

# Studies in Oral History

The Journal of  
Oral History Australia

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*Issue 42, 2020*



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Intimate Stories,  
Challenging Histories

Issue 42, 2020



**STUDIES IN ORAL HISTORY:  
THE JOURNAL OF ORAL HISTORY AUSTRALIA**

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The editors of the journal welcome offers of material for possible publication in the 2021 issue, No. 43. Our call for peer-reviewed papers for inclusion in the 2021 issue closed on 30 November 2020. As such, suitable items include unrefereed reports and reviews of books, websites or exhibitions. All enquires can be directed to the editors.

## From the Editors

We are delighted to launch this first edition of *Studies in Oral History*, the renamed *Oral History Australia Journal*, which aligns with the launch of the new Oral History Australia (OHA) logo and website. Our journal has been re-designed, making it more accessible and more reader friendly for those reading from electronic devices, and is now open access which will extend reach and availability. We have also expanded our Editorial Board and created the role of Reports Editor. We would like to thank the OHA Committee's ready support for these changes, and acknowledge their approval of expenditure for the journal's redesign. We particularly thank Judy Hughes for her tireless work supporting many of these new initiatives.

In late 2020, when Victorians are only just easing out of COVID-19 lockdown and travel is limited, when we are all alert to the need to maintain social distancing and limit numbers at social gatherings, the thought of attending a large conference, in person, without wearing a mask, and mingling with people who have travelled from across the nation, seems almost like a distant dream. However, it was only 12 months ago that Oral History Australia's biennial conference was held in Brisbane, on Turrbal and Yugara Country. In alignment with the 2019 conference, the theme for this issue of the journal is 'Intimate Stories, Challenging Histories'.

Our peer-reviewed articles are based on presentations made during the conference, and Madeleine Regan and Chris Chevalier have written and recorded their conference highlights in the reports section, the audio file of which is available through the URL provided. By presenting part of their conference review as an interview, the authors have imitated the dialogic medium most frequently utilised by their readers.

Katrina Srigley travelled from Canada to attend last year's conference where she presented a moving and poignant opening keynote address. Throughout her address, Srigley's deep appreciation for Indigenous understandings of oral history theory, practice, form and politics was evident. Katrina spoke of the lessons learned and insights gained while working with the Nishnaabeg people on Nbisiiing Nishnaabeg Country in Canada, and how she has drawn on these lessons to develop an ethical framework for oral historians who work with Indigenous people. The framework she has developed is based on the ethics of *zaagidwin* (love), an approach to story listening and storytelling that Srigley convincingly argues is a meaningful way to practice decolonial and indigenised feminist oral history; it 'requires practitioners to position themselves in relation to spirit, territory, knowledges, and people', and 'to unlearn in order to meaningfully learn from stories of the past'. This approach is extremely pertinent for non-Indigenous oral historians who work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and we are grateful that Katrina kindly agreed to rewrite her keynote address for publication in this issue. We urge readers to immerse themselves in this powerful and beautiful piece.

Through her work with the Cambodian diaspora in Melbourne, Naomi Frost sensitively examines how, through oral histories, we can better understand the multi-faceted processes through which second-generation refugees inherit memories and trauma of the Khmer Rouge genocide. Frost's thoughtful analysis explores the generational negotiations and the non-verbal ways through which historical consciousness is formed, how information conveyed about the Pol Pot time is fragmented, and how silences are loaded with meaning. Frost also demonstrates how language and concepts are emotionally laden and culturally specific. For example, the concept of 'trauma' is not neutral or universal but a western construct drawn on by second generations (to make sense of their parents' experiences and reactions) but does not necessarily accurately or effectively describe the emotions felt by Frost's interviewees' parents. Because oral historians are by nature experts in hearing meaning through sound, we have introduced a new feature in this issue where our audience can listen as well as or instead of reading Naomi's article. We would like to thank Naomi for so generously agreeing to record an audio of her paper.

Oral history borders upon several other fields where practitioners interview people in order to construct meaning. Sometimes the boundaries between disciplines can be permeable or blurred. In their article, academics and journalists Lawrie Zion, Andrew Dodd and Matthew Ricketson discuss the similarities and differences between journalism and oral history. They argue that oral historians could learn from journalists' approach to controversial issues in interviews, particularly in an age when interviews are more readily accessible online, by offering third parties a right of reply.

