

Archiving Feminism: Papers, Politics, Posterity



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RÉSUMÉ Cet article explore le processus par lequel la bibliothèque nationale australienne a acquis les archives personnelles de Merle Thornton, qui documentent des décennies d'activisme féministe. Thornton, une personnalité éminente des débuts de la deuxième vague du mouvement féministe australien, est mieux connue comme l'une des « suffragettes des bars » (« *Bar Room Suffragettes* »), qui en 1965 se sont enchaînées au bar principal de l'hôtel Regatta à Brisbane, réclamant le droit des femmes de boire aux côtés des hommes dans les bars publics. En se penchant sur le processus par lequel on a sauvegardé ces documents, l'auteure pose une série de questions au sujet des archives et du vieillissement, de l'intégration de l'histoire personnelle dans la mémoire collective et du rôle des sources archivistiques pour fixer les conditions rendant possible l'écriture de l'histoire de l'activisme féministe. De plus, en se penchant sur son propre rôle dans ce projet, l'auteure se demande s'il est possible d'effectuer le travail de « l'archivage du féminisme » sur des bases radicalement non-nostalgiques qui contestent le positionnement discursif des activistes de la deuxième vague comme une génération dont le patrimoine politique est menacé par la « culture de l'oubli » contemporaine. Enfin, l'article aborde nécessairement la tension entre les archives comme mécanisme de la mémoire et l'enchevêtrement propre aux archives entre attentes et possibilités futures.

ABSTRACT This article explores the process of securing for the National Library of Australia Merle Thornton's personal archive, which documents decades of feminist activism. Thornton, a noted figure in Australia's early second-wave women's movement, is best known as one of the "Bar Room Suffragettes," who in 1965 chained themselves to the front bar of the Regatta Hotel in Brisbane, demanding women's right to drink alongside men in public bars. In reflecting on the process of securing these papers, the author poses a series of questions concerning archives and aging, the folding of personal history into collective memory, and the role of archival source material in determining the conditions of possibility for writing histories of feminist activism. Further, in reflecting on her own role in the project, the author asks whether it is possible to perform the work of "archiving feminism" on radically non-nostalgic terms that challenge the discursive positioning of second-wave activists as a generation whose political legacy is threatened by a contemporary "culture of forgetting." Finally, the article necessarily engages with the tension between the archive as a memory device and the archive's entanglement with anticipation and futurity.

“...when you use the term ‘second wave’ it actually started in Brisbane.”

– Kay Saunders¹

“Loss narratives *require* the ‘death of feminism’ in order to retain a static and familiar object to be lamented, in order to ensure at all costs that they do not encounter that object in the present, and in order to imagine a future in which that familiar feminism can be recovered by the same subjects as those who keen for its current internment.”

– Clare Hemmings²

“Bar Room Suffragette”

On the afternoon of 31 March 1965, Merle Thornton and her friend Ro Bognor entered the public bar of Brisbane’s Regatta Hotel and ordered two drinks. State legislation of the period made it illegal for women to be served in public bars³: they were only permitted to drink in the “ladies” lounge, where, despite women’s lower wages, the drinks were more expensive. Thornton and Bognor were refused drinks and asked to leave, at which point they chained themselves to the foot-rail of the bar. When the police arrived and discovered that there were no keys to the padlock, they set out to find bolt cutters.⁴ All the while, the husbands of the two women were circulating in the bar, distributing leaflets soliciting support for the women’s cause. The event garnered extraordinarily intense press coverage, not only nationally but internationally. Indeed, Thornton and Bognor – recognizing the power of the media as a channel for prosecuting their claims – had issued a press release earlier in the day and had timed their protest to ensure they would make that evening’s television bulletins. This media involvement was strategic and clearly designed to put pressure on a government that had rebuffed their direct approaches through the formal lobbying channels open to them. Their actions that afternoon constituted the first use of direct action anywhere by feminists of the second-wave era. As the women were at pains to articulate in their leaflet, their primary concern was not the exclusion of women from drinking opportunities per se, although they genuinely opposed the legis-

1 Interview with Kay Saunders for “Women,” broadcast as part of the program “Encounter,” Australian Broadcasting Corporation Radio National, 14 November 1999, transcript accessed 25 January 2014, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/encounter/women/3562116>.

2 Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 73 (italics in original).

3 Women would sometimes be refused service in other states as well, but it was at the publican’s discretion, not by law as it was in Queensland.

4 Elaine Dignan had taken the keys to the padlocks and thrown them into the Brisbane River, opposite the hotel.

lation that lay at the heart of the protest. They were concerned with what the legislation symbolized: women's exclusion from public spaces and public life more generally. In short, the two women were staging a protest for equal citizenship, a demand that underpinned much of Thornton's subsequent career as a feminist activist. As she would recall more than forty years later, "What we did at the Regatta represented an idea whose time had come. It was the idea of ending the confinement of women to the private domestic sphere."⁵ Moreover, and crucially, as historian Marilyn Lake acknowledges, the Regatta Hotel protest "presaged a new phase in the history of feminism," one in which "feminism [was] becoming brazen and intemperate."⁶

