] and projects like that. But we're just quite not at that point yet.

MJ: Duncan, how does this play out in your work?

Duncan Loxton: I have been a practitioner my entire career. I've not been a researcher, but I am a bit of a gushing fan of research; and so I'd like to say that there isn't a distinction and that my work mirrors the leading edge of the best research that Rose was talking about, but that wouldn't be the whole truth. I find, perhaps because of the context that I'm working in, that I have a bit of trouble separating the two. But in listening to what Elliot was saying – the research is *why* we do things, and perhaps the professional practice is *how* we do things – then it's easier to make that distinction. In terms of the 'why', I point to research, I listen to researchers speaking, I read their papers when I get the time, and I use that as a source of inspiration, as well as the basis for change in our work. I'II try and make sure that it's always informing what we're doing and justifies the recommendations for change that I'm making when it goes up to be approved by a committee.

So I look to research for ideas that resonate with me. I'll often find that there's a question that I've been grappling with and someone's put it to words or explained it way better than I could so I'll cite that, and then that will change my frame of reference. I think Eva was saying that there's a bit of a challenge in translation sometimes, and there may not be the opportunity or the resourcing to do that translation work. I reflect that now I've been working at the same place for some time, and it's always been encouraged to engage with research. We support researchers, so we speak the language of research.

MJ: You say that you look to research to support the work that you want to do. When you go looking, do you ever find the research isn't there, or do you find the research you need is generally available?

DL: Generally, there's always something there. There's 20, maybe 30 years, perhaps even longer, of discussion about Indigenous sovereignty. If there's a question I need answering it's often there, and I actually find there's too much research. So I'll read a paper, then revisit it a year later and something else will jump out at me. Or I'll follow a reference in that paper and uncover something new. I've always been able to find something adjacent to the question that I'm asking. There will be something there reflecting that need that I have to articulate something that I've not been able to articulate before.

MJ: Annie, how about you?

Annie Cameron: There's definitely an overlap between research and practice. But I've come to archives as a language researcher, essentially, whose work was always slightly frustrated because of archival issues, so I often approach archive practice and research from that perspective. I work as a linguist at Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre, and I'm doing my PhD research on the archive there. My PhD was designed to fulfil the need for an archivist in the organisation so my research was always intended to meet very practical needs within the language centre. In terms of the value for the organisation, practice and research operates on a sliding scale. We can move it to a very practical position: the linguist just needs to be doing linguistics and getting that work done, which is our core business and will always be the priority. But having the 50:50 split between my daily job, and then my PhD research and being in the archive, we can also slide it all the other way and say: 'Okay, at the moment we're just doing 100% archival work, investigation, mobilising records for community use'.

The archive has accumulated so naturally and has evolved with what looks like a lot of disruption, but it's not disruption. It's just how the archive has come together through community creation and use over 35 years. Every time we use the archive we find out something new about it, so there's a very practical approach where we are doing language centre business, and we are finding out things about the archive as we do it, and I'm squirrelling those things away

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into the archive folders and thinking 'Oh, that's interesting!' It helps us understand what we can do to mobilise the language material in the archive to support activities in the community as needed.

The tension and challenge between the archive and the prioritisation of language work are always there, and we have to keep asking 'how can this support language learning?' That's the core business of the organisation. Language Centres have never received specific funding for their archives, and my PhD is the first archival research into a language centre archive in Australia. With my PhD coming to an end, we are developing strategies to make the archival work self-sustaining. The Language Centre operates under such robust Indigenous governance. One of the challenges for me as a non-Indigenous person with a researcher hat, and as an employee, is knowing where the parameters of what is in-house research that is just for the Language Centre, and what is able to be presented outside of the language centre context, or maybe just shared with other language centres that are also grappling with the same issues. My guidance comes from the rest of the team, who are Aboriginal, and the cultural authorities and board of directors. I discuss with them what I think are really important parts of the research output that could be shared more broadly with archival research communities beyond Language Centres, around Australia or around the world.

Part of the challenge also comes from linguistics, which historically has looked at language centre archives just as places where some language data are stored – a very practical computational or research repository infrastructure issue – whereas they're not. They're community based, Aboriginal-controlled archives that have very unique characteristics. In my research, I've become really aware of that, and wearing two hats, as a linguist and an archivist, can be a bit tricky in that situation.

MJ: Is there anything about archival theory and research that surprised you when you first started moving into that space from the linguistic space?

