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Author	McKemmish, Sue; Upward, Frank
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A LA RECHERCHE DU TIGRE PERDU, CONTRE SAINTE-BEUVE:

Re-constructing the Possibilities in ‘Evidence of Me ...’

Frank Upward and Sue McKemmish

This response to Verne Harris’s ‘On the Back of a Tiger: Deconstructive Possibilities in “Evidence of Me”’ will deal with archival science as professional theory for a ‘known’ group, archivists. It endorses, but is not confined to, the telling of stories, the ‘petit recits’ in a Lyotardian sense, or Harris’ many corridors. ‘Evidence of Me ...’ had a particular professional audience in mind, and a particular way of integrating the stories it tells, both of which disappear from view in Harris’ deconstruction. The manner of integration is meta-narrative based, drawing on post-structural and post-functional perspectives from a continuum framework, and using recordkeeping theory. Within its structuring approach, the small stories, the many corridors, can become professional metatext. It is these meanings we wish to re-construct. We will be exploring the present which is always present in witnessing, but absent in evidence, the trace which does not exist, the document that never speaks nakedly to us, and the way these can be managed within professional theory by concentrating on the way objects are structured by process. In this account, process, metaphorically, is the archivist’s ‘tiger’.

1. Narrative and the Music of the Continuum

If I got up for a moment and drew back my curtains to put myself in tune with the light, it was as a composer, who hearing in his head the symphony he is writing on paper scarcely needs to strike a note in order to make sure he is in tune with the real pitch of the instruments.

Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, from ‘III, The Days’

Marcel Proust, a generally celebrated French literary philosopher, was in tune in *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu* (In Search of the Lost Tiger), or so the story usually goes. Everything else was trial, test, draft, including *Contre Sainte-Beuve* (By Way of Saint-Beuve), from which the opening quote to this article was gleaned. For those who want to get some useful glimpses of French literary philosophy over the last fifty years, and the postmodern strands of it which have influenced Anglo-American thought in particular, it is not a bad start to go via existentialism and Proust, as an easy way of encompassing structuralism and its significance in French twentieth century thinking. That, to a modest extent, is where this article begins.

In this response to Verne Harris's Derrida-style deconstruction of 'Evidence of Me ...', we do not want to detract from or disrespect Harris' drafting of his extended reading for much of what he writes challenges us. But initially, we want to draw attention to the music of the infinite, of the continuum, to indicate how 'Evidence of Me ...' is the work of a composer who is in tune with the continuum, and to suggest that because Harris does not hear that music resonating in the text, his attempt at an extended reading is at times discordant.¹ From that starting point, the continuum as an existential entity, we also touch on the nature of 'Evidence of Me ...' as an exercise in postmodern narrativity, the formation of theory for a profession, the post-functionalist/post-structuralist approach to witnessing and recordkeeping as a form of witnessing, and the role archivists play 'in search of the lost tiger'.

Harris sees 'Evidence of Me ...' as moving 'beyond the margins' of archival discourse into what was then 'virgin terrain'. He aims at a further opening up of personal recordkeeping spaces 'beyond the margins' – especially those marked, but not fully explored, or missed by McKemmish. Harris moves into some of the personal recordkeeping spaces 'beyond the margins', e.g. in passages on the connection between the event and the trace, and on mourning evidence. He marks for us, though does not himself move into, spaces not explored in 'Evidence of Me ...', e.g. questions of whether there are specificities in the realm of recordkeeping behaviour relating to gender, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation. He points out that there are broader relevant discourses

that McKemmish did not tap, and spaces McKemmish ‘declined’ to enter, although the examples Harris cites of McKemmish ‘declining’ to enter recordkeeping spaces may be more a product of her preference for *narrative form*, letting the points she is making emerge from the stories. At the same time Harris mistakes or misses some of the most significant openings marked by McKemmish. There is also a clash of personal styles here. Harris favours a ‘spelling out’, a ‘probing beyond the surface layers’ of the points that McKemmish prefers to make more subtly through the insights and multiple layers of meaning of the stories she tells or recounts.

Harris’ exploration of the spaces McKemmish does enter is limited. ‘Evidence of Me ...’ resonates with understandings of recordkeeping in society from a continuum perspective. It uses the then still evolving records continuum model² to structure its exploration of issues relating to personal recordkeeping, identity, and memory, and the role of archivists in transforming records as a form of ‘evidence of me’ into part of the ‘evidence of us’, an aspect of collective identity and memory, which Harris recognises but does not deconstruct. We are not certain whether it is possible to deconstruct a continuum given its nature as a merging of points (it would seem to defy the Derridaen tactic of isolating words), but for now it is worth repeating the paragraph that Harris also identifies as a quintessential one in the article.