Looking back, it is hard now to grasp the scale of the storm that arose around the Regatta protest. Media coverage dwelt extensively on the seeming disjunction between Thornton's and Bognor's status as respectable middle-class wives and mothers and their demands about public drinking. The two women were also young, pretty, and well groomed, a further point of confusion given that the media had, since the suffrage campaigns of the nineteenth century, "depicted feminists as physically unattractive women who ... could not get a man."⁷ Missing the wider point of the campaign, newspaper reporters and interviewers often questioned why "nice" ladies would seek to enter "low" spaces associated with drunkenness, swearing, and vice. This was despite the fact that women elsewhere already enjoyed such access. Indeed, Thornton and Bognor's leaflet had expressly proclaimed "WE ONLY WANT A RIGHT AVAILABLE IN ALL OTHER AUSTRALIAN STATES."⁸ The women did not have the protection of today's privacy regimes, which meant that local and interstate media covering the protest were free to publish intimate details of their lives, including where they lived, to whom they were married, their husbands' professions, and how many children they had, along with the children's ages. Much was made of the fact that Thornton's and Bognor's husbands were both employed as lecturers at the nearby University of Queensland, and that a question was asked in State Parliament about whether university staff were given psychiatric examinations before taking up their appointments. The clear implication was that no man in his right mind would "let" his wife behave in such a manner – much less accompany her in support of such actions – and if he did, he should not have access to impressionable young minds.

5 Merle Thornton, "Our Chains: Rear View Reflections," *Queensland Review* 14, no. 1 (2007): 51.

6 Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999), 214.

7 Marian Sawer, *Making Women Count: A History of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia* (Kensington, NSW: UNSW Press, 2008), 8.

8 Merle Thornton Papers, series 5, folder 1 (emphasis in original). At the time of writing, the papers were still in Thornton's possession, ahead of their transfer to the National Library of Australia. See later discussion on this point.

This level of highly personalized coverage generated hate mail directed at the two women.⁹ These letters, sent by both women and men, variously accused Thornton and Bognor of being alcoholics, morally degenerate, neglectful mothers, and domineering wives – in short, a threat to the sanctity of the form of virtuous womanhood that found its expression in domesticity and sobriety. Some of the letters were signed, while others were either sent anonymously or their authors hid behind colourful pseudonyms such as “Disgusted.” Believing the women’s actions had already placed them beyond the pale, the authors of the hate mail assumed the right to chastise these fallen women (“Don’t you look cheap and mannish instead of being home looking after your children”), and they adopted a uniformly abusive rhetoric in which the cause of licensing reform was conflated with general moral slackness (“slut”) and social drinking with drunkenness (“gin soaked”). The letters are profoundly misogynist. Each letter writer expresses in different ways horror at the prospect of women stepping outside their pre-ordained domestic and maternal roles, in some cases issuing evangelical calls for them to return to those roles as swiftly as they could. For example, a Mrs. Owen Smith was “shocked to read of a Professor’s wife making such a show of herself” and asked, “What sort of home life are you making for your man & your poor little children?” She concluded by imploring Thornton to “Stay home & do a better job than you are doing.”¹⁰ There were also several instances of photos being cut from newspapers and sent to the women with litanies of abuse scrawled across Thornton’s and Bognor’s faces and bodies. To the authors of this mail – filled as they were with fury and fear – the Regatta protesters appeared to presage the end of civilization. These documents represent quite unique and striking evidence of how threatening the citizenship claims of second-wave feminists appeared to those with a significant stake in the prevailing gender order. As Thornton observed, “Someone who threatens to kill you must feel personally threatened in some important way.”¹¹ That the back of one of the letters contains hasty jottings in Thornton’s hand, referring, it seems, to women’s low levels of participation in certain university courses (“1964 ... 1/4 science, none engineering, 10% commerce”) suggests that her desire for social change remained undiminished in the face of such profound opposition.

Access to this unusual – and unusually confrontational – correspondence came about through participation in the process of archiving Thornton’s personal papers, which were generated throughout decades of activism, teaching, and writing. What follows is an account of that project: how it arose and proceeded,

9 Amanda Izzo similarly records finding hate mail in the papers of Gloria Steinem. See Amanda Izzo, “Outrageous and Everyday: The Papers of Gloria Steinem,” *The Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 151–53.

10 Merle Thornton Papers, series 5, folder 1.

11 Thornton, “Our Chains,” 52.

its challenges and outcomes, and the ways in which it prompted a series of questions for me concerning archives and aging, the folding of personal history into collective memory, and the role of archival source material in determining the conditions of possibility for writing histories of feminism.

Paper Chase

Contact with Thornton occurred initially through my co-researcher, Margaret Henderson, who was conducting a consultancy for the Museum of Australia aimed at documenting and collecting significant artifacts associated with the Australian women's liberation movement.¹² Thornton had been approached to ascertain whether she retained – and could be persuaded to donate – the chain and padlock used at the Regatta Hotel. While it turned out she no longer possessed those (in)famous items, her enthusiastic discussion of that episode and her efforts to identify suitable alternative donations revealed a woman with a penchant for personal recordkeeping, someone who had preserved detailed documentation of her “life in feminism.” In conversation, she estimated that she possessed about eight filing cabinets filled with personal papers, including letters, press clippings, manuscripts, speeches, organizational records, scripts, and videotapes. These items had survived more than ten household moves – local and interstate – in the five decades since the height of her activism. Moreover, as we would discover, the usual formal distinctions between personal papers and organizational records ceased to be meaningful ones in this instance. As can be the case with individuals who are active in mostly informal or community-based organizations and networks, Thornton's personal papers also incorporated the only substantial, extant documentary repository for many of the events and organizations with which she had been closely associated. Although neither my co-researcher nor I had specific archival training, we had already undertaken a survey of the dispersed and fragmentary nature of the publicly accessible holdings relating to Australia's second-wave women's movement,¹³ and thus we recognized the value of these types of primary materials, not least because they documented grassroots feminist activism taking place outside the more familiar southeastern axis of Sydney–Canberra–Melbourne.¹⁴ At the same

12 See Alison Bartlett and Margaret Henderson, “The Australian Women's Movement Goes to the Museum: The ‘Cultures of Australian Feminist Activism, 1970–1990’ Project,” *Women's Studies International Forum* 37 (March–April 2013): 85–94.