AC: I don't think there was much that surprised me. I mean, I finally got to understand the Australian Series system which has always been this mysterious thing out there that I didn't know, so that was really interesting for me. I also got to understand Australia's position globally as a place that's generated really useful archival theory and has made a significant contribution to the way that Indigenous materials are approached and treated in archival theory.

I trained in archives and records hoping it would help me understand how to manage Aboriginal community language archives better. During training, I saw that continuum theory was similar to the workflow of a language centre archive. The process of language documentation, language description, and then the activation of those records for language activities in a community, is also essentially a continuum that can't end. In my PhD, I've been able to understand that similarity at a far more practical and granular level. Not that the continuum is the answer to the perpetual problems of language centre archives, but I've been exploring whether the model provides a different way of looking at language centre archives and the work that produces them that we haven't used before.

What surprised me more is that in language centres – which are not a new thing in Australia, they've been around since the late 1980s – no language centre I've come across yet has had an archivist. They have these incredible, unique collections of community-created material. Wangka Maya represents 31 languages. The archive is so rich with linguistic, cultural, and historical material created by the community. The archive also contains material that has been returned from mainstream archives where it has been deposited by researchers. The two sources of community-produced material and material copied from other archives combine at Wangka Maya as the central archive for the Pilbara language, culture and history. When the material is viewed as a whole in the language centre context it tells a very different story that can be understood through archival concepts like parallel provenance.

As far as managing the archive, linguists and IT engineers have all built databases based on principles of research repositories designed for researchers. Community people have written lists and lists of metadata and have shaped how the material is managed in really important ways. But a trained archivist has never come in and looked at it – not in *any* language centre that I've come across yet.

So the challenge has really been identifying that gap, and then finding ways to bridge it. That doesn't mean that archivists are the people doing the work because the language centre I work at is so robustly governed by the community. The language centre has to be sustainable and self-determination is embedded in all of the activities. That means every step of the way for practice and research I am thinking, 'how can I withdraw, as a non-Indigenous person so that an Indigenous person, one of my colleagues, sits in this place and does this task instead?' Applying archival concepts has definitely helped me understand the language archive in a way that better supports community autonomy.

James Lowry: I was thinking about this question in relation to teaching, where there's a balance between engaging students with new research and preparing them to do a job – it's a vocational degree – so that tension between research and practice is always there. It's built into our program at City University of New York (CUNY); we have the Intro to Archives class, which is totally theoretical. It's the history of the field, the principles, and the theory building that has been the focus of a lot of research lately. And then the other compulsory class for our students is basically the practice class where they're learning how to do the appraisal, how to do arrangement and description. A division is built into the structure of the program, which can make it difficult to show students the relationship between the two, unless they're taking both classes at the same time.

I teach the more theoretical class, and I try to stress that these are ideas that you can choose to take with you into practice, or not. And as the next generation of archivists, the students will decide what archival theory and practice will look like in the future, because the norms of practice will be established by the theories they apply in the repository, and they can generate new theories out of their practice.

As we've been having this conversation I've also been thinking about a chapter in *Research in the Archival Multiverse* by Luciana Duranti and Giovanni Michetti called 'The Archival Method'.[3] They talk about how every aspect of archival work is a research undertaking. When we're doing appraisal we are doing research. We're trying to figure out the significance of records, creators, and functions. Then, when we're doing arrangement, we're trying to uncover modes of organisation, the functions and activities of the creating body and how these fit together. That's historical research. When we do description, we're doing documentary analysis, right? So research is woven into all aspects of the work. And as Eva was speaking, I was thinking about how that also applies to records management. If you're developing classification schemes or doing any kind of process analysis, these are all research activities as well. That tension is absolutely there, but in other ways, the distinction is also blurry.

MJ: James you have worked in a variety of contexts – the US, Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, Australia. Do you find that this plays out in different ways in different contexts around the world? Or are these fairly common, shared relationships between theory and practice and research and practice?

JL: I don't know. Practices, concepts and professional cultures all vary a lot but I don't know about attitudes to research: it didn't come up much. Maybe it's more of a generational thing? When I was a practitioner, I think a lot of my mentors and colleagues were sceptical of research and theory, and were critical of the academic arm of the profession. But I'm encouraged that my students are excited about the theoretical aspects because they understand that the work that they're doing as archivists – selecting the materials that will survive; the representation

of history – can't be severed from the intellectual currents in our societies. They understand that these are important questions. When I speak to them about some of the opposition to 'theory', students often speak very articulately about the threats of anti-intellectualism, and how we want to avoid falling into this trap of viewing archives as purely a rote, mechanical job. Everything that we're doing needs to be critiqued, and research helps us do that.

