

2021 Recipient of the Sharman Award

Deborah Bisa – Conference report

I was pleased to be a one of two recipients of the 2021 Shaman Award and congratulate everyone who made this year's fully online ASA Conference, Archives Amplified, so successful. The organisers clearly put a lot of thought and effort into ensuring the program ran smoothly while comprehensively cover a range of interesting topics. Special thanks go to Councillor Kim Burrell and President Nicola Laurent who encouraged me along the way.

In this era of COVID-19 I have been relatively unscathed living in far north Queensland, and as the Cultural Data Officer for an organisation working with a WA First Nations community, I have been among the privileged who have been able to work from home. I predominantly work with digital media assets, so this privilege has not been without its significant challenges because of large data sets and unreliable remote servers. The challenges have been further compounded by the creation of archival items from ongoing cultural activities and a corporate legacy of 'hunting and gathering' in an environment where the management of cultural holdings has not always been given the attention required to make items findable, searchable and more accessible in a relational way. Not an unfamiliar scenario I'm assured ...

I was looking forward to the conference which ended up containing both positive and negative experiences. The latter mainly around the fact that being new to the ASA community I was keen to physically meet with people, especially those involved with big-picture information management. I often find that it is those random one-on-one encounters that can be most serendipitous, so I look forward to maybe attending a conference in person one day.

I found the conference portal easy to navigate with information and sessions readily accessible. It was difficult at times choosing from among the many interesting offerings and my attendance capacity was also compromised by the fact that I was recovering from illness and loss. However, if the conference had not migrated to being fully online, I would have missed so much more! Being able to re-enter the conference portal well after the end of the conference has also been beneficial to catch up on some sessions I missed.

A technical highlight was the capacity to take notes while viewing a session directly from the portal. The process was straightforward and after exporting notes to a Word document it could be value-added with key screenshots captured during a presentation. Very helpful indeed. I was also extremely humbled by the calibre and expertise within the archive community and others who attended. The knowledge and experience which attendees brought to the conference was inspiring, as were the keynote speakers.

The webinar dealing with pests in archival collections held by the Queensland Archives was very thorough. As an ex-herbarium facility and collection manager, I was aware of most aspects but still found the presentation refreshing. I particularly

enjoyed the virtual experience of the blue-tooth microscope which enabled participants to look closely at the detail of several pests and their frass. This included the bane of most institutions – the carpet and tobacco beetles. And no visit (virtual or otherwise) to this archive is apparently replete without the obligatory show-and-tell of *Chomp* or *Chompie*, the Supreme Court register from the 1960s subsequently damaged by fire, water and most likely a rat or two, albeit this last onslaught well-disguised until opened to reveal the cavernous spaces therein!

The competing needs from within and outside traditional archive spaces from legal, cultural, ethical, political and societal pressures appears to remain challenging across jurisdictions. One very thought-provoking presentation looking at new media clearly left more questions unanswered than answered. For example, how does one truly appraise and manage FB and Twitter records in recordkeeping and archival contexts where there are abundant amounts of dis- and mis-information?

Listening to Rose Barrowcliffe's presentation which highlighted the fact that First Nations people have tended to remain invisible in Australian archives – historically ignored, overlooked, unseen and undervalued – highlighted the amount of work still needed in this area to be more supportive and enabling for communities. However, positive steps are being made. The release in 2019 of the Tandanya Declaration in Adelaide is already seeing institutions adopting some principles. AIATSIS and Australia Post were used as examples. More broadly there does seem to be an increasing recognition of First Nations custodianship in the media when referring to many regions and places.

The last presentation in this particular sequence focused on the need to decolonise the archive. Finding ways to actively engage First Nations peoples in this process was highlighted, as was the need to put 'truth' before 'treaty' in any healing and reconciliation processes. This re-set amplifies the critical need for archives to describe legacy records better and more quickly with the passing of elders. It was suggested that a focus could be on digitising and describing more frontier-conflict records for example. For some working in this area, it has already been described as the most important work of their lifetime. Finally, a sound piece of advice from Phyllis Williams reminded us that when interacting and collaborating within the colonial archive with First Nations people we must tread carefully, talk to communities first and ask them about what they want, and need, and what would access look like for them. These points are especially key in my current role.

The solutions and options for creatively managing online access to collections for a range of users and audiences is vast, bewildering, inspiring and growing. In such a broad church it seems unlikely that overarching solutions across jurisdictions will ever be applicable or appropriate. Nonetheless, as indicated for First Nations people, shared platforms may be invaluable for sharing knowledge and assets. Among the solutions presented at the conference for managing collections was the work Queensland State Archives has undertaken with Gaia Resources. Besides the massive amount of work on their overall systems, the Q-Album was born. It enables access and sharing of content by small to medium cultural organisations and has evolved into more of an image-based solution rather than for in-depth research. Capacities within communities for participatory sharing are still developing and unfortunately the Q-Album does not allow for content to be restricted.

I found the interactive geographic map of children's homes developed by Melbourne University with Find and Connect a great example of how GIS technology is being deployed to facilitate quality interactions with database content. In this case, a person may not remember the name of the institutional home they were placed in but can find it based on the landmarks they remember on a map. In my current role, this type of mapping to deeper levels of cultural information and associated media items will continue to be extremely important and enabling work for knowing and maintaining cultural connections to country and family.

I also found the presentation by Newcastle University that raised the concept of exploring ways to integrate the digital archive and social-media use while simultaneously connecting communities very interesting. Accessing information and data via a mobile phone or tablet, as many without a computer do, is certainly worth consideration in my area of work.

And finally, also compelling was the important work needed to uncover and digitise historical weather observations that lie buried within archives to make that metadata more accessible to researchers working in the controversial area of climate science. It left me bereft thinking that perhaps we have let down future generations by failing to recognise and act on this sooner. It seems that caring for the future – in more ways than one – may always remain constrained by the levels of resourcing made available for often overworked and under-appreciated archivists who care for historical records!