13 See Alison Bartlett, Maryanne Dever, and Margaret Henderson, “Notes Toward an Archive of Australian Feminist Activism,” *Outskirts* 16, <http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-16/bartlett>.

14 On this latter point, and more generally on geographical lacunae in accounts of the Australian women's movement, see Margaret Henderson and Margaret Reid, “‘It's Not That Bloody Far from Sydney’: Notes Towards a Semiotic History of the Brisbane Women's Movement, 1973–1983,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 19, no. 44 (July 2004): 159–68.

time, it was apparent to us that Thornton was in difficult circumstances. She was elderly, a pensioner, and caring for a chronically ill husband. The state of her papers was causing her anxiety: she understood that their organization and ultimately their preservation were critical to enduring public recognition of her activism, but she considered it beyond her ability and resources to address the matter. We could also be reasonably sure that the types of documents Thornton possessed – newsletters, minutes, handbills, roneoed circulars, and so on – were especially vulnerable because they were generally created with a view to urgency and speed rather than longevity and, as generally happens in such situations, “the quality of the materials used in their production ... is usually insubstantial and susceptible to rapid deterioration.”¹⁵

Given this situation, we crafted a uniquely productive, if occasionally uneasy, collaboration with Thornton, which saw us working with support from several funding bodies and in close consultation with staff from a national collecting institution to resolve Thornton’s dilemma. It was an interesting position in which to find ourselves: this style of co-operative initiative between scholars, activists, and collecting institutions is generally associated with an earlier period in the development of women’s history,¹⁶ and despite the more recent “archival turn”¹⁷ in the humanities, it remains relatively uncommon for those engaged in archival research to contend with “the broader processes by which such evidence came to be saved, placed in an archive, catalogued by a professional, and listed in a card catalogue.”¹⁸

Following a series of preliminary telephone conversations and emails, and with Thornton’s enthusiastic agreement, we approached the National Library of Australia (NLA) to determine whether it was interested in acquiring the papers. Although some of Thornton’s most celebrated activist initiatives took place in Brisbane, the NLA was selected over Brisbane’s John Oxley Library (State

15 Jan Paris, “Conservation and the Politics of Use and Value in Research Libraries (paper presented at the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC 28th Annual Meeting, 8–13 June 2000, Philadelphia, PA), accessed 10 June 2013, <http://cool.conservation-us.org/coolaic/sg/bpg/annual/v19/bp19-16.html#note3>.

16 See, for example, Wendy Chmielewski, “Women’s History Archives,” in *Archival Information: How to Find It, How to Use It*, ed. Steven Fisher (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 65–83.

17 See, for example, Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Thomas Osborne, “The Ordinarity of the Archive,” *History of the Human Sciences* 12, no. 2 (May 1999): 51–64; Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Maryanne Dever, Sally Newman, and Ann Vickery, *The Intimate Archive* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2009).

18 Honor R. Sachs, “Reconstructing a Life: The Archival Challenges of Women’s History,” *Library Trends* 56, no. 3 (Winter 2008): 651.

Library of Queensland) and the Fryer Library at the University of Queensland because Thornton's achievements were of national significance. Thornton initially favoured the regional Brisbane institutions, where other well-known local radicals¹⁹ had deposited their papers, but she also accepted the argument that having her collection in a more centrally located, national-level institution offered the possibility of both greater visibility and accessibility for future researchers, as well as considerable additional prestige. An approach was made to the National Library's then curator of manuscripts, Marie-Louise Ayres, who confirmed that the NLA would indeed be keen to accept the donation of Thornton's papers and that it could advise on preparation of the papers off-site ahead of their eventual transfer. It was also agreed that, as a complement to the papers, we would record an interview with Thornton for inclusion in the NLA's oral history collection and that the NLA would arrange for a formal photographic portrait of Thornton. A site visit to Thornton's inner-Melbourne home was organized to enable NLA staff to confirm the suitability and scope of the project and to get to know Thornton in her capacity as a potential donor.