MJ: Does anyone else see a generational shift here? Thinking about the different people you have worked with, and the different environments you've worked in, do you think that things are changing over time?

EF: When I was first entering the profession, I definitely noticed that when I mentioned I was finishing my Masters or doing my PhD a very common response would be, 'Oh, God! The continuum stuff!' And that was the first thought people had about research. You could see the exasperation on their faces. But when I was teaching archival/record-keeping students, they were always really interested and really engaged; and even if they weren't always sure what the application would be, they found talking about the ideas really enjoyable.

I particularly saw this at Monash where I was teaching a mix of students from the library and archives and recordkeeping specialisations, and then more technical disciplines like data science or cybersecurity. So many of my students, across all disciplinary backgrounds, liked having those big discussions about the ethics of archives, the work that we do, and the contingencies and subjectivities of it. I think they quite liked unpacking these ideas even if they didn't always see the practical implications for their future careers, whereas when I've been in workplaces with people who have been in the field for quite a long time, they almost had the inverse. They had spent so long trying to deal with doing the practical work with so few resources they couldn't see how these highfalutin ideas would actually help ameliorate those really practical challenges. There's quite a lot of 'No Man's Land' in the middle at the moment – a balance between trying to enrich practice with ideas and research, and the need to moderate that with the fact that a lot of people are really under the pump in terms of their BAU.

RB: It's funny for me, because I came to archives as a user, and that was through an archive that's about my traditional country where I just didn't see us being represented in this archive. It was actually archival theory that saved me in that process because I started reading Dr Kirsten Thorpe's work, for example. And I was like, 'Oh, thank God!' I had the people managing this archive saying things like, 'Oh, well, it doesn't really apply to you because there's not really any cultural content to the records', things like that. Then to read people's work that brought in Indigenous perspectives through research – and not just Indigenous perspectives, but looking at queer theory and feminist theory, and looking at activist archives, particularly in the US – and being able to see another way of doing things. That's what really got me interested in archives. I think if I had just stopped after looking at the archive as it currently existed, I would never be doing what I'm doing today. So I totally changed my perception of archives by reading theory, and that was before I was an academic. And then through that, I ended up enrolling in my post-grad degree.

MJ: Extending from that, Rose and Duncan, you are part of the Indigenous Archives Collective (IAC).[4] How do you see the role of a group like that in both influencing practice and bringing more theoretical understandings to these spaces?

RB: For me, it's been hugely influential personally, but I also see the impact of the work of that collective across the profession. Duncan runs or coordinates all these things, so props to Duncan. But those get-togethers are really nourishing spaces as well. I think for the people who are part of the collective, if you're working in a space where you're seeing a big disconnect between what you would like to see happening in practice and what is actually happening in practice, it's a great space to go in and let off steam, share experiences, and be inspired by other people's work. And there are a lot of people in the collective who are across practice

and academia in some capacity or other – not necessarily studying, but who might be working in university archives, or like Duncan who is a practitioner at the university. I think it's really important, the work that the IAC does.

DL: I became involved with the Collective because of my role working with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Archive (ATSIDA) and some of the people in the collective. I got to know them and became interested in their work, and thought that I should be supporting them in ways beyond just the reach of the data archive that I work in. The Collective is a place in which I can offer additional support and advice.

I think I'm fortunate to have worked at the University for 10 years. That's given me time to come to grips with some of the ideas that the collective is often discussing, and it's meant that we've had time to see the outcomes of implementing some of those ideas. That's a luxury in many ways. If you can stick it out, you'll see the change that you want to see. I do value the Collective, and the conversations that happen, and I'm constantly astonished at the amount of work that's happening in this space – that integration of theory and practice, that leading edge that Rose was mentioning. I'm just full of admiration for the people in that Collective.

MJ: There are other structures in our profession that try and work to bring these areas together. There are the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) conferences, where you get practitioners, theorists, and researchers in the same space. There are international archival conferences, there are journals like *Archives & Manuscripts*. There are branch meetings, branch events, and more. How do you think we're going as a sector and a profession, in terms of building a culture where research and practice are working together in useful ways?

ES: I have had quite a bit of exposure to the ASA conference and more recently Records and Information Management Practitioners Alliance (RIMPA) forum events. The ASA feels quite strong. I think the conference really does bring together a good mix of voices and issues – sometimes hard ones to deal with. I'm thinking of the last conference in particular, which was heavy at times (in a good way). I've only been attending on and off for the last few years, but I think the people involved in organising the ASA conferences are doing a good job, and it's getting better in that it's bringing important issues to the fore and featuring a good range of voices. RIMPA is more on the practical side of things from what I've seen. It's focussed on tools and emerging technologies and things like that which is still important, but it is not so heavy on the research. I don't feel like that's something that's explored in that space, from my experience.