Very early on in ‘Evidence of Me ...’ the beat is established in the following passage which provides a preliminary reading of personal recordkeeping in terms of the dimensions of the continuum (see the Appendix):

Those of us who, like Mike Langford, accumulate our personal records over time are engaged in the process of forming a personal archive. The functionality of a personal archive, its capacity to witness to a life, is dependent on how systematically we go about the business of creating our records as documents, capturing them as records (i.e. ordering them in relation to each other and 'placing' them in the context of related activities), and keeping and discarding them over time (i.e. organising them to function as long-term memory of significant activities and relationships). Archivists, in particular collecting archivists, are in part in the business of ensuring that a personal archive considered to be of value to society at large is incorporated into the collective archives of the society, and thus constitutes an

accessible part of that society's memory, its experiential knowledge and cultural identity – evidence of *us*.³

McKemmish uses the continuum as meta-narrative to give coherence to the many small stories she tells. ‘Evidence of Me ...’ is an exercise in postmodern narrativity. An elementary view of the postmodern condition is that it is an age in which there are many narratives. Jean-Francois Lyotard described the postmodern age in terms of European history since the 1950s as ‘a general situation of temporal disjunction, which makes sketching an overview difficult’.⁴ That was his temporary view, but in his career he has expended considerable effort writing about narrative and discourse in a hidden dialogue which subverts Marxism as meta-narrative and promotes it as small stories, *petit recits*. In *The Postmodern Condition*, for example, he analyses pre-modern narrative forms, and their role in holding social groups together, and goes on to contemplate the fragmented and diverse way this now occurs. The unifying narrative methodology that once established customary knowledge within societies, including Marxist thought, is now found in the *petit recits*, holding smaller groups together, and operating in patchwork fashion. There are many more forms of being in society than there were in ‘pre-modern’ times, and many more stories to tell. In this sense Lyotard’s view of *petit recits* can be seen as an extension of the emphasis in existentialism upon the individual and their responsibilities and freedoms.

The narrative form whether *petit* or *meta* shares the same characteristics. It is used to work out ways of discussing and transmitting a group’s competencies, its purport, its meanings. Through narrative we are able to convey our identity to ourselves and discuss it with others. It provides models for integration, criteria for competence. It follows a rhythm and has a meter. Rules are set out which define the pragmatics of its transmission, and it can accommodate a great variety of language games. Or at least that is how Lyotard describes the form, allowing for our mis-statements of his view.

If we enter the kinds of corridors Harris’ article opens up through recordkeeping spaces, are we doing so in tune with a meta-narrative, or do we accept the postmodern

condition, diagnosed within a structuralist approach as the small stories of modern existentialism undergoing temporal disjunction? ‘Evidence of Me ...’ has many of the features Lyotard identifies as characteristics of narrative. Its objective, however, is not with the small stories per se, but their existence within a meta-narrative, forming theory for a profession, for customary knowledge. So, it tells many stories, but the rhythms of each story are the rhythms of the continuum.⁵

2. The Grain of the Continuum

If the *continuum* has a grain, unexpected and mysterious as it may be, then we cannot say all we want to say. Being may not be comparable to a one way street but to a network of multilane freeways along which one can travel in more than one direction; but despite this some roads will nevertheless remain dead ends. There are things that cannot be done (or said).

Umberto Eco, *Kant and the Platypus*, from section 1.11, *The Sense of the Continuum* (The italics for the continuum are Eco’s.)

The Australian archival profession, in gradually building its meta-narrative around the continuum over the last forty years has been following an intellectual trend of some depth. The continuum has emerged in many areas of thought and has become a meta-narrative of its own, a possible counter to the angst of the *petit recits*, to fragmentation and disarray. Eco’s recent explorations are but one example of many within metaphysics, including the work of David Lewis commencing in the late 1960s, the exploration of possible worlds in Alvin Plantinga, and the work of educators such as Michael Loux.⁶ For all the attention it has received the continuum remains ‘italicised’ except within the physical and mathematical sciences, a word with meanings that are still being explored.

We would hope we could enjoin Harris (and others) to be part of that exploration, but in doing so we have to warn that Eco’s concern with the continuum of content is a valid one. What we can say is infinite. It can take off in many directions but we need to avoid dead ends. In the McKemmish article, the continuum has a rhythm to it, something

existential which enables us to grasp the significances of the continuum as an entity (although it eluded Harris). Harris believes it has a recordkeeping framework. In actuality it has a grain provided by recordkeeping theory, and observable within a continuum framework. That recordkeeping theory provides some control over the lanes in which we can travel and over what we can and cannot say.

If we look at what we can say differently from others, then as a professional group with a professional knowledge of recordkeeping objects, we should be able to make statements about the interplay between recordkeeping objects and their evidential qualities, the identity of those who created them, and the social and business processes that brought them into being. The objects of archival practice, and the processes of recordkeeping that construct them, are areas where we should be able to claim competence. In communicating this as an area of competence to other professionals, ‘Evidence of Me ...’ draws upon a concept of records developed by Upward and McKemmish in ‘The Archival Document’⁷ and extended in McKemmish’s ‘Are Records Ever Actual?’⁸

The concept of archival documents distinguishes records from other forms of recorded information by their ongoing participation in social and business processes, broadly defined, i.e. by their transactional and contextual nature. Their evidential qualities are seen as integral to their ‘recordness’, and to their intents, multiple purposes, and functionality in terms of governance and accountability, their role in the formation of individual, group, corporate, and collective memory and the shaping of identity, and their value as authoritative sources of information. The concepts of transactionality and contextuality, as further developed in the records continuum, are complex and multi-layered. Transactionality is defined in terms of the many forms of human interaction and relationships that are documented in records at all levels of aggregation. The concept of contextuality is concerned with the record’s rich, complex, and dynamic social, functional, provenancial, and documentary contexts of creation, management, and use through spacetime. In the records continuum model framework⁹ these concepts find expression in a range of continua:

- the evidential continuum: trace, evidence, corporate and individual [whole of person] memory, collective memory
- the continuum of recordkeeping objects: [archival] documents, records, the corporate and individual archive, and the collective archives
- the continuum of identity: actor, work group/unit, organization/corporate body, and institution,
- the continuum of transactionality: act, activity, function, purpose.

