

Abstract

Introduction

This article suggests extensions to the place of 'national collections' of Australia's migration histories, and considers the role of regional libraries and museums in collecting, preserving, and making accessible the history of migration. The article describes a recent collaboration between the Bonegilla Migrant Experience site, the Albury LibraryMuseum and the regionally-based Charles Sturt University (CSU) to develop a virtual, three-dimensional tour of Bonegilla, a former migrant arrival centre. Through this, the role of regional collections as keeping places of migration memories and narratives outside of those institutions charged with preserving the nation's memory is highlighted and explored.

What Makes a Nation's Memory?

In 2018 the Australian Research Council (ARC) awarded a Linkage grant to a collaboration between two universities (RMIT and Deakin), and the National Library of Australia, State Library of South Australia, State Library of Victoria, and State Library of New South Wales titled "Representing Multicultural Australia in National and State Libraries" (LP170100222). This Linkage project aimed to "develop a new methodology for evaluating multicultural collections, and new policies and strategies to develop and provide access to these collections" (RMIT Centre for Urban Research).

One planned output of the Linkage project was a conference, to be held in early 2019, titled "Collecting for a Society's Memory: National and State Libraries in Culturally Diverse Societies." The conference call for papers suggested themes that included an interrogation of the relationship between libraries and 'the collecting sector', but with a focus still on National and State Libraries (Boyd). As an aside, the correlation between libraries and memories seemed slightly incongruous here, as archives and museums in particular would also be key in this collecting (and preserving) society's memory, and also the libraries that exist outside of the national and state capitals.

It felt like the project and conference had a definite 'national' focus, with the 'regional' mentioned only briefly in a suggested theme.

At the same time that I was reading this call for papers and about the Linkage, I was part of a CSU Learning and Teaching project to develop online learning materials for students in our Teacher Education programs (history in particular) based around the Bonegilla Migrant Arrival Centre in Wodonga, Victoria. This project uses three-dimensional film technology to bring students to the Centre site, where they can take an interactive, curriculum-based tour of the site. Alongside the interactive online tour, a series of curricula were developed to work with the Australian History Curriculum. I wondered why community-led collections like these in the regions fall to the side in discussions of a 'national' (aka institutional) memory, or as part of a representation of a multicultural Australia, such as in this Linkage.

Before I start exploring this question I want to acknowledge the limitations of the ARC Linkage framework in terms of the project mentioned above, and that the work that is being done in the "Representing Multicultural Australia in National and State Libraries" project is of value to professional practice and community; in this article I am using the juxtaposition of the two projects as an impetus to interrogate the role of regional collaboration, and to argue for a notion of national memory as a regional collecting concern.

Bonegilla: A Contested Site

From 1947 through to 1971 over 300,000 migrants to Australia passed through the Bonegilla Migrant Reception and Training Centre ("Bonegilla") at a defining time in Australia's immigration history, as post-World War II migration policies encompassed non-English speaking Europeans displaced by the war (Pennay "Remembering Bonegilla" 43). Bonegilla itself is a small settlement near the Hume Dam, 10 km from the New South Wales town of Albury and the Victorian town of Wodonga. Bonegilla was a former Army Camp repurposed to meet the settlement agendas of multiple Australian governments.

New migrants spent weeks and months at Bonegilla, learning English, and securing work. The site was the largest (covering 130 hectares of land) and longest-lasting reception centre in post-war Australia, and has been confirmed bureaucratically as nationally significant, having been added to the National Heritage Register in 2007 (see Pennay "Remembering Bonegilla" for an in-depth discussion of this listing process). Bonegilla has played a part in defining and redefining Australia's migrant and multicultural history through the years, with Bruce Pennay suggesting that

perhaps Bonegilla has warranted national notice as part of an officially initiated endeavour to develop a more inclusive narrative of nation, for the National Heritage List was almost contemporaneously expanded to include Myall Creek. Perhaps it is exemplary in raising questions about the roles of the nation and the community in reception and training that morph into modern day equivalents. ("Memories and Representations" 46)

Given its national significance, both formally and colloquially, Bonegilla has provided rich material for critical thinking around, for example, Australian multicultural identity, migration commemorations and the construction of cultural memory. Alexandra Dellios argues that Bonegilla and its role in Australia's memory is a contested site, and that

despite criticisms from historians such as Persian and Ashton regarding Bonegilla's adherence to a revisionist narrative of multicultural progress, visitor book comments, as well as exchanges and performances at reunions and festivals, demonstrate that visitors take what they will from available frameworks, and fill in the 'gaps' according to their own collective memories, needs and expectations. (1075)

This recognition of Bonegilla as a significant, albeit "heritage noir" (Pennay, "Memories and Representations" 48), agent of Australia's heritage and memory makes it a productive site to investigate the question of regional collections and collaborations in constructing a national memory.