One thing I do like about our sector is that a lot of our journals are open access by default, and there are many great blogs as well. I have also found organisations like the Digital Preservation Coalition (DPC)[5] helpful. The DPC shares the scholarship and research that they do proactively, both often and for free, and if you can pay as an institution you'll get access to even more. From my experience working in the sector, it's been quite good in that I have access to a lot of information and a lot of research when I need it, and I don't necessarily have to do that through my university access. I can also do it as a practitioner.

JL: I've been reading a lot of old back issues of some of the journals because I'm increasingly interested in the history of our field, and you can really see the way that the articles have moved from being descriptive, or reports about events and activities, into more formally structured research articles. The quality and the level of analysis have become much richer over time, and that is partly because of things like the growth of archival studies PhD programs, journals, and the Archival Education Research Institute (AERI),[6] which started in the US but from its earliest days included a strong contingent of Australian participants. The field building and the scholarly infrastructure that has been put in place by the senior academics, all of that has increased the rigour of the work and set higher expectations.

Thinking about Australia and the work that was being done in the 1960s at the National Archives or the Commonwealth Archives at that time, we could probably say that Australia has long been open to questioning. I think that's a key characteristic of Australian archival thinking: an openness to new ways of doing things generally. And that comes through in the journals and the conferences. Over the last few years, I have been a little sceptical about some of the newest continuum work, but at the same time, there are several other really exciting things happening in the Australian scene. There's the Indigenous data sovereignty work that others have spoken about. There's the trauma-informed work coming out of Melbourne. Rachel, your Critical Archives Reading Group[7] has stimulated a lot of new thinking as well. So it's always been there. But you can also chart a rise, an improvement.

MJ: Annie, as a relative newcomer to the profession, how do you find those professional structures?

AC: I am a newcomer to archives and I'm still becoming familiar with the current situation in Australia. I've jumped in at the deep end a bit through involvement in ASA committees which are very supportive of new members in my experience. I've come from linguistics which is a far smaller discipline, especially for so called Australianists, who specialise in Australian Aboriginal languages. So coming into archives, it seems very professionalised, and the sector is far more developed. It has longevity and also numbers – there's just more people – partly because records and archives are supported through legislation in all States and Territories. We don't have the regulatory aspect in Australian linguistics and I've noticed the research components of both disciplines speak to that.

It seems to me that, like James said, we have a long history of innovation in archives in Australia, and it's been really interesting to see. My feeling is that in linguistics it's kind of the opposite – it's a much more closed discipline in that sense. Over the last 6 months, I've been very interested in watching other linguists who don't have a background in archives, navigate archives. That's been an interesting experience because it's made me realise how familiar I've become with archives and archival theory, and how far we might have to go in archives to cross over into related disciplines. I'm not sure we're doing a lot of that kind of work at the moment. Maybe that's something we need to look at a bit more.

EF: I did take note of James's point about the latest continuum work. I did both my master's and my PhD at Monash, so my archival worldview has been really shaped by continuum thinking. And I've been having a lot of discussions as I come to the end of my PhD about articulating my relationship with continuum thinking from a methodological standpoint. Because it was day one of my archival education, it's been really foundational. It's the lens through which I see and think about archives, but it's so inherent that I'm not always conscious of it.

When I speak with other researchers working in spaces like queer archives and Indigenous archives, there's a lot of work being done to critically re-evaluate what we sometimes take for granted – those foundational elements of the discipline, the theory, or of our research. There are people trying to reconfigure those foundational elements in a new way, or in a different way based on our context now. It's a perspective that is often much more critical, especially from an inclusion and social justice perspective, which I think is for the better. It's going to be really interesting to see the next 5 or 10 years of research come out as hopefully those discussions become even more critical and reflexive and interrogative.

Rachel Tropea: Following on from what Elliot was saying about people's reactions to their PhD and the records continuum, archival theory often gets critiqued for being too complex or opaque. What are your thoughts on that?

DL: I often think reflexively, that it's my own lack of creativity and imagination that means that I can't comprehend what the research is, or what the researcher is trying to say to me, and so I'm sympathetic. But earlier I mentioned reading an article once, and then reading it

a second time, and giving myself that space to come to grips with that research side. And so I suppose I can only be encouraging, which is part of my own self-talk. It's good to be patient, and not to give up right away.