The records continuum model's approach to the roles individuals may play along the identity axis of the model encompasses their roles as actors in social and business acts, units in social and business activities, legal entities with social and business functions, and social entities with institutionalised social purposes. The continuum concept of transactionality encompasses individual acts of communication, and social and business transactions of all kinds, the social and business activities or processes of which they are a part, the social and business functions they fulfil, and the social purposes they serve. Like the recordkeeping object and evidentiality continua, these are broad taxonomies, masking many other terms and near synonyms lurking in their midst, but each is locatable within the process continua of creation, capture, organisation and pluralisation, the framework rather than the grain. The grain within this framework is provenance, the vehicle for narratives about who did what within an emphasis upon recordkeeping processes and recordkeeping objects.

The grain, as described, is not operating within a dichotomy between the personal and the corporate. 'Evidence of Me ...' was written for the May 1996 special issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* which focused on personal recordkeeping, while rejecting the dualism encapsulated in the title of the Australian journal in favour of a more holistic approach to corporate and personal records. It does not see the archivist who looks after personal archives as a separate species. Such an archivist is not our equivalent of the platypus for early nineteenth century natural scientists, a species which cast doubt upon their existing taxonomy of knowledge. Archivists looking after personal records can be found in all recordkeeping spaces, and not necessarily in the streams of 'dysfunction' or

‘otherness’ where Harris’s approach casts them. Archivists in government institutions or working for businesses are concerned with personal records, regional archivists with the recordkeeping of the individual people in their region. Libraries and museums collect personal records and increasingly are recognising the need to employ archivists to do manage them. Yet Harris has written most of his critique assuming that there is a boundary between personal recordkeeping and corporate recordkeeping, and believing that in doing so he is following McKemmish. He is not.

3. Witnessing, Function, Structure and the Continuum

Recordkeeping is a ‘kind of witnessing’. On a personal level it is a way of evidencing and memorialising our lives – our existence, our activities and experiences, our relationships with others, our identity, our ‘place’ in the world.¹⁰

The McKemmish article, by concentrating on witnessing, extends the account of records developed by Upward and McKemmish in ‘The Archival Document’, in McKemmish’s ‘Are Records Ever Actual?’, and in Upward’s continuum modelling. ‘The Archival Document’ characterises records in terms of their transactionality and contextuality; ‘Are Records Ever Actual?’ explores the related notion that records are ‘always in a state of becoming’; and the modelling attempts to produce a single representation of the ideas being developed, as outlined above. There is no distinction made in any of this work between personal and corporate records. Personal archives had always been ‘present’, but the exploration of their presence in the recordkeeping spacetimes of the continuum, and of recordkeeping as a form of witnessing, are fresh.

‘Evidence of Me ...’ weaves together stories that tell about witnessing in the broad sense with stories about the particular role of recordkeeping as a form of witnessing. Harris appears to be uncomfortable with a number of aspects.

One of his concerns is what he reads as an attempt to squeeze ‘witnessing’ into ‘the claustrophobic space of recordkeeping functionality’. He ‘spells out’ what he terms

the ‘category’ of witnessing as ‘a terrain without horizon, always stretching beyond evidencing and memorializing, embracing (without hard boundaries between them) interrogating, constructing, resisting, imagining, narrating, fabricating, hiding (from), forgetting, healing, and so on (and on)’. He acknowledges the breadth of McKemmish’s ideas about ‘witnessing’, which are expressed by reference to Giddens’ ‘ongoing “story” about the self’, Swift’s man as ‘the storytelling animal’ sustained by the ‘comforting trail-signs and marker-buoys of stories’, and Edmund White’s ‘instinct to witness’. But asks: ‘Why should the capacity to witness through personal records depend on the degree of functionality?’ He believes that:

The notion of recordkeeping functionality works against McKemmish’s broad understanding of witnessing in records. It pulls her towards a privileging of ‘evidencing’ over other dynamics, and towards a narrower representation of evidence as an authentic, reliable ‘capturing’ of process.

Here, Harris is working within a particular construct of customary knowledge rather than deconstructing the text. He uses the quote which begins with a reference to Mike Langford, cited above, to raise questions about dysfunctionality in recordkeeping¹¹, and an otherness amongst those who deal with personal archives. He makes it clear that the notion of function, functional requirements, and an emphasis upon system, order and business give him a feeling of claustrophobia. This concern, for him, is suggestive of the way recordkeeping theory can represent a narrowing of scope for archivists. Harris, argues that ‘witnessing can only be squeezed into the claustrophobic recordkeeping space at a price’. He writes:

But she does not explore what is for me by far the most interesting dimension – the resistance to functionality in this domain. What underlies these resistances? Why do even archivists resist ‘system’ and ‘order’ and ‘business’ within their personal archives. What is this ‘dysfunctionality’ saying to us?

