

# Inclusive Archives and Recordkeeping: Towards a Critical Manifesto

Joanne Evans<sup>a\*</sup> and Jacqueline Z. Wilson<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Faculty of Information Technology Caulfield, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia;

<sup>b</sup> Collaborative Research Centre in Australian History, Federation University Australia, Ballarat, Australia

\*Associate Professor Joanne Evans

Centre for Organisational and Social Informatics

Caulfield Faculty of Information Technology

Monash University

900 Dandenong Road

Caulfield East

Victoria

Australia 3145

[joanne.evans@monash.edu](mailto:joanne.evans@monash.edu)

Associate Professor Joanne Evans is an ARC Future Fellow in the Faculty of Information Technology, Monash University, and co-ordinator of the Records Continuum Research Group, part of the Faculty's Centre of Organisational and Social Informatics. Her research explores the multifarious roles metadata plays in creating, managing, and sustaining information and recordkeeping infrastructure and systems, particularly in community settings. Her *Connecting the Disconnected: Co-designing Integrated and Inclusive Recordkeeping and Archival Networks* Future Fellowship research program is exploring inclusive archival design methodologies for sustainable living archives.

Associate Professor Jacqueline Z. Wilson is an historian in the Collaborative Centre for Australian History at Federation University Australia. She has authored over forty scholarly publications, including *Prison: Cultural Memory and Dark Tourism* (2008) which was the first national study of prison heritage sites, and she is the lead editor for *The Palgrave Handbook of Prison Tourism* (2017). Jacqueline is currently a chief investigator on several collaborative research projects supported by the Sidney Myer Fund and the Australian Research Council Discovery Awards. She is a former ward of the State of Victoria and an activist and advocate for Care Leavers in Australia. This underpins much of her research which is concerned with historical justice, national memory, heritage and experiences of State care and punitive welfare systems.

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## **Inclusive Archives and Recordkeeping: Towards a Critical Manifesto**

The need for archiving systems and methodological approaches that acknowledge and accommodate the manifold complexities of memory-making has been well established for decades. Just as history and heritage have come to be understood as domains of (at times hotly) contested narratives, so too the archival sources upon which they draw, and in turn further create, are now increasingly interrogated regarding their intrinsic ideological biases, their role in creating and maintaining power imbalances, and their integrity as products of variant, at times conflicting, motives and points of view.

A growing community archives movement has taken advantage of the capabilities of digital and networking technologies to build archives to create, capture, collect and share their stories. It is exciting to see archival and recordkeeping processes and systems being valued and used by individuals and communities to express and signify their identity. The diversity of ways in which a multiplicity of life experiences and world views can be represented is also inspiring, along with leading to the recognition and emergence of a myriad of different kinds of evidentiary and memory texts. Through these initiatives archives become tools for promoting and promulgating social justice and inclusion agendas — for questioning attitudes, changing thinking, and refiguring practices — rather than as institutional bastions of power and privilege in support of a dominant hegemony. In raising issues about the ownership, control, and shaping of the archival record the traditional structures, strictures and ethics of archival and recordkeeping professional practice are also called into question.

These developments have given rise to a growing number of educators, practitioners, and researchers joining with community advocates and activists to question the social constructs, values and power differentials embedded in existing archival and recordkeeping frameworks, processes, systems and technologies. As with Critical Heritage Studies this community is keen to ask provoking and uncomfortable questions about the marginalisation and exclusion that traditional thinking and practices sustain and propagate, and to interrogate the role that archives and recordkeeping plays in the exercise and abuse of power in society. It is also keen on moving beyond insight and critique, utilising interventionist and inclusive research and development methodologies to bring about radical and fundamental transformations in the way recordkeeping and archiving is understood and enacted. Of particular interest is enabling decolonised, imagined and participatory archives built on principles for acknowledging, respecting, representing, and negotiating multiple rights in records in and through time and space.

In this themed section of the journal we explore this movement from a variety of perspectives with the aim of developing a critical archives and recordkeeping ethos.

In an era of rapidly emerging technological advances in information storage and retrieval, a plethora of issues which may be encapsulated in the over-arching concept of ‘accountability’ must be addressed in the creation of contemporary memory-systems. How is this best to be done? Leisa Gibbons essays a comprehensive response to this question in her article, ‘Use of personal reflexive modelling in challenging conceptualisations of cultural heritage’, with her explication of the ‘Mediated Recordkeeping Model’ (MRkM), a structured archival schema designed to provide a detailed conceptual framework, or map, by which inclusive, interactive and subject-owned memories can be create and managed.

Gibbons’s model embodies a series of procedural steps that in their final expression encompass an abundance of aspects of the archival process. The MRkM is depicted in graphic form that illustrates its scope to guide the practitioner toward a full appreciation of the multi-dimensional skein of facets to be accounted for. Thus the personnel involved — the co-creator of the records (cognate, in Gibbons’s schema, with the modeller), and those who interpret, organise and curate them, among others — are defined and systematised in the context of environment, process, purport, motive and expectations.

Gibbons demonstrates the MRkM in use with an example taken from a YouTube clip that has been archived by the National Film and Sound Archive (NFSA): a tongue-in-cheek reinterpretation of ‘Zorba’s Dance’ by an Aboriginal troupe calling themselves ‘The Chooky Dancers’. Her step-by-step analysis of both the original video and the memory-making processes at play in the NFSA’s preservation of it amply demonstrate the complexities involved, and the sheer multiplicity of factors requiring attention, in creating a genuinely inclusive archive. It also serves to illustrate the scope of archiving as a dynamic, technologically sophisticated practice.