RB: I definitely struggle with some of the denser theoretical stuff, but I'm not a linear learner. I need to go over things again and again and take a little bit more time. The continuum model is a key example of that. I avoided it as much as I could because I just found it too complex, and I couldn't understand it. And then I got to the last year of my PhD and I was looking for a framework to lay my analysis over. And all of a sudden it clicked, and I was like, 'Oh, I see now'. But I needed something to apply it to, I couldn't just read it as a theory in isolation from what I was trying to do. Like Duncan said, it takes time and patience sometimes; but I always appreciate that people have put a lot of thought into this, into anything they put down on paper, so I try to stick with it as much as possible.

JL: I think that theory and research can act on practice in a couple of ways. With a lot of the critical work coming out of the US for example, the authors will take an idea from, let's say, feminist theory, and then they'll work it through in terms of archival procedures. 'What if we take this idea and apply it to appraisal?' Those articles often end on a practical note: 'Here is what this might look like in practice'. So there you have a very direct relationship, and a lot of the translation work has been done by the authors.

But in other contexts – and I think the continuum is one – the influence of theory can work differently. If you're in a meeting, you're not going to start speaking to your boss about continuum theory because their eyes would glaze over. It's too complex and it's not directly translatable. On the other hand, it has precipitated some major shifts in the way that we think about the work we do. One example is the fact that the international records management standard treats appraisal not as a moment in a life cycle, but as a continuous activity that begins before the creation of a record. I think we can attribute that change in our understanding of appraisal to the thinking around the continuum model. There are different ways that research can translate into practice, at a very broad level, and then in a more direct way.

ES: I did my PhD with a cohort of people who weren't in my field. I found that quite interesting. My supervisor was not an archivist and was always asking questions, which was great, but it was often this process of trying to translate my whole profession to someone who had no knowledge about the area. Then as we continued that journey over three and a half years, by the end of it he started picking up on the terms, and he would say 'That's appraisal' and I'd say 'Yes!' and he'd say, 'I'm an archivist!' and I'm like, 'Maybe not!'

But I liked to see my colleagues starting to get it through me sharing my thesis chapters or journal papers with them and discussing papers in our reading club. We were a small cohort and would all share each other's work as we went along. I found that helpful in that it was a good opportunity to explain the theory, but in a different way, to a different audience. Being a researcher in a multi-disciplinary cohort forced me to find new ways of exploring and sharing archival theory, such as selecting papers to share in reading club that weren't necessarily directly about archiving, but were something on the peripheral that would engage them.

RT: Annie, you talked about crossing disciplines as well. Archival scholars have written about this and we often complain about how historians for example don't engage with archival theory when they write about archives. But perhaps it goes both ways?

AC: Like Eva was saying, I also don't have an archivist on my supervision panel so as a student, I've done some of that teaching archives and archival theory to a supervisor. And I do have an underlying anxiety that I'm possibly getting it all wrong! The continuum theory is complex but it's important for us to understand the circumstances that it came out of, and James has touched on that. I'm particularly interested in it because Peter J. Scott, who was at the Commonwealth Archives Office, was also a linguist before becoming an archivist. The

underlying principles of what became the Commonwealth Records Series are really familiar to us as linguists, but I've asked around and no linguists I've spoken with have heard of Scott!

Working across linguistics and archives, I navigate language and translation between disciplines. When I talk to an IT team, I get so confused, but we're talking about the same thing essentially, we're just using different words. And when I talk to linguists now, they're getting confused because I'm talking like an archivist, but we're talking about the same thing again. Finding that common language and being clear on definitions is part of approaching the complexity of theory.

I've been thinking a lot recently about the conversations that we're having about data and the conversations that we have about records, and how these two things are often conflated; maybe without even realising sometimes. But they are different things, and they need to be treated differently. We have to maintain those definitions when we're having conversations across disciplines as well. There are a lot of linguists doing archiving but not many of them are trained in archives, and even fewer know continuum theory. Yes, the theory is complex, but I think the starting point for speaking with non-archivists might be, 'Do you know there is a theory?' We need to remind people that it's not just archivists filing stuff in cardboard boxes in the back rooms of organisations. There are really strong, underlying principles through which we approach our work.