Recordkeeping: By Government and Community

The past decade has seen a growth in the prominence of community archives as places of memory for communities (for example Flinn; Flinn, Stevens, and Shepherd; Zavala et al.). This prominence has come through the recognition of community archives as both valid sites of study as well as repositories of memory. In turn, this body of knowledge has offered new ways to think about collection practices outside of the mainstream, where "communities can make collective decisions about what is of enduring value to them, shape collective memory of their own pasts, and control the means through which stories about their past are constructed" (Caswell, Cifor, and Ramirez 58). Jimmy Zavala, and colleagues, argue that these collections "challenge hierarchical structures of governance found in mainstream archival institutions" (212), and offer different perspectives to those kept on the official record. By recognising both the official record *and* the collections developed and developing outside of official repositories, there are opportunities to deepen understandings and interpretations of historical moments in time.

There are at least three possible formal keeping places of memories for those who passed through, worked at, or lived alongside Bonegilla: the National Archives of Australia, the Albury LibraryMuseum in Albury, New South Wales, and the Bonegilla Migrant Experience site itself outside of Wodonga. There will of course be records

in other national, state, local, and community repositories, along with newspaper articles, people's homes, and oral lore that contribute to the narrative of Bonegilla memories, but the focus for this article are these three key sites as the main sources of primary source material about the Bonegilla experience.

Official administrative and organisational records of activity during Bonegilla's reception period are held at the National Archives of Australia in the national capital, Canberra; these records contribute to the memory of Bonegilla from a nation-state perspective, building an administrative record of the Centre's history and of a significant period of migration in Australia's past. Of note, Bonegilla was the only migrant centre that created its own records on site, and these records form part of the series known as NAA: A2567, NAA A2571 1949–56 and A2572 1957–71 (Hutchison 70). Records of local staff employed at the site will also be included in these administrative files. Very few of these records are publicly accessible online, although work is underway to provide enhanced online and analogue access to the popular arrival cards (NAA A2571 1949–56 and A2572 1957–71) onsite at Bonegilla (Pennay, personal communication) as they are in high demand by visitors to the site, who are often looking for traces of themselves or their families in the official record. The National Archives site [Destination Australia](#) is an example of an attempt by the holder of these administrative records to collect personal stories of this period in Australia's history through an online photograph gallery and story register, but by 2019 less than 150 stories have been published to the site, which was launched in 2014 (National Archives of Australia).

This national collection is complemented and enhanced by the [Bonegilla Migration Collection](#) at the Albury LibraryMuseum in southern New South Wales, which holds non-government records and memories of life at Bonegilla. This collection "contains over 20 sustained interviews; 357 personal history database entries; over 500 short memory pieces and 700 photographs" (Pennay "Memories and Representations" 45). It is a 'live' collection, growing through contributions to the [Bonegilla Personal History Register](#) by the migrants and others who experienced the Centre, and through an ongoing relationship with the current Bonegilla Migrant Experience site to act as a collection home for their materials.

Alongside the collection in the LibraryMuseum, there is the collection of infrastructure at the [Bonegilla Migrant Experience](#) (BME) site itself. These buildings and other assets, and indeed the absence of buildings, plus the interpretative material developed by BME staff, give further depth and meaning to the lived experience of post-war migration to Australia. Whilst both of these collections are housed and managed by local government agencies, I suggest in this article that these collections can still be considered community archives, given the regional setting of the collections, and the community created records included in the collections.

The choice to locate Bonegilla in a fairly isolated regional setting was a strategy of the governments of the time (Persian), and in turn has had an impact on how the site is accessed; by who, and how often (see Dellios for a discussion of the visitor numbers over the history of the Bonegilla Migrant Experience over its time as a commemorative and tourist site). The closest cities to Bonegilla, Albury and Wodonga, sit on the border of New South Wales and Victoria, separated by the Murray River and located 300 km from Melbourne and 550 km from Sydney. The 'twin towns' work collaboratively on many civic activities, and are an example of a 1970s-era regional development project that in the twenty-first century is still growing, despite the regional setting (Stein 345).

This regional setting justifies a consideration of virtual, and online access to what some argue is a site of national memory loaded with place-based connections, with Jayne Persian arguing that "the most successful forays into commemoration of Bonegilla appear to be website-based and institution-led" (81). This sentiment is reflected in the motivation to create further online access points to Bonegilla, such as the one discussed in this article.