In their article ‘Between speaking out in public and being person-centred’, Chloe Brownlee-Chapman and her fellow-researchers explain the development of their Living Archive of Learning Disability History (LALDH), aimed at achieving a synthesis of heritage, learning disability and the role of archives in empowering those traditionally deemed unable to engage meaningfully in high-end analytical research. Through the personal narratives of individuals with a range of learning disabilities, outlining their experiences of participating in inclusive analytical research, we come to understand how the LALDH can potentially reverse the long-

established trend in archiving, especially in public institutions, that result in records ‘dominated by the viewpoint of those in power, the decision makers’ (Brownlee-Chapman et al.).

The LALDH, which is designed to embody the flexibility and inconstancy of real-world individuals’ intent — contributions can be temporary or ongoing, for instance — exemplifies the value of ‘self-advocacy’ as a form of activism that has proved effective in achieving equitable autonomy for excluded or marginalised groups. Here, too, the role of memory-making methods and facilities is central, provided they are controlled and ‘owned’ by those whose stories are represented. This is achieved through processes of conversational collaboration, public activism, and the pursuit of a ‘person-centred’ ethos.

A re-imagining of disability, in which the individual is defined not in terms of limitations but in terms of potential, is key to projects such as the LALDH, and needs to become far more a feature of wider societal and academic perceptions and expectations. ‘Between speaking out in public and being person-centred’ provides invaluable insights and perspectives upon which such a perceptual shift could occur. It also describes the project team’s methodology for ‘de-mystify[ing] the research process’ (Brownlee-Chapman et al.) in order to facilitate engagement and inclusion across the fullest possible spectrum of intellectual abilities. One of the article’s great virtues is that it challenges all of us in the academic community to rethink our assumptions regarding the nature of our work and its relationship and relevance to a wide range of people.

In ‘More voice, less ventriloquism’, Anna Sexton and Dolly Sen recount the inception and development of the Mental Health Recovery Archive (MHRA), the result of a collaboration between researchers whose relationship evolved, in the course of creating the archive, from a working partnership into a friendship. They explain the ramifications of this shift in the research dynamic, and how and why it proved a positive factor in the project.

An exemplar of participatory research, the article cogently illustrates the inherent shortcomings in ‘traditional’, authority-based archiving processes as representative of those undergoing treatment in a mental health environment. All too often — as in so many situations involving interaction between health professionals or carers and their clientele — an innately adversarial relationship prevails and tends to be reflected in the content, tenor and form of records created. As Dolly Sen tellingly puts it, ‘most of the archives that depict mental health lived experience are filtered by mental health professionals, but that is like lions representing bird song in roars. Why should the hunter give the hunted’s history?’

(Sexton and Sen)

The MHRA aims to address this power imbalance by gathering the personal writings and reminiscences of people as they recover from mental illness, thus preserving a record of the stories not heard by the treating professionals. In the process the tendency of the system to objectify the patient and render them abstract and categorised is countered, and thus privilege and power are challenged and scrutinised. Sexton & Sen's article not only explores challenges for inclusive archiving, but also of inclusive research. Through the exploration of their research relationship, they artfully illuminate many of the dilemmas encountered in seeking to undertake participatory research from within frameworks that privilege academic over lived experience and expertise. Their article can serve as a guide on how to navigate and negotiate participation in both archiving and research processes to challenge and transform embedded power differentials.

The nature of heritage itself, and its relationship to processes of memory-making, is central to Jacqueline Wilson and Frank Golding's article 'Loud Fences', which examines a grass-roots activist campaign that arose out of the recent Australian Government's Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. The campaign, which involved no marches, slogans or overtly adversarial tactics, consisted of simply installing coloured ribbons, as symbolic commemorations of the victims, on the boundary fences of institutions — churches, schools, former orphanages, and so on — that had been implicated in the Royal Commission as having contributed to the suffering of children in their care.

As Wilson and Golding point out, many of the institutions targeted by Loud Fences have long histories within their communities as bastions of 'Establishment' heritage, and their shaming in the Royal Commission has had significant impact not only on their community standing, but also on those aspects of community identity bound up with the institutions' historical narratives. The installation of hundreds of coloured ribbons, as ironically bright signifiers of the institutions' darkest aspects, both disrupts the existing heritage narrative, and overlays a new narrative, not exclusive of the old but incongruent with it, that must then be somehow assimilated into each institution's overall heritage identity. How, the article asks, is this 'disrupted history' to be recorded? How archived?

These are complex questions, given that any activist campaign is bound to be a dynamic and perhaps ephemeral affair. In the case of Loud Fences, which comprises material artefacts whose physical location is intrinsic to their symbolic meaning, the various institutions' responses to the campaign — which ranged from rejection, through grudging

partial acceptance, to wholehearted embracement of both artefact and shame — and the campaigners' subsequent 'replies', constitute a silent, symbolic 'dialogue' with manifold implications for heritage and memory-making. Wilson and Golding acknowledge the difficulties inherent in archiving such transient events and phenomena, while yet noting the urgent need to make some sort of attempt, however imperfect, to do so.