EF: I'm going to call myself out here: I think I am often guilty of conflating research and theory when I speak about the relationship between research and practice. As James said, there is a lot of research that in varying degrees is prescriptive, but is certainly more grounded in direct, practical applications. And I've been reflecting on this as both a researcher and a practitioner as I'm finalising my PhD, thinking about what I am producing that is actually of practical benefit to the profession. Doing a queer PhD, I'm very mindful of that because – how do I say this? – a lot of queer research can tend towards the slightly *esoteric*. And so for a lot of archival practitioners, it can be a little bit dense and hard to implement and hard to see the value.

I was writing the other day and I described what I'm trying to produce as something like a menu that archivists can use to order what they can afford and what they have the stomach for. It doesn't have to be 'absolute truth from God'. It's about trying to create practical tools that people can actually engage with, think about, and apply.

I've had a lot of discussions recently about the conflation of research and theory, and maybe that turns some people off. They think that anything to do with research is a continuum-level dense, philosophical exegesis that is a little bit impenetrable. Yet sometimes research is exceedingly practical and really straightforward, and can just be something you refer to if you have a question you need answered.

RT: Archives are not neutral spaces, and are not just for the preservation of records. They are there for access and use. Sometimes they can also stand in the way of access, and that can have significant implications for communities. So what does all this talk of theory, research, and practice mean for users of archives? Is it a distinction that has any relevance to users and communities? Rose, you said you started your journey as a user of archives.

RB: Yes, and that's exactly where my answer starts. I saw the usefulness for myself as a user. I work across or with a few large collecting institutions and one of the frustrations for users is that they have to learn a new language or a new system every time they go to a different institution. But to them they just want to find their stuff – they shouldn't have to relearn everything. It's similar to theory, in that our role as people who sit across these spaces is to translate it to the user so they don't have to become experts in all of the theories themselves. We should be able to explain it in a way that they could understand so they can find their stuff. I mean, that's the goal right? Find and use their stuff. And for me, an example of that is Indigenous

standpoint theory. It really helped me to be able to look at archives and archival practice in a way that meant I could see how this would impact the user and recognise why things need to change in certain ways for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who use archives so that users are able to find their stuff.

ES: This is a gap in my experience because I'm not a user of archives. But I think about users, especially when I do descriptive work. For example, when I worked at PROV I took a different approach to writing series descriptions, applying accessible language and more summarised information because I found some existing descriptions to be too dense. I thought 'most people just want to know what the records are, we don't have to give them a full history about everything'.

Like Rose was saying, in terms of users having to relearn – especially when a user comes up with a barrier and questions 'Why aren't I allowed to access these records? What are my rights as a user? What is the kind of framework that's operating?' – then they might start getting a bit into the theory. Potentially also looking at legislation, because the legislation is different in every jurisdiction (which is so annoying), and the way that access is provided also differs. I am still perplexed by how the National Archives manages access. It's not scalable. It's not practical, especially in the digital world. As a non-user, I presume theory might come into play more when a user's hand is forced, and they must acquire deeper knowledge to be able to work the system.

JL: All of the research and theory and everything else that we've been speaking about today absolutely shapes what the user will encounter in the archive in terms of what's present or absent, how it's represented in the finding aids – all of that kind of stuff. But I feel like there's something to be said about how the knowledge the user is bringing to the archive is quite important, not just for their meaning-making in the archive, but how we think about our core concepts. For example, Sony Prosper's work on how community attitudes might help us conceptualise what a record is.[8] Users are part of the research/practice mix in under-recognised ways.

DL: I've never been a user of archives, but when I'm reading theory or when I'm reading research it offers me a window into archival practice somewhere else. And so I'll see the winds of change, you know? I'll see what best practice looks like in another area of Australia, and I'll get people who will start to prepare me at least intellectually, and start driving me to improve our offering locally because I think people's experiences change the more they interact with archives. Engaging with that research is good for the user as a sort of proxy for my own archive. But I don't remember anyone pointing to a piece of research and approaching us as an archive.

EF: In my research I've interviewed a number of people – queer historians primarily – who go into institutional archives, national, state, and university collections, trying to find things and they absolutely have to become experts in archives in order to find those materials. The skill sets that they have to acquire are incredible, just to be able to navigate collections and find what they need.

What I found interesting was that while they had this immense practical knowledge of how collections are structured and how to navigate them, there was sometimes not a full understanding of the biases and contingencies of those systems. I think there was still a surprising amount of faith in how those records were described, arranged, and managed, and maybe less awareness of the imperfections of archival systems and the human beings doing the work. So that was a really interesting contrast.