Enhancing Teaching, Learning, and Public Access to Collections

In 2018 these concepts of significant heritage sites, community archives, national records, and an understanding of migration history came together in a regionally-based Teaching and Learning project funded through a CSU internal grant scheme. The scheme, designed to support scholarship and enhance learning and teaching at CSU, funded a small pilot project to pilot a virtual visit to a real-life destination: the Bonegilla Migrant Experience site. The project was designed to provide key teaching and learning material for students in CSU Education courses, and those training to teach history in particular, but also enhance virtual access to the site for the wider public.

The project was developed as a partnership between CSU, Albury LibraryMuseum, and Bonegilla Migrant Experience, and formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding with shared intellectual property. The virtual visit includes a three-dimensional walkthrough created using Matterport software, intuitive navigation of the walkthrough, and four embedded videos linked with online investigation guides. The site is intended to help online visitors 'do history' by locating and evaluating sources related to a heritage site with many layers and voices, and whose narrative and history is contested and told through many lenses (Grover and Pennay).

As you walk through the virtual site, you get a sense of the size and scope of the Migrant Arrival Centre. The current Bonegilla Migrant Experience site sits at Block 19, one of 24 blocks that formed part of the Centre in its peak time. The guiding path takes you through the Reception area and then to the 'Beginning Place', a purpose built interpretative structure that "introduces why people came to Australia searching for a new beginning" ([Bonegilla site guide](#)). Moving through, you pass markers on the walls and other surfaces that link through to further interpretative materials and investigation guides. These guides are designed to introduce K-10 students and their teachers to practices such as exploring online archives and thematic inquiry learning aligned to the Australian History Curriculum. Each guide is accompanied by teacher support material and further classroom activities.

The guides prompt and guide visitors through an investigation of online archives, and other repositories, including sourcing files held by the National Archives of Australia, searching for newspaper accounts of controversial events through the National Library of Australia's digital repository [Trove](#), and access to personal testimonies of migrants and refugees through the Albury LibraryMuseum [Bonegilla Migration Collection](#). Whilst designed to support teachers and students engaging with the Australian History Curriculum, these resources are available to the public. They provide visitors to the virtual site an opportunity to develop their own critical digital literacy skills and further their understanding of the official records along with the community created records such as those held by the Albury LibraryMuseum.

The project partnership developed from existing relationships between cultural heritage professionals in the Albury Wodonga region along with new relationships developed for technology support from local companies. The project also reinforced the role of CSU, with its regional footprint, in being able to connect and activate regionally-based projects for community benefit along with teaching and learning outcomes.

Regional Collaborations

Liz Bishoff argues for a "collaboration imperative" when it comes to the galleries, libraries, archives, and museums (GLAM) sector's efficacy, and it is the collaborative nature of this project that I draw on in this article. Previous work has also suggested models of *convergence*, where multiple institutions in the GLAM sector become a single institution (Warren and Matthews 3). In fact the Albury LibraryMuseum is an example of this model. These converged models have been critiqued from resourcing, professionalisation and economic perspectives (see for example Jones; Hider et al.; Wellington), but in some cases for local government agencies especially, they are an effective way of delivering services to communities (Warren and Matthews 9). In the case of this virtual tour, the collaboration between local government and university agencies was temporal for the length of the project, where the pooling of skills, resources, and networks has enabled the development of the resource.

In this project, the regional setting has allowed and taken advantage of an intimacy that I argue may not have been possible in a metropolitan or urban setting. The social intimacies of regional town living mean that jobs are often 'for a long time (if not for life)', lives intersect in more than a professional context, and that because there are few pathways or options for alternative work opportunities in the GLAM professions, there is a vested interest in progress and success in project-based work. The relationships that underpinned the Bonegilla virtual tour project reflect many of these social intimacies, which included former students, former colleagues, and family relationships.

The project has modelled future strategies for collaboration, including open discussions about intellectual property created, the auspicing of financial arrangements and the shared professional skills and knowledge. There has been a significant enhancement of collaborative partnerships between stakeholders, along with further development of professional and personal networks.