Let us first of all make an argument which is no defence against the charge of excess functionalism within a recordkeeping approach. It is clear what the dysfunctionality is saying to Harris, but to us Harris is living in a parallel universe with which we are unfamiliar. In our universe, which despite our Antipodean location and the

increasing ethnic diversity of Australian society, could still be categorised as an Anglo-American one, such archivists do not oppose system, order and business. They are involved with personal archives because it is connected to their business. They do not store papers in disorder by choice but because their ambition to collect often exceeds their capacity to process. Far from ignoring system, archivists looking after personal archives have long been interested in standardised description processes across institutions. As members of the archival profession in Australia they have played a leading role in standardisation.

However, simply extending the 'functional' aura is not a real defence. A more serious question is whether 'Evidence of Me ...' is in any way functionalist in Harris's sense simply because it respects the notion of functional requirements for recordkeeping. This raises all sorts of intellectual debates, including what is wrong with being a functionalist, but that is not the issue here. Functional requirements developed as a technique within *structural* systems design, and as such are part of a functional-structural mix developed in that profession. They are no more functional, in isolation, than order, or business, or system itself. Moreover, 'Evidence of Me ...' is written within a structuring mode which is in tune with the interaction between action and structure, not a functional one. Any debate on functionalism in the context of the article seems to us to be a dead-end.

'Evidence of Me ...' aimed to open up wide ranging and fundamental questions about 'evidence of me' and 'evidence of us', with reference to how our lives are individually and collectively witnessed in the extensive sense of Derrida's archive. The term 'evidence of me' was drawn from the writing of novelist Graham Swift (in *Ever After*) and it is used in the article as a synonym for the personal archive in the broadest sense ascribed to 'evidence' by Derrida.¹² 'Evidence of Me ...' places recordkeeping, as a form of witnessing, within this more extensive context. It is concerned with defining the particular role records play as one form of 'evidence of me', and their relationship with other forms of witnessing. It is also concerned with collective archives as an aspect

of ‘evidence of us’ in the extensive sense, and the way in which they constitute a form of collective memory.

The article, again echoing understandings drawn from continuum perspectives, proposes that the distinctive contribution records make in witnessing to our lives lies in their documentation of activities and experiences *in the context of our relationships* with others. It is in this way that they help to form our identity by ‘placing’ us in the world, in spacetime.

Harris reads into the movement in the text between evidence/ memory in an extensive sense, and recordkeeping as one form of evidence/memory (among many), as a narrowing of scope, a concern with the ‘claustrophobic space of recordkeeping functionality’. He concludes that his reading of the article in terms of Derridean thinking opens huge, vertiginous intellectual chasms under McKemmish’s account of personal recordkeeping. He points to how she risks marginalising orality, and claims she subsumes remembrancing to recordkeeping.

An example. Harris points to a narrowing of the scope of the text in a passage that, he claims, describes how White moved from being a ‘remembrancer’ to a ‘recordkeeper’. But this passage is actually about how White moved from being a destroyer of records to a keeper of records. Within the boundaries of his own spacetime, White had maintained a ‘narrative of self’ through his own prodigious memory and in the literary forms of his novels and plays. In this dimension White did not *move* from being a remembrancer to being a recordkeeper; remembrancing remained a key part of his personal recordkeeping.

The point of this passage in ‘Evidence of Me ...’ is to explore the interface between two recordkeeping spacetimes, the dimension of the personal/corporate archive/memory and the dimension of the collective archives/memory. This passage is to do with institutionalizing ‘evidence of me’ – the whole me, evidence as memory, with the process of transforming it into ‘evidence of us’, i.e. moving it beyond the boundaries of

individual spacetime. It is about White recognizing the significance of other forms of recordkeeping, and engaging in processes that enable the movement of ‘evidence of me’ through spacetime. He had once insisted on the burning of his manuscripts and letters, feeling that looking back was morbid, and that in terms of moving the ‘evidence of me’ beyond the boundaries of an individual life, only his novels should survive. But later in life, he came to value the ‘evidence of me’ present in the ‘other voices’ of his letters, and he quite deliberately became involved in their ‘pluralisation’. And of course the passage is also fundamentally about the archival endeavour and the professional role of archivists in institutionalizing the archive. Harris has read this passage from within a recordkeeping vs remembrancing dichotomy. However, in the continuum recordkeeping as a form of witnessing embraces aspects of remembrancing and orality, while being embraced by them. Remembrancing and orality also embrace other forms of witnessing than recordkeeping.