AC: I've been thinking so much recently about access and use of the language centre archive because the people who mostly access it are the same people and families that created the material in it, and that have run the organisation that the archive sits within, and that have

managed non-Aboriginal people coming in – mostly linguists and researchers. So access looks totally different from what we're used to as archivists in mainstream settings. I've had to really rejig the way I think about access and use.

A huge component of my PhD thesis is about the language material that was created before Wangka Maya that is held in mainstream archives. I didn't plan for that to become a focus, but it had to be. I examined every major archival language collection from the first expedition into the Pilbara up to 1987. I was able to identify each language and person in all that material. That shouldn't have been work that Wangka Maya had to dedicate resources to, the material is held by institutions that receive funding for archiving. I know it's not enough funding, but they receive a huge amount of funding compared to what any community language centre is ever going to receive for their archive. However, my work was done through Wangka Maya, so the material belongs there now, in the community it came from. I can see what could happen is that the archives that hold the material will want access to that information to improve their collection metadata and inform access protocols. It will be up to Wangka Maya to really decide what to do with the information and how to negotiate that process.

Generally, access is simple and well established within the community, because material created since 1987 was created with a clear purpose at Wangka Maya. Material created before Wangka Maya is understood in the community as being created for the same purpose and treated with the same access protocols. The Pilbara is such a unique region historically and that is reflected in the continuity of language and culture, throughout the community and in the archive.

RT: One final question, what are some practical steps or an action we could take as a profession to improve the way theory and practice work together in archives?

ES: When I finished my PhD I felt like I was a bit disconnected from scholarship. I was going back to work full-time. So, I participated in the Critical Archives Reading Group. I found it helpful to activate my brain in an academic way and engage with other archivists about ideas and practice. I encourage people to join. It's a great group.

DL: I was reflecting on my comments about reading all this research, and thinking that I work in a university that has *access* to a whole lot of research. We have subscriptions to all these channels and databases, and that makes it readily available to me. So I'd encourage anyone who doesn't have that kind of access to seek out the authors of the research if they can. Find their email and get in touch with them, because they'll often be able to provide you with a copy of their research, and they would be thrilled that you're interested in their research. And of course, there are other places to find research online. For example, institutional repositories will often publish versions of research before they go to print so you'll be able to access pretty much the same thing for free.

EF: What I try and do is think about how engaging with research can help educate me and help me to take on the burden of self-education, particularly in my position as an able-bodied person, as a white person, as a person living in a colonised state. I think about how research can help to expand my knowledge, improve my practice, and not rely on colleagues within those positionalities to take on that burden themselves. I think we're really lucky to be in a context in Australia where incredibly diverse research is coming out that can help you do that work. Even if you just read one paper a month on a lunch break, and just start really thinking critically about the work you do and how you can help support necessary changes in how we think about and do archival work.

JL: For me, there are three things that come to mind. First, I think the open access stuff that Duncan mentioned is really important. I'm really proud that *Archives & Manuscripts* has moved in that direction. That's valuable, and I think we have to normalise it as an expectation more and more wherever possible. I would love to see *Archival Science* fully open access. I'm

co-editing a book series and those books are expensive, so I understand that it's a little ironic that I'm saying this, but I do think that open access is an important part of this.

If we want more reciprocity or more interaction between research and practice, then we need to consider research design and research methods, as core competencies for archival work and build that into whatever kind of education programs we're designing. I know that's a problem in Australia at the moment, with the education situation looking a bit bleak, but however training or education is happening, research skills should be part of it.

And then the reverse of that is a problem I'm seeing in North America that I don't think exists in Australia, which is this pipeline from the Master's degree straight into the PhD and then straight into academic jobs. You've got people who are writing and teaching about archival studies without ever having been a practitioner. I think that that shows up in their understanding of the work and raises a question about how informed their teaching is. So I think it works both ways. We want practising archivists to be researchers, but we also need the archival educators to engage with practice really solidly.

RB: One of the things that the ASA Queensland Branch and Queensland State Archives (QSA) do really well, is that they host talks regularly from researchers at the archives where practitioners can come and hear about the latest research. I think that's a really good way to do it. But yeah, open access all the way!

AC: I agree about publications being open access absolutely; but also presentations and talks. I'm often looking up archives and records talks on YouTube and I'm very appreciative that over the history of archives in Australia, YouTube has been a platform that's been used a lot.