Once the broad parameters of the work and a budget for its completion had been established, we set about identifying potential funding sources. As the project did not conform to the regular definitions of "research" in terms of aims, scope, and outcomes (the principal expenditure item was the employment of a qualified archivist to box the records in situ and to create a detailed descriptive box list), we bypassed traditional research funding schemes (such as the Australian Research Council) in favour of philanthropic foundations that we hoped would appreciate the project's potential and its urgency. We lodged an initial application with the Feminist Review Trust (UK). When this was unsuccessful, we made a submission to the Sidney Myer Fund – a major Australian philanthropic organization known for its support of education and the arts – at the same time writing directly to the Office of the Premier of Queensland (Anna Bligh) with a request for financial assistance. Both funding avenues proved successful, and we engaged Jane Ellen, a consultant archivist located in Melbourne who had experience with feminist organizational records and was available to work part-time. Thornton and Ellen met for lunch and decided that they could work together. As the processing of the papers was to occur in Thornton's residence, the work program was designed to cause the least possible disruption to Thornton and her husband. After an initial teleconference briefing involving National Library staff, Ellen and ourselves, in which we mapped the project and established expectations, we arranged for Ellen to spend one or two days per week at Thornton's residence for a period of approximately three months,

19 For further details of Brisbane's radical past, see Raymond Evans and Carole Ferrier with Jeff Rickertt, eds., *Radical Brisbane: An Unruly History* (Carlton North, VIC: Vulgar Press, 2004).

working through the papers, liaising with us and with the National Library to determine which documents were “in scope”²⁰ and which were not, boxing the papers, and ultimately producing a finding aid and descriptive box listing for the twenty-five boxes that came to comprise the collection.

What was distinctive about Thornton’s papers as a whole was their orderliness. With respect to her correspondence, newspaper clippings, and campaign documentation, she was clearly a “filer” rather than a “piler,”²¹ who, over the years, had commonly arranged materials concerning particular political campaigns in labelled manila folders. This documentation was important to her, and in the course of our oral history interview she would on occasion proffer a particular item in support of a point she was making. Thornton had experienced some success as a fiction writer and a screenwriter for film and television, and she had systematically preserved drafts of her creative work (both published and unpublished), associated research materials, and clippings of various reviews. This meant that Ellen’s work was focused primarily on seeking clarification from Thornton on the correct identification of already filed materials for the descriptive box listing. Care was taken, for example, to distinguish between completed and unfinished drafts of fiction and screenplays, as well as produced and unproduced scripts. In the course of this work, therefore, Ellen made only minimal intervention in the prevailing organization of the papers, using Thornton’s file titles and maintaining original order. Some limited work was done to unify existing correspondence files, but correspondence interleaved with other related documents (e.g., in the scrapbook on the Regatta Hotel protest) was left in those locations.

Despite the level of resources and organization, the project was not without its challenges. As the work began to unfold, it became apparent that Thornton, not surprisingly, had complicated investments in what was taking place. Her life and her history found a material form in her papers, and in them was the evidence that she mattered. While age and infirmity were the ever-present conditions of working in and around Thornton and her increasingly frail husband, the implicit recognition that the physical removal of the papers from her home would indeed mark the end of something meant that we struggled, for example, with the question of just when the transfer to the National Library would take

20 Among materials considered not “in scope” were items detailing earlier generations of Thornton’s family and copies of television news interviews (principally VHS tapes) that were already available in other public collections or available from those media organizations. Materials and papers relating to Thornton’s husband and his career were excluded after consultation between Ellen and staff of the NLA. Notably, Thornton did not offer documentation relating to her children, particularly her daughter, Sigrid, who is a very popular Australian actor and likely to be the subject of a future collection in her own right.

21 Steve Whittaker and Julia Hirschberg, “The Character, Value and Management of Personal Paper Archives,” *ACM Transactions on Computer-Human Interaction* 8, no. 2 (June 2001): 150–70.

place. Whatever sense of satisfaction might be achieved from closure or from the knowledge that the papers would be secure had to be, as we realized, weighed against a palpable sense of loss. Numerous theorists have commented on how death and the archive are deeply entangled: Derrida writes of the archive's very structure as "spectral"²²; and Freshwater describes the "ghostly"²³ nature of those we encounter there. But it is Wexler and Long, in their reflection on the work of field archivists, who perhaps best account for what we were experiencing. Field archivists routinely operate in a "sensitive zone of life and death" as they appraise collections from donors "at the end of their careers and the end of their lives – whether or not they are able to acknowledge these realities."²⁴

While some donors view the removal of the accumulated detritus of their lives with something akin to relief, others, as Wexler and Long observe, view it as being confronted with their own mortality. Thus, we became implicated in a series of gestures or bargains seemingly designed to forestall the very process we had been party to initiating. Thornton's agreement to the professional organization and donation of her papers was accompanied by a performance of hesitancy. Most notably, from the time of the initial site visit, Thornton indicated that she was in the process of compiling a memoir for which continued access to the papers would, of course, be essential. The question of the memoir haunted our ongoing contact with her; she insisted that our project not detract from or in any way interfere with the production of this work, the schedule for which was – unlike our own – open-ended. Even the offer to send a packet of fragile and water-damaged papers to the NLA for urgent conservation work was refused on the grounds that they could not be spared even briefly. These hesitations ultimately led to the decision on the part of the NLA to treat the papers as a delayed collection that would be transferred when Thornton was comfortable relinquishing it. Initial agreements between the parties were drawn up and labels were affixed to the boxes – now stored and stacked in one of Thornton's front rooms – indicating their final destination as the National Library. In this way, general recognition was achieved that the formal acquisition process had at least begun. The formal portrait photographs and the oral history interview thus paved the way for the papers that would come later.²⁵

22 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 84.

23 Helen Freshwater, "The Allure of the Archive," *Poetics Today* 24, no. 4 (Winter 2003): 738.

24 Geoff Wexler and Linda Long, "Lifetimes and Legacies: Mortality, Immortality, and the Needs of Aging and Dying Donors," *American Archivist* 72, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2009): 478, 480.