In this example, Harris misses the rhythms of the continuum in the text. The rhythms of the continuum are also evident in Richard Holmes’ reflections on biography. Holmes, biographer of Robert Louis Stevenson, Shelley, Coleridge, and others, has discussed biography as ‘a kind of pursuit, a tracking of the physical trail of someone’s path through the past, a following of footsteps’.¹³ He writes incisively about how, when a biographer goes beyond the physical presence of the subject to his or her place in the ‘web of other people’s lives’, the notion of the ‘single subject of biography’ becomes a ‘chimera’.¹⁴ His insights on how ‘biographical evidence is witnessed’ are particularly relevant to our understanding of the role of recordkeeping as one way of constructing identity and forming memory, and of the nature of personal records (indeed all records) in terms of both their contextuality and transactionality. Referring to his ‘pursuit’ of Stevenson, he writes:

The truth is . . . that Stevenson existed very largely in, and through, his contact with other people; his books are written for his public; his letters for his friends, even his private journal is a way of giving social expression – externalising – his otherwise inarticulated thoughts. It is in this sense that all real biographical evidence is witnessed . . . The more closely and scrupulously you follow someone’s footsteps through the past the more conscious do you become that they never existed wholly in any one place along the recorded path. You cannot freeze them, you cannot pinpoint

them, at any particular turn in the road, bend of the river, view from the window. They are always in motion, carrying their past lives over into the future. It is like the sub-atomic particle in nuclear physics that can be defined only in terms of a wave motion. If I try to fix Stevenson in his green magic dell in the Lozere, or his whitewashed cell at La Trappe, or under his chestnut tree below Mont Mars; if I try to say – this man, thinking and feeling these things, was at this place, at this moment – then at once I have to go backwards and forwards, tracing him at other and corresponding places and times – his childhood bedroom at No 17 Heriot Row, Edinburgh, or his honeymoon ranch at Silverado, California. ¹⁵

For Holmes, biography can only be captured – brought alive in the present – through placing its ‘single subject’ in relationship to other people. His approach is not functional (the whole individual as co-extensive with the parts), or structural (the trackable individual as the focus), nor is it a simple structural-functional mix. Like McKemmish, Holmes is in structuring mode. The way that recordkeeping witnesses to our lives is by evidencing, accounting for, and memorialising our interactions and relationships, thus ‘placing’ us in the world. But, as with Holmes’ biographical subjects, records too are like the sub-atomic particle, only definable in terms of a wave motion – never existing in all their complexity in any one place or time, and only definable in terms of their multiple and dynamic documentary and contextual relationships. This kind of understanding of the nature of records as ‘always in a state of becoming’ is present in the music of the continuum as played out in ‘Are Records Ever Actual?’ and ‘Evidence of Me ...’.

The continuum takes us beyond the conventional binary oppositions of function and structure. Another example. At one point, Harris pursues his aim of a further opening up of recordkeeping spaces by posing the following questions: ‘What of the possibility that a poem about a life can carry far more meanings than a whole archive of personal records?’ ‘What does that say about the value of evidence in records?’¹⁶ He then says: ‘Questions not asked. A narrowing of scope ...’. In fact there is an extensive passage in ‘Evidence of Me ...’ which canvases different approaches to this very issue – including the Harris-like view of Ted Hughes that wife Sylvia Plath’s true self is only present in her final poems, and Patrick White’s earlier conviction that only his novels ‘counted’ (a view

he later revised). Harris is arguing that a single bit may tell us more than the whole, essentially a structuralist/deconstructive approach. A structuring approach presents a different perspective, which is present in Janet Malcolm's conclusion that the story of Plath's life can be heard through the interplay of the many different voices present in her poems, novel, letters, and journals. The intention of this passage from a continuum perspective is to open up questions about the nature of records as evidence/memory of me and of us, and the particular way in which they witness to a life and relate to other kinds of witnessing.

A further example of the difference in perspective between Harris' approach and the post-structural, post-functional view present in the structuring approach of the article. Harris points to the privileging in McKemmish's article of the question: 'What factors condition recordkeeping behaviours?' In his view, McKemmish fails to address the question that he sees as the other side of the coin: 'How does recordkeeping condition a life?' We would argue that McKemmish does address this issue, but not within the binary opposition suggested by the 'two sides of a coin' metaphor. McKemmish references Giddens' view that: 'The existential question of self-identity is bound up with the fragile nature of the biography which the individual "supplies" about herself. A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor – important though this is – in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*.' In her comments, McKemmish questions the role that recordkeeping plays in keeping a particular narrative going, for example the role of keeping a journal in 'sustaining an integrated sense of self'. She notes with reference to Giddens' view of how the 'process of mutual disclosure' is associated with intimate relationships in the modern age, that 'one dimension of this process can be the writing and keeping of letters'. She cites Malcolm on 'letters as fossils of feeling', Swift in a passage that provides the title of the article, 'keep them, burn them, they are evidence of *me*', and Tolstoy's view that 'the diaries *are me*'. All touch on structuring something which is multi-faceted and interactive – not one or other side of a coin.

A final example relates to Harris' view that the research agenda that ends McKemmish's article as modest. It is modest only in terms of what actions are possible. From a structuring perspective, there is nothing modest about questions like:

- what is the significance of bearing witness to the cultural moment to the construction of individual identity
- what role does personal recordkeeping in forming collective identity and memory
- what is the role of personal recordkeeping in our society and the "place" of the personal archive in the collective archives
- how can we understand recordkeeping as a social system
- how do recordkeeping processes and systems become institutionalized in our society
- what are the functional requirements for postcustodial archival regimes that can ensure that a personal archive of value to society becomes an accessible part of the collective memory?

4. Genesis, Evidence and Ash

There is nothing outside of text, of 'trace'. Everything is always already outside of text. 'Evidence' must always be mourned, for its preservation carries the very possibility of its reduction to ashes. 'Evidence' must always be mourned, for it is the ashes of the 'always already outside'.