Archives still have that regulatory function in government, and something we've discussed at the WA State Branch has been the diminishing number of people participating in the ASA. Even people who are at the Specified Calling Level in the public service as archives or records managers are not necessarily participating or holding membership in the professional bodies. Whether that's a government sector trend or a trend that ASA and RIMPA are looking at, I think that might be something that we need to approach; and as a profession, especially as a profession that does have a regulatory function, we need to make sure that professional development is active. Also, we need to support research practice in the workplace. Like James said, so much of the archival process involves on-the-job research, so we really need to maintain an understanding of that which I'm not seeing so much in younger professionals. The older generation of professionals is reaching retirement and commitment to the profession and on-the-job research is not necessarily carrying through.

RT: Thank you so much for your time, it's been absolutely fascinating.

Notes on contributors

Dr Mike Jones is an archivist, historian, and collections consultant with more than 15 years of experience working with the GLAM sector (galleries, libraries, archives, and museums) on digital, archival, and public history projects. Mike's interdisciplinary research explores the history of archives and museums, and the ways in which collections-based knowledge is documented, managed, exhibited, and preserved, with a particular interest in the potential of contemporary technologies to support this work. He is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow – Indigenous and Colonial Histories (University of Tasmania), and inaugural Convenor of the Australian Society of Archivists' Research and Education Special Interest Group (REDSIG). Mike is the author of *Artefacts, Archives, and Documentation in the Relational Museum* (Routledge, 2022).

Dr Rose Barrowcliffe is a Butchulla postdoctoral research fellow at the Department of Indigenous Studies and the Centre for Global Indigenous Futures. Rose's research examines the representation of Indigenous peoples in archives at both an organisational level and a

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Dr Evanthia (Eva) Samaras is a practitioner-researcher specialising in information management, archiving, digital preservation and media production. She presently works in the Information Governance Services group at the University of Melbourne and previously held positions at the National Archives of Australia, PROV and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. Eva completed her PhD in 2021 at the University of Technology Sydney. Her research examines records and archiving practices in the global film and television visual effects industry.

Elliot Freeman is an archival researcher and practitioner in Naarm/Melbourne. In the final stages of her doctorate at Monash University, Elliot's research explores queer/ing reparative description in institutional archives. She presently works as an archivist at La Trobe University and has a particular interest in making archival collections, skillsets, and experiences accessible for students. Elliot is a committee member of both the AQuA and the Australian Society of Archivists' Victorian Branch.

Duncan Loxton is an archivist involved in scholarly communication and managing research data. Duncan works for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Data Archive (ATSIDA) at the University of Technology Sydney Library where he strives to support the individual and collective rights of researchers, community groups and institutions to control the circumstances in which their knowledge is shared and applied. Duncan has previously worked at the Australian Museum, and State Archives and Records NSW.

Annie Cameron has worked with Aboriginal communities in the Pilbara region of Western Australia since 2014. She has extensive experience in language documentation, description and language revitalisation and maintenance. Annie completed her graduate diploma in archives and records management at Curtin in 2020 followed by a brief stint in public recordkeeping. Annie works closely with Pilbara Aboriginal community members to support the development of local linguistic and archival practices. She is currently the Senior Linguist at Wangka Maya Pilbara Aboriginal Language Centre. Annie's PhD at Charles Darwin University is investigating how an Aboriginal language centre archive supports community language activities.

Dr James Lowry is an Associate Professor and current Chair of the Graduate School of Library and Information Studies, Queens College, CUNY. James is the Ellen Libretto and Adam Conrad Endowed Chair in Information Studies and the founder and director of the Archival Technologies Lab. He is an Honorary Research Fellow at University College London and the University of Liverpool, where he was co-director of the Centre for Archive Studies, following a career in record-keeping in Australia, Europe, Africa and the Caribbean. His recent publications include *Disputed Archival Heritage*, an edited collection published by Routledge in 2022 and, with Riley Linebaugh, the award-winning article 'The Archival Colour Line: Race, Records and Post-Colonial Custody'. His writing has been translated into French, Spanish and Portuguese. James is the convenor of *Archival Discourses*, an international research network that fosters critical enquiry into the intellectual history of archives, and he is co-editor of the *Routledge Studies in Archives* book series.

Rachel Tropea is the Archivist and Senior Coordinator at RMIT University Archives. Prior to this, she was a research archivist at the University of Melbourne. Most of Rachel's experience has been in the 'action research' space, working on nationwide projects involving the community, practitioners, and researchers. This includes the *Who Am I?* and *Find & Connect* projects with people who grew up in out-of-home care in their quest to find out about their childhood, and, on another project, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to repatriate ancestral remains from museums, collecting institutions (including universities) and private collections, back to their community of origin.

Notes

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