25 Portraits of Merle Thornton, Collingwood, Victoria, 19 January 2011, by Greg Power can be viewed via the catalogue of the National Library of Australia (www.nla.gov.au) under the call number PIC NL40383. The oral history interview recorded on 25–27 January 2011 can be accessed at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn5055859>.

What we experienced in these negotiations, however, was more than a complicated process of “letting go.” It was also a salient reminder to us that Thornton could not be understood solely as the object of this archiving exercise or even as its descriptive subject. While it may have been expedient when seeking funding, for example, to frame the project in ways that privileged formal archival practices, together with their traditional agents and institutions, it was impossible in the context of our continuing work with Thornton to elide her own role as the central agent of her archive, an archive created, shaped and preserved “well beyond the boundaries of the institutions that have historically authorized their existence.”²⁶ The introduction of the memoir into our discussions, which foregrounded Thornton’s understandably proprietary disposition toward the papers, threw this question of agency into relief by underscoring for us how the “archived” Thornton was constituted by the “archiving” Thornton, who over decades had diligently determined the extent and nature of the documentary record that would be available for posterity.²⁷ In her work on collecting oral histories of the Australian second-wave women’s movement, Magarey has observed that one must contend not only with how those feminists “want to remember feminism themselves,” but also with “how they want feminism to be remembered.”²⁸ In our project with Thornton, I could definitely identify with these themes. But something else was also present. What was additionally at issue in our work with Thornton, I realized, was the dilemma of how such figures want to be remembered as feminists. This would remain central to the project.

Getting Equal

Our desire to secure Thornton’s papers for the NLA was driven by the wish to make the papers broadly accessible to future researchers. The production of any history of Australia’s second-wave women’s movement – and, in particular, the accounts of the role of activists within it – is intimately connected to the movement’s archival legacy; in short, the possibilities for writing that history depend on the nature and quality of the available documentation. While some efforts have been made to combat the fragmented and dispersed nature of

26 Kate Eichhorn, “D.I.Y. Collectors, Archiving Scholars, and Activist Librarians: Legitimizing Feminist Knowledge and Cultural Production Since 1990,” *Women’s Studies* 39, no. 6 (September 2010): 623.

27 This distinction draws on the work of Jennifer Douglas and Heather MacNeil, “Arranging the Self: Literary and Archival Perspectives on Writers’ Archives,” *Archivaria* 67 (Spring 2009): 25–39. Douglas and MacNeil distinguish between the “archiving I” and “archived I,” noting how “the ‘archiving I’ makes decisions about the retention and disposition of the various documents and texts that will be preserved as the archive of the self” (p. 35).

28 Susan Magarey, “Memory and Desire: Feminists Re-membering Feminism,” *Lilith* 14 (2005): 10.

sources for Australian women's history more generally,²⁹ Australia, in contrast to many other nations, has no central collection or repository dedicated to its women's movement.³⁰ That the documentary heritage of Australia's second wave has been preserved in an uneven, ad hoc, and partial fashion³¹ inevitably limits public and scholarly access to materials that are vitally necessary to contest the ways in which that movement is remembered, narrated, and debated.

Working through Thornton's papers, I could readily see what they offered as a resource. In addition to containing what is undoubtedly the most comprehensive record of the Regatta protest and its prolonged reverberations,³² they also provide documentation of other significant campaigns. These include the founding in Brisbane of Equal Opportunities for Women (EOW) by Thornton, Bognor, and others in the immediate aftermath of the Regatta episode; included are details of EOW's concerted campaign for the removal of the Marriage Bar in the Commonwealth and State Public Services, legislation that terminated women's employment upon marriage.³³ This was the same legislation that had

29 I refer in particular to the Australian Women's Register, with its searchable database of biographical, archival, and organizational information: http://www.womenaustralia.info/archives/br_a_arc.htm.

30 Key examples are the Canadian Women's Movement Archive, which is housed within the special collections of the University of Ottawa Library (<http://uottawa.ca/libguides.com/content.php?pid=194014&sid=1626252>); and the Netherlands, which supports the International Archives for the Women's Movement, housed in its Aletta Institute for Women's History in Amsterdam (<http://www.aletta.nu/aletta/eng>).

31 Various small collections exist, such as the Adelaide Women's Liberation Movement Archive, housed in the State Library of South Australia; the Victorian Women's Liberation and Lesbian Feminist Archive, housed in the University of Melbourne Archives; the Jessie Street National Women's Library and the Lespar Library of Women's Liberation, both housed within the special collections at Murdoch University, Perth. Further records and artifacts concerning Australian second-wave activism remain in private hands.

32 Merle Thornton Papers, series 5, folders 1–3. This contains, for example, a 22-page scrapbook of press clippings of the Regatta Hotel coverage locally and nationally, in addition to press releases, copies of the leaflet distributed in the bar, and correspondence between Thornton and Peter Delamothe, Minister for Justice and Attorney General (for the state of Queensland), who was responsible for overseeing a review of the Queensland licensing laws and who had treated a delegation of women (including Thornton and Bognor) in a patronizing manner the day before the Regatta Hotel protest.