National Memories: Regional Concerns

The focus of this article has been on records created about a significant period in Australia's migration history, and the meaning that these records hold based on who created them, where they are held, and how they are accessed and interpreted. Using the case study of the development of a virtual tour of a significant site—Bonegilla—I have highlighted the value of regional, non-national collections in providing access to and understanding of national memories, and the importance of collaborative practice to working with these collections. These collections sit physically in the regional communities of Albury and Wodonga, along with at the National Archives of Australia in Canberra, where they are cared for by professional staff across the GLAM sector and accessed both physically and virtually by students, researchers, and those whose lives intersected with Bonegilla.

From this, I argue that by understanding national and institutional recordkeeping spaces such as the National Archives of Australia as just one example of a place of 'national memory', we can make space for regional and community-based repositories as important and valuable sources of records about the lived experience of

migration. Extending this further, I suggest a recognition of the role of the regional setting in enabling strong collaborations to make these records visible and accessible.

Further research in this area could include exploring the possibility of giving meaning to the *place* of record creation, especially community records, and oral histories, and how collaborations are enabling this. In contrast to this question, I also suggest an exploration of the role of the Commonwealth staff who created the records during the period of Bonegilla's existence, and their social and cultural history, to give more meaning and context to the setting of the currently held records.

References

- Bishoff, Liz. "The Collaboration Imperative." *Library Journal* 129.1 (2004): 34–35.
- Boyd, Jodie. "Call for Papers: Collecting for a Society's Memory: National and State Libraries in Culturally Diverse Societies." 2018. 1 Apr. 2019 <<https://networks.h-net.org/node/73374/announcements/2079324/collecting-society%E2%80%99s-memory-national-and-state-libraries>>.
- Caswell, Michelle, Marika Cifor, and Mario H. Ramirez. "'To Suddenly Discover Yourself Existing': Uncovering the Impact of Community Archives." *The American Archivist* 79.1 (2016): 56–81.
- Dellios, Alexandra. "Marginal or Mainstream? Migrant Centres as Grassroots and Official Heritage." *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 21.10 (2015): 1068–83.
- Flinn, Andrew. "Community Histories, Community Archives: Some Opportunities and Challenges." *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 28.2 (2007): 151–76.
- Flinn, Andrew, Mary Stevens, and Elizabeth Shepherd. "Whose Memories, Whose Archives? Independent Community Archives, Autonomy and the Mainstream." *Archival Science* 9.1–2 (2009): 71.
- Grover, Paul, and Bruce Pennay. "Learning & Teaching Grant Progress Report." Albury Wodonga: Charles Sturt U, 2019.
- Hider, Philip, Mary Anne Kennan, Mary Carroll, and Jessie Lymn. "Exploring Potential Barriers to Lam Synergies in the Academy: Institutional Locations and Publishing Outlets." *The Expanding LIS Education Universe* (2018): 104.
- Hutchison, Mary. "Accommodating Strangers: Commonwealth Government Records of Bonegilla and Other Migrant Accommodation Centres." *Public History Review* 11 (2004): 63–79.
- Jones, Michael. "Innovation Study: Challenges and Opportunities for Australia's Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums." *Archives & Manuscripts* 43.2 (2015): 149–51.
- National Archives of Australia. "Snakes in the Laundry... and Other Horrors". Canberra, 29 May 2014. <<http://www.naa.gov.au/about-us/media/media-releases/2014/25.aspx>>.
- Pennay, Bruce. "'But No One Can Say He Was Hungry': Memories and Representations of Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre." *History Australia* 9.1 (2012): 43–63.
- . "Remembering Bonegilla: The Construction of a Public Memory Place at Block 19." *Public History Review* 16 (2009): 43–63.
- Persian, Jayne. "Bonegilla: A Failed Narrative." *History Australia* 9.1 (2012): 64–83.
- RMIT Centre for Urban Research. "Representing Multicultural Australia in National and State Libraries". 2018. 11 Feb. 2019 <<http://cur.org.au/project/representing-multicultural-australia-national-state-libraries/>>.
- Stein, Clara. "The Growth and Development of Albury-Wodonga 1972–2006: United and Divided." Macquarie U, 2012.
- Warren, Emily, and Graham Matthews. "Public Libraries, Museums and Physical Convergence: Context, Issues, Opportunities: A Literature Review Part 1." *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science* (2018): 1–14.
- Wellington, Shannon. "Building Glamour: Converging Practice between Gallery, Library, Archive and Museum Entities in New Zealand Memory Institutions." Wellington: Victoria U, 2013.
- Zavala, Jimmy, Alda Allina Migoni, Michelle Caswell, Noah Geraci, and Marika Cifor. "'A Process Where We're All at the Table': Community Archives Challenging Dominant Modes of Archival Practice." *Archives and Manuscripts* 45.3 (2017): 202–15.