Verne Harris, in this issue, referring to Derrida and Krell.

Harris's article opens an evocative line of thought about witnessing in the way he draws attention to evidence as ash.

The heart of Krell's evidence as ash conundrum is the opposition between interior and exterior. Within Eco's continuum of content, however, Krell's statement is little more than a postmodern riddle with an infinite number of small stories that can be told under its banner, and many potential restatements. It leaves us directionless on a multi-

lane freeway. Within continuum theory, the trace, the internality, is brought into a merging structure with the exteriority of evidence and memory. Creation, genesis, is tied in to, not separated from, the ash within an ongoing making of the record. As archivists, we have our own 'interiority' in creating objects, whether they are documents, records, the archive, and the archives or other objects situated somewhere within that continuum including a series. We are creators as well as undertakers and auditors. Our own actions are in turn disembedded from their context, becoming ash within such routines as the construction of finding aids, or more rarely within properly maintained records of the actions we have taken. The task within electronic recordkeeping, well enough understood within the profession, is to transfer our actions into systems routines that control creation, and disembed (capture) the actions represented in data and documents within records, the archive and archives.

In the writings of Cook, Nesmith and others, the archivist most definitely has an interior world of action and creation, a world which stretches the record through spacetime. Like every one else historical recordkeepers participate in the world of action, of the interior. For Cook, the role of recordkeeping professionals is an active one of participation in record and archive creating processes as 'active shapers' of the archival heritage, 'intervening agents' who need to be conscious of their own historicity in 'the archive-creating and memory-formation process'.¹⁷ Tom Nesmith has also written eloquently about the 'ghostly' interventions of archivists, Geary's 'phantoms of remembrance', in creating and shaping the record – through their role in appraisal, description, and access – often invisible, or at least unacknowledged, participants in societal and organisational processes of remembering and forgetting.¹⁸

From a continuum perspective the interior is not in opposition to the exterior. Trace, that paralogical thing that does not exist because it is always present, needs to be given shape as evidence and memory. With no apologies to John Wayne's script-writer, 'an archivist's gotta do what an archivist's gotta do'. We certainly do not need to apologise to Derrida. There are many indications in *Archive Fever* that he recognises this role. [Endnote]

It is this disembedding role of the archivist's work that is the locus of provenance. It is the point where we act to record something, or encourage others, including systems, to act to record. Thus when Harris argues that: 'Perhaps "provenance" does not "lie" in any particular "locus" (cf. pages 35-6 of "Evidence of Me...") – perhaps it is – and always was – shattered and shattering', we would reply that such a view is cutting against the grain of the continuum. What we would say is said in McKemmish's work elsewhere. The record is in a constant state of becoming. Provenance is continually being remade. It is multifaceted. It is heavily influenced by our frameworks for the archive and the archives, and is dependent upon action. The creation/capture threshold operates within structuring processes but it is the intersecting point between the interior and exterior. It is a moving point in spacetime, a re-maker of ash from the re-made trace. An archivist's recursive actions reverberate through spacetime.

Nesmith writes about a record being

... an evolving mediation of understanding about some phenomenon – a mediation created by social and technical processes of inscription, transmission and contextualisation

and archives as

... an ongoing mediation of understanding of records (and thus phenomena) or that aspect of record making which shapes this understanding through such functions as records appraisal, processing, and description, and the implementation of processes for making records accessible.¹⁹

This brings us almost back to where we began – 'in search of the lost tiger', the process that structures recordkeeping objects.

If you separate time and space and remove genesis then of course the archivist is not creative. She is always working in the crematorium, the handler of ash. If you accept the central premise of the continuum, that it involves a union of space and time, the archivist becomes the producer of trace, of the archival trail, with all the limitations that the trace itself carries with it.

5. REPRISE

We would like to conclude this response with an extended re-telling of the Michael Long *petit recit* in ‘Evidence of Me ...’, making its metatext component a little more obvious. It is a story about a prominent Aboriginal, respected by many, crying at the time he opened an exhibition prepared by the National Archives of Australia. Harris rightly chastises McKemmish for making only a passing reference to ‘what is a rich tapestry’, and hopes that McKemmish was not suggesting that Aboriginals need (white) institutional intervention in order to help them remember and evidence their pasts. But again Harris is not attuned to the music of the continuum in the text, and his concern with the possibility of McKemmish’s political incorrectness is discordant. Long’s tears indicated that he has been complicit in an initial forgetting. In continuum terms Long had lost his archive; he had little idea what his family had been through. And he was not alone. The later Bringing Them Home Inquiry [Endnote] provided an opportunity for members of the ‘stolen generation’ to tell their stories. Many did so for the first time. They had never told their families – the pain, the shame they felt was too overwhelming.