33 Merle Thornton Papers, series 6. The Marriage Bar (Regulation 139) had been in place in the Australian Commonwealth Public Service since 1901. Regulation 139 stated that "the employment of married women in the Service is deemed undesirable, but if in any special case it should be considered advisable to depart from this rule, employment may be sanctioned upon the recommendations of the Permanent Head and the special certificate of the Commissioner in each case." The removal of the regulation was first recommended by the Boyer Commission in 1958, and the National Council of Women passed resolutions at its national conferences in 1960, 1962, and 1964, but it was a further eight years before the change was effected. While EOW had been effective in pushing for this change, it did not manage to achieve its additional objective of the reinstatement of women who had been dismissed as a consequence of the Marriage Bar. See Marian Sawyer, ed., *Removal of the Commonwealth Marriage Bar: A Documentary History* (Belconnen, ACT: Centre for

earlier ended Thornton's graduate employment at the Australian Broadcasting Commission after several years of successfully concealing her married state.³⁴ The EOW records are interesting in several key respects. While the Regatta Hotel protest demonstrated Thornton's and Bognor's early awareness of the strategic uses that could be made of the media – something more often associated with later phases of second-wave campaigning³⁵ – EOW documents in contrast show a reliance on a more traditional, genteel style of formal political lobbying, as evidenced in detailed correspondence files, meeting agendas, minute books, and invitations to catered Christmas gatherings. Sheafs of letters congratulating the founders on the initiative and attached membership forms and fees indicate that this type of organizing appealed to a broad spectrum of women in the local community who might not have identified with the Regatta Hotel protest but who could identify with general calls for equality and demands to end sanctioned forms of discrimination against women. The volume of clippings from newspapers, moreover, recalls a moment in time when feminism – or at least the demands made in its name – was newsworthy.³⁶

EOW was extremely active in both collating existing research and conducting its own on the harm done to women by discriminatory legislation such as the Marriage Bar. Papers held by Thornton document how different Australian women's organizations – some new and others well established³⁷ – co-operated with EOW to share research and devise complementary strategies for lobbying state and federal politicians. These papers clearly show that EOW, unlike later groups associated with the women's liberation movement, emphatically encouraged the membership of both women and men, and this philosophy (one vigorously espoused by Thornton³⁸) underpinned one of the organization's most

Research in Public Sector Management, University of Canberra, 1996); and Commonwealth of Australia, *Lifting and Raising the Bar* (Canberra: Commonwealth Public Service Commission Office for Women, 2006).

- 34 Merle Thornton, "Scenes from a Life in Feminism," *Hecate* 25, no. 2 (October 1999): 28.
- 35 See, for example, the 1968 and 1969 US-based protests in Atlantic City, NJ, against the Miss America Pageant. See also Mary Spongberg, "If She's So Great, How Come So Many Pigs Dig Her?: Germaine Greer and the Malestream Press," *Women's History Review* 2, no. 3 (1993): 407–19.
- 36 On this point, see Susan Sheridan, Susan Magarey, and Sandra Lilburn, "Feminism in the News," in *Feminism in Popular Culture*, ed. Joanne Hollows and Rachel Moseley (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 25–40; and Kaitlynn Mendes, "Reporting the Women's Movement: News Coverage of Second-Wave Feminism in UK and US Newspapers, 1968–82," *Feminist Media Studies* 11, no. 4 (2011): 483–98.
- 37 These included the Union of Australian Women, the Young Women's Christian Association, Labor Women's Central Organising Committee (Queensland Branch), the National Council of Women of Queensland, Queensland Women's Electoral League, Quota Club of Brisbane, the Business and Professional Women's Club of Brisbane, and – perhaps somewhat ironically – the Women's Christian Temperance Union of Queensland.
- 38 See Sawyer, *Making Women Count*. Sawyer's history of the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL) suggests that Thornton "decided not to join WEL because she mistakenly saw it as a women-

propitious alliances – with Bill Hayden, a Labor politician who would rise to become leader of his party and later Australia's governor general. As a young member of the Federal House of Representatives, Hayden joined EOW as a consequence of a personal association with Thornton and her husband, and went on to advocate, in the Federal arena, the removal of the Marriage Bar and the establishment of paid maternity leave, even introducing a private members' motion on the issue.³⁹ While his autobiography and two biographies largely ignore this development,⁴⁰ surviving correspondence between Hayden and Thornton reveals his genuine commitment, at this early stage in his career, to matters of gender equality. Further, it is clear that he worked closely with EOW to the extent of sharing articles and reference lists with Thornton and keeping her apprised of the progress he was making in Canberra to persuade others in the federal opposition to support this new agenda for change.⁴¹

The more personal elements of Thornton's papers are also compelling. Read symptomatically, they reveal the precarious working life of a fervent activist who was herself unable to benefit from opportunities generated by the types of reforms she championed. While she vigorously pursued the cause of equality in the workplace, papers relating to Thornton's own history of university employment and her various academic appointments show that she was never offered more than the short-term and part-time tutoring and lecturing positions so regularly occupied by aspiring female faculty in the 1960s and into the 1970s.⁴² Thornton's desire to pursue the necessary qualifications for an academic career is evident from official and personal correspondence concerning her higher degree enrolments,⁴³ although read against one another these surviving documents intimate how challenging she found it as a married mother of two – and the wife of a full-time academic – to have her career aspirations taken seriously, let alone to find the time to devote to further study and paid work when basic supports such as child care were absent.⁴⁴

only organisation" (p. 17).

39 The Australian Labor Party, of which Hayden was a member, refused to countenance an Opposition motion on the issue but permitted him to introduce a private member's motion in late 1965. The vote was lost 45 to 60. (See *Hansard*, Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, Parliamentary Debates, 2 December 1965.) The Bar would ultimately be removed as a consequence of a government motion introduced by Leslie Bury, the minister for Labour and National Service, shortly before the 1966 federal election.

40 Bill Hayden, *Hayden: An Autobiography* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1986); Denis Murphy, *Hayden: A Political Biography* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1980); John Stubbs, *Hayden* (Melbourne: William Heinemann, 1989). Murphy and Stubbs make single-sentence references to his role in the Marriage Bar campaign.

41 Merle Thornton Papers, series 6, folder 8.

42 Merle Thornton Papers, series 8, folders 3 and 4.

43 Merle Thornton Papers, series 1, folder 47.

44 In the interview we recorded with Thornton, she recalled occasions when she left her younger child at a child-minding facility in the city provided for mothers on shopping trips

Forgetting to Remember

There is no question that our closer examination of Thornton's papers confirmed in our minds that hers was an important collection and one worth securing. Indeed, we were genuinely excited by what we encountered, as were the National Library staff when I emailed them the first digital images of individual documents. But the challenge for me as I pursued this work was how to characterize the enterprise. To put it another way, was it possible for me to engage in this work of "archiving feminism" on radically non-nostalgic terms? I was contributing to the "national archive" of Australian feminism by assisting in securing a collection that derived from the second wave, conscious all the while of the risk of aligning this work with prevailing debates – nationally and internationally – which discursively positioned the second wave in terms of loss and amnesia, i.e., as a generation whose legacy has apparently been forgotten or squandered by the women who came after.⁴⁵ I term this a "risk" inasmuch as such discourses have recently been subject to considerable critical scrutiny and calls issued to find "new ways to tell stories about feminism's past, present and future."⁴⁶ Further, the archival domain is not immune from this particular discursive turn. Linda K. Kerber, for example, chastises "post-feminists" who were "born too late to have used carbon paper" or to understand the achievements of either first- or second-wave feminist activists. Consequently, she asserts, this generation does not "know how many of the opportunities they cherish are of recent invention. They do not know that they need to know their own history. They do not know that they need *archives*."⁴⁷ According to this logic, archives become central to the seemingly urgent and necessary work of disciplining a

while she went to work at the University of Queensland. Merle Thornton, interviewed by Maryanne Dever and Margaret Henderson, 25–27 January 2011, Oral History Collection, National Library of Australia, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.oh-vn5055859>.

- 45 See, for example, Judith Roof, "Generational Difficulties; or, the Fear of a Barren History," in *Generations: Academic Feminists in Dialogue*, ed. Devoney Looser and E. Ann Kaplan (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 69–87; Anne Summers, "Letter to the Next Generation," in *Damned Whores and God's Police*, rev. ed. (Ringwood: Penguin, 1994), 505–28; Anne Summers, *The End of Equality* (Sydney: Random House, 2003); Helen Garner, *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power* (Sydney: Pan Macmillan, 1995); Astrid Henry, *Not My Mother's Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2004); Chilla Bulbeck, "Feminism by Any Other Name?: Skirting the Generation Debate," *Outskirts* 8 (2001), <http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-8/bulbeck>; Katha Pollitt, "Feminism's Generation Wars," *The Guardian*, 6 October 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/oct/06/feminism-gender1>.
- 46 Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013), 76–77. Here, Eichhorn is reflecting on the work of Clare Hemmings in *Why Stories Matter*.
- 47 Linda K. Kerber, "'I Was Appalled': The Invisible Antecedents of Second-Wave Feminism," *Journal of Women's History* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 90–91 (emphasis added).

new generation of women and feminists by challenging their alleged culture of ignorance and complacency. How could I embrace our project and at the same time negotiate the peculiarly moral imperative that had become attached to initiatives construed to “recover,” celebrate, or otherwise recognize the contributions of earlier generations of feminists?

As I began to recognize, challenging this position requires challenging both the idea of feminism itself as a “lost” object and that of archives as simple “repositories to preserve what *was*.”⁴⁸ Even if I had not been familiar with the proliferating popular and scholarly accounts of how “the wind has gone out of the sails”⁴⁹ of the women’s movement in the wake of “the loss of a unifying momentum,”⁵⁰ working with Thornton would inevitably have impressed upon me this “dystopian chronology.”⁵¹ My co-researcher and I were arguably the living embodiment of something Thornton campaigned for – equal employment opportunities for women in the academy – and it was from this position that we had been able to pursue the very project on which we were all now focused. However, it was also subtly communicated to us that we might be the living embodiment of something that had been lost, a loss made apparent in occasional requests over our afternoon tea that we declare *our* activist credentials. Such a request on the part of Thornton, one clearly based on the idea that the contemporary academy is divorced from things political, confirms Clare Hemmings’ observations in her analysis of the technologies of Western feminist storytelling that politics and the academy operate as “mutually exclusive terms” that “are overlaid on a chronology that locates politics and feminist activism firmly in the past.”⁵² For me to work within this logic would not only position Thornton’s papers (and her achievements) as subject to my necessary “restorative” efforts – efforts directed toward filling an apparently already defined “gap” in the archival record – but would also suggest that together we could facilitate the secure and unproblematic transmission of a vital and now successfully reconstituted moment in feminism’s history or memory. As Adkins observes, such a logic imagines feminist consciousness as something that is “passed on through time” via a reproductive logic wherein “the past reproduces the future and the present and the future are positioned as being in constant debt to the past.”⁵³

48 Kate Eichhorn, “D.I.Y. Collectors, Archiving Scholars, and Activist Librarians,” 627.

49 Barbara Leslie Epstein, “The Successes and Failures of Feminism,” *Journal of Women’s History* 14, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 120.