Significant numbers of the ‘stolen generation’ believed that their mothers had voluntarily given them up or abandoned them. They, like many other Australians, black and white, did not know that the systematic removal of part Aboriginal children was for decades a government policy aimed at assimilation, nor were they aware of the pressure that was put on Aboriginal women to sign away their child. They carried not only the pain of their removal, but the shame as well – not their shame, the shame of a nation. Significant numbers of witnesses at the Bringing Them Home Inquiry remain anonymous. They told of fractured lives and of despair, and of secrets they could never share with their families. The institutional action of NAA, its creative act in assembling the exhibition in close consultation with Aboriginal and Torres State Islander communities, regenerated a story for Long, for many other Aboriginal people and for the Australian community – and it is his-story, their-story, our-story. The visitors’ books of the exhibition (later the subject of a Monash masters research thesis – Endnote) testify to the effect that the exhibition had on those who saw it. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians literally wrote paragraphs, even pages of their responses to the exhibition. There are negative and denying reactions to the stories it tells. There are expressions of

grief, sorrow, anger and regret. Many, like Long, were profoundly moved. A continuing theme was – we didn't know – that this was happening, that this was government policy. For some it was a transforming experience, typified in the comment: 'this has changed my sense of what it is to be an Australian'.

The exhibition did not speak 'nakedly' to Long and others. 'The trace itself does not exist', as Derrida points out, and who are we to debate the issue within a story. The same documents speak very differently to different observers. Documents seldom speak 'in the nude' to us (Derrida again). The documents presented in the exhibition were clothed by an institution outside of Long's culture, but that is part of the story, a story of the suppression and repression of an archive, and its re-impression in the mind of Michael Long and others (Derrida yet again). There is some optimism, some joy, in Derrida's archive fever. We should not be too dismayed at archivists doing their job effectively simply because of their exteriority to Aboriginal experience. Preparing the exhibition is an interior experience, part of the multi-lane freeway of being. In looking at the Aboriginal story over the last few hundred years in Australia no one can deny the multiplicity of narratives. The white is of significance in all of them. Aboriginal culture is not a museum piece in the antiquated sense in which the word museum was once used. The stories within it, and the stories of other Australians are changing, and you can set them to the music of the continuum. Aboriginal culture has its own continuum of content, but part of the juridical environment for that continuum, part of what can be said and not said, is that things are no longer black and white. The Aboriginal experience, in many different ways, is evidence of us. To imagine it is evidence of 'them', 'the other', is to establish an unbearable binary opposition, another dead-end.

We could, of course, continue on with this article and tell a similar story about the continuum and Patrick White's homosexuality ...

APPENDIX

Upward's explanation of the dimensions of the records continuum model, is widely available in the literature, but is re-presented below to indicate the music and grain of the continuum that we argue Harris has not heard, and cuts against. [Reference to other continuum models]

The Dimensions of the Records Continuum Model²⁰

1D Create

The first dimension encompasses the actors who carry out the act (decisions, communications, acts), the acts themselves, the documents which record the acts, and the trace, the representation of the acts.

2D Capture

The second dimension encompasses the personal and corporate records systems which capture documents in context in ways which support their capacity to act as evidence of the social and business activities of the units responsible for the activities.

3D Organise

The third dimension encompasses the organisation of recordkeeping processes. It is concerned with the manner in which a corporate body or individual defines its/his/her recordkeeping regime, and in so doing constitutes/forms the archive as memory of its/his/her business or social functions.

4D Pluralise

The fourth dimension concerns the manner in which the archives are brought into an encompassing (ambient) framework in order to provide a collective social, historical and cultural memory of the institutionalised social purposes and roles of individuals and corporate bodies.

¹ Sue McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me ...', *Archives and Manuscripts* 24:1 (May 1996), p. 29. 'Evidence of Me ...' was also published by invitation in the *Australian Library Journal* 45:3 (August 1996), pp. 174-87. In his article Harris does not reference any of McKemmish's other work or any writings that explore the continuum, present the records continuum model, or discuss the social/structuration theories that underpin it.

² Frank Upward, 'Structuring the Records Continuum, Part Two: Structuration Theory and Recordkeeping', *Archives and Manuscripts* 25:1 (May 1997), pp. 10-35;
Frank Upward, 'Structuring the Records Continuum Part One: Post-custodial Principles and Properties', *Archives and Manuscripts* 24:2 (Nov 1996), pp. 268-85.

³ McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me ...', *op.cit.* p. 29.

⁴ The brief account of postmodernity and narrativity is drawn from *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, translation from the French by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: University Press, 1997), Reprint pp. 1, 18-23. For a broader overview of his career writings, see Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Toward the Postmodern*, edited by Robert Harvey and Mark S. Roberts (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993).

⁵ Harris argues that archivists must engage with the 'archive' in Derrida's extensive sense, and we would agree, but not when Harris seems to suggest that the Derridean 'archive' is co-extensive with our professional terrain. Wherein lies the significance of Derrida's ideas to the archival profession? As philosophy? As social theory? As constituting a theory for the archival profession? Or, as part of the broader philosophical and theoretical context for the formation of a theory for a profession? We would argue that Derrida's approach to 'archive' does not form the basis for constituting a theory for the archival profession. It forms part of the wider philosophical and theoretical context for the formation of that theory. Our philosophizing/theorizing for a profession needs to engage with Derrida's deconstruction of the word 'archive' amongst many other approaches. Our professional terrain is not co-extensive with the 'archive' in Derrida's sense, but with recordkeeping spaces that are encompassed by it, with recordkeeping as one form of 'witnessing', among many others. Continuum perspectives on recordkeeping, echoed in 'Evidence of Me ...', relate to the formation of theory for the archival profession within the broader context of postmodern intellectual currents, including currents about the nature of theory itself.