50 Deborah Philips, “The Women’s Liberation Movement at Forty, Ruskin College, Oxford, 12–13 March 2010,” *History Workshop Journal* 70, no. 1 (Autumn 2010): 293.

51 Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 72. Hemmings is here paraphrasing the ideas of Robyn Wiegman, “Feminism, Institutionalism, and the Idiom of Failure,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 11, no. 3 (1999/2000): 107–136.

52 Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 71.

53 Lisa Adkins, “Passing on Feminism: From Consciousness to Reflexivity?,” *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 11, no. 4 (November 2004): 428. Adkins is here drawing on

But are the meanings of feminism so easily fixed – either in time or, more importantly for our purposes, in its material or documentary legacy? Certainly the operations of the archive – out of which such meanings might be fashioned – are not. The idea that the archives are where we “dig” in order to “revive elusive evidence”⁵⁴ may have enduring appeal, but recent re-theorizations of the archive⁵⁵ have radically questioned its status as a mere storehouse for documents whose meaning is fixed, fully present, and amenable to the researcher’s “juridical”⁵⁶ gaze. There is now widespread understanding that archives themselves have histories that must be accounted for and that in their operations they do not so much preserve as produce meaning. As Eichhorn (citing Foucault) reminds us, “the archive is an authorising apparatus – a structure that determines what statements can and do act in the social world.”⁵⁷ These issues are clearly at stake when considering the passage of Thornton’s papers into the public realm and how they might “speak” to the history of Australia’s second wave. That passage is one of constant mediation. Decisions made in the context of our work with Thornton concerning the selection of material or what was considered to be “in scope,” together with the activities of describing and then cataloguing the same material, actively determined what will be known as “her” collection.⁵⁸ At the point of formal acquisition by the NLA, what is more, the collection will also gain “the status of having been worthy of collection.” Thus, as Mills highlights, collections take on “the role of being representative and exemplary of something outside” that institution (a movement, a moment or moments in history), and “[enter] into relationships” with other materials within that institution, at the same time becoming subject to its organizing principles.⁵⁹ In short, the

Judith Roof’s discussion of the limitations of such generational logic; see Roof, “Generational Difficulties; or, the Fear of a Barren History,” 69–87.

54 Sachs, “Reconstructing a Life: The Archival Challenges of Women’s History,” 650.

55 See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Tavistock, 1972); Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (March 2001): 3–24; Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook, “Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 1–2 (January 2002): 1–19; Jane Taylor, “Holdings: Refiguring the Archive,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 243–81.

56 Susan Grigg, “Archival Practice and the Foundations of Historical Method,” *Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June 1991): 234.

57 Eichhorn, “D.I.Y. Collectors, Archiving Scholars, and Activist Librarians,” 640.

58 On this latter point and on the need to account for the impact of these mediating processes, see Catherine Hobbs, “New Approaches to Canadian Literary Archives,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2006): 109–19; and Barbara L. Craig, “The Archivist as Planner and Poet: Thoughts on the Larger Issues of Appraisal for Acquisition,” *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001): 175–83.

59 Josephine Mills, “Modus operandi,” in *On Collecting*, ed. Josephine Mills and Nancy

manner in which these papers might produce knowledge or what these papers might mean shifts as a consequence of their having thus been “collected” or “archived.” Of what they might be “evidence” will be determined by the questions or inquiries brought to bear upon them in times to come. In this respect, it is too limiting to understand Thornton’s archived papers as simple memory devices capable of *preserving* existing or past knowledge, as “filling a gap” in the records that constitute the “feminist archive.” I am arguing that these papers offer a basis for future knowledge production via their capacity to add *potential* to that same archive. A similar point is made by Eichhorn when she characterizes recently archived collections of third-wave feminist cultural production as “deeply oriented to the future.”⁶⁰

Conclusion

The availability of archival sources is an important determinant of the conditions of possibility for writing histories of feminism. Working with Thornton to secure her papers gave me a new awareness of the complicated ways in which personal histories of feminist activism come to be folded into public memory. It is difficult, when negotiating terrain that declares feminism itself as past or passed away, to work with materials that ostensibly concern that past. Bringing feminism together with the archive, however, helped me understand that, despite the evident appeal of the idea, these materials not only have value for their “pastness,” but also for their future – for what feminism will and can mean. After all, as Verne Harris observes, “far from constituting the solid structure around which imagination can play, [the archival record] is itself the stuff of imagination.”⁶¹ In this way, the “feminist archive” can be re-imagined, not as congealed memory but in terms of anticipation and futurity.

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Tousley (Lethbridge, AB: University of Lethbridge Art Gallery, 2005), 11.

60 Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, 151.

61 Verne Harris, “The Archival Sliver: A Perspective on the Construction of Social Memory in Archives and the Transition from Apartheid to Democracy,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, Jane Taylor, Michele Pickover, Graeme Reid, and Razia Saleh (Dordrecht, NL: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 151.

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