⁶ Loux discusses the continuum in an unresolved fashion, and the work of Lewis and Plantinga, in Chapter 5 of Michael J. Loux, *Metaphysics, A Contemporary Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998). The book provides an introduction to contemporary approaches to Aristotle's 'object-oriented' metaphysics.

⁷ Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward, 'The Archival Document: A Submission to the Inquiry into Australia as an Information Society', *Archives and Manuscripts* 19:1 (May 1991), pp. 17-32

⁸ Sue McKemmish, 'Are Records Ever Actual?' in Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott, eds., *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives first fifty years* (Clayton: Ancora Press in association with Australian Archives, 1994), pp. 187-203

⁹ By way of qualification, it should be stated that continuum perspectives on the transactional nature of records, and the richness, complexity, diversity, and idiosyncrasies of the contexts in which records are created, managed, and used cannot be fully represented in a model, but this does not detract from its significance and strategic importance to practice. Models can never fully represent the dynamic, complex, multi-dimensional and dynamic nature of records, and their rich webs of contextual and documentary relationships in and through spacetime. Within these limitations, what the records continuum model is reaching towards are ways to represent the continuum as richly and extensively as

possible. Thus the records continuum model is a tool for perceiving and analysing complexity, providing multi-dimensional views of recordkeeping and archiving, 'at the point of creation, within groups, at organisational and interorganisational levels'. Elsewhere Upward argues that the model can provide a way of 'patterning' the knowledge of a community of practice that is relevant across cultures and can persist over long periods of time. See his 'Modelling the Continuum as Paradigm Shift in Recordkeeping and Archiving Processes and Beyond – A Personal Reflection', *Records Management Journal* 10:3 (December 2000), pp. 115-39.

¹⁰ McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me ...', *op.cit.*, p. 29.

¹¹ Working within a world of binary oppositions functionality cannot be conceptualized as encompassing dysfunctionality. This is not so in the continuum.

¹² Derrida refers in *Archives Fever* to what he terms 'dramatic evidence' as 'dramatic proof, mark, clue, dramatic testimony, in the broad sense of the word 'testimony', one could even say archive': Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 75. See also the reference to this part of the text, and the translation issues raised by it, in the Translator's Note, p. 107. In his article in this issue, Harris perhaps implies that 'Evidence of Me ...' should have been informed by the insights of *Archive Fever*. It would have been extraordinarily prescient if it had, for *Archive Fever* was not generally available in Australia in English translation until after 'Evidence of Me ...' was written. The most recent works of Brothman, Nesmith, and Harris are examples of archival writings informed by *Archive Fever*, e.g. Brien Brothman, 'Declining Derrida: Integrity, Tensegrity, and the Preservation of Archives from Deconstruction', *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999), pp. 64-89; Verne Harris, 'Claiming Less, Delivering More: A Critique of Positivist Formulations on Archives in South Africa', *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997), pp. 132-41; Tom Nesmith, 'Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory', *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), pp. 136-50.

¹³ Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (London: Flamingo, 1995), p. 27. We are grateful to long-time colleague Michael Piggott for drawing attention to Richard Holmes' writing and our ongoing dialogue about personal recordkeeping.

¹⁴ In the same way in the continuum, the pursuit of meaning through a deconstruction of words as isolates becomes a chimera.

¹⁵ Holmes, *op.cit.*, pp. 68-9.

¹⁶ Harris' question about the 'value of evidence' is asked from within another kind of binary opposition, the evidence/memory dichotomy. It could be argued that Harris' reading of 'Evidence of Me ...' is too often from inside the kinds of binary oppositions that he himself rejects. There is a profound irony in this for Harris praises McKemmish for writing 'outside the evidence/memory dichotomy', and depicting the record as 'at once evidence and memory', while decrying what he sees as her privileging of evidencing. A further instance of a reading of text from within this dichotomy is the section in his paper to the ICA

Congress in Seville on what he terms the ‘record-keeping paradigm’ in the broader ‘record-keeping discourse’. See ‘Law, Evidence and Electronic Records: A Strategic Perspective from the Global Periphery’ (September 2000), available via <http://www.archivists.org.au>. It should also be noted that, as is evident from discussion of this paper during December 2000 on the Aus-archivists Listserv (the listserv archive is available at <http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/asa>), many Australian readers interpreted his use of the term ‘record-keeping paradigm’ as referring to the whole of what in Australia is identified as continuum thinking, recordkeeping theory and practice, and the records continuum model. Although a clarification from Harris, posted to the Listserv on 12 December, indicates that he was using the term much more narrowly, unfortunately, the paper itself, like his article in this issue, does not engage with continuum concepts or the records continuum model – a significant omission given their subject matter.

¹⁷ Terry Cook, “What Is Past Is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift”, *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), p. 46.

¹⁸ Tom Nesmith, *op.cit.*, pp. 136-50; the Patrick Geary reference, quoted by Nesmith, is from *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (New York: Princeton, 1994).

¹⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 145 and 146.

²⁰ This statement of the dimensions of the records continuum model is drawn from Frank Upward, ‘Structuring the Records Continuum Part One’, *op.cit.*