Imogen Smith, Sasha Mackay and Helen Klæbe describe the process through which they developed a digital archiving system – the 'Digital Story Bank' – which works as a management tool through which a broad range of archival data, including oral histories, can be stored and readily retrieved. As the authors point out, many organisations become overwhelmed with historical data, the management of which is often dependant on one or two key staff or volunteers who, on leaving the organisation, take their knowledge of the material and stories of the organisation with them. And when archival material is stored in centralised collecting institutions, it is removed from the locale in which it was created and where it is most meaningful. The Story Bank enables data to remain in place, it is simple to use, inexpensive and does not require specific training. As such, information contained in this article will no doubt be of use for a broad range of organisations, associations and societies.

Kah Seng Loh shows how personal narratives enrich understandings of national history, and may challenge dominant narratives. His study of home cooking in Singapore interweaves food and family, public and private to illuminate intergenerational transmission within families, women's roles within home and nation, and the relationships between diverse cultural traditions and the Singaporean nation state. Cooking, he reveals, is never just a selection of ingredients combined to create a dish upon the table.

Following on from our peer-reviewed articles are the reports and reviews sections. This year we have a bumper reports section and we thank our inaugural Reports Editor, Imogen Smith, for her efforts in managing and editing such an array. Part of the reports section follows our normal practice of reporting on a variety of oral

history projects and news from across the country. In addition, this year we have a special COVID-19 section in recognition of how social distancing and travel restrictions have impacted on oral historians' work. This section features reports from a broad range of oral historians who reflect on how they have modified, transformed or abandoned their work in response to the pandemic.

Gemma Burden, our Reviews Editor, has again performed an exceptional job identifying books to review, inviting reviewers and editing their pieces. We hope this offers readers an introduction to a diverse range of some of the most exciting new research in oral history from Australia and internationally. We would like to thank outgoing Editorial Chair Francesco Ricatti for his contributions over the past three years. Francesco has worked hard to secure the best possible reviewers for our peer-reviewed articles to secure constructive feedback to help enhance the standard of this section. We welcome our new Editorial Chair Alexandra Dellios and look forward to working with her into the future. We also express our appreciation to all members of the Editorial Board who have lent their expertise in different areas of oral history to assessing and responding to articles.

Last year, Oral History Australia introduced two new awards to complement the Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence in Oral History. We warmly congratulate the 2019 recipients of each award: Rosemary Block (the Hazel de Berg Award); Peg Fraser (the OHA Book Award); joint winners of the OHA Media Award, namely curators Anisa Puri and Shirleene Robinson (digital exhibition) and co-producers Catherine Freyne and Scott McKinnon and sound engineer Mark Don (two radio programs).

Plans are well underway for next year's biennial conference that is to be held in Launceston from 14-16 October. The conference theme is 'Troubling Times: Opportunities and Challenges'. We hope COVID does not prevent us meeting face to face, engaging with our colleagues and hearing about each other's research. In the meantime, we hope you enjoy this refreshed journal and find it readily accessible, visually appealing and intellectually stimulating.

Skye Krichauff and Carla Pascoe Leahy

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# Peer-reviewed articles

# The Ethics of Zaagidwin: Relational Storytelling and Story Listening on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg Territory

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KATRINA SRIGLEY

*Katrina Srigley lives and works on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory. She is a Professor in the Department of History at Nipissing University, co-editor of the award-winning collection Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century and author of the award-winning monograph Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-era City. Her Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC)-funded project, developed in partnership with Nipissing First Nation, examines the history of Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory through Nishnaabeg ways of knowing, recording, and sharing the past. Professor Srigley is currently co-authoring a book with Glenna Beaucauge (Cultural and Heritage Manager, Nipissing First Nation) titled Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing/The Stories of Nbisiing.*

## INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Yo-wah Yuuingan, aanin boozhoo, greetings to readers. This paper was first delivered as a keynote address for the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference in Yugarra Country at the State Library of Queensland in Brisbane. I remain grateful to Gaja Kerry Charlton for the bi-balka Yuggera djarra-na (welcome to Yugarra Country) and acknowledge and express my gratitude to the Elders, knowledge keepers, language stewards, and the youth of that country, for the land and water, the animals, plants, and for the many conference participants who meaningfully responded to the knowledge I shared during those lovely days in Brisbane.<sup>1</sup>

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1 I want to thank the conference organisers, particularly Elisabeth Gondwe, Joan Kelly, and Alistair Thomson, for inviting me to speak at this conference. It was an honour and privilege to travel to Australia. Seven months have passed since that lovely and warm (for a Canadian) October day in Brisbane and much has changed. Now I acknowledge the fires that had a devastating impact on Country and the global COVID 19 pandemic that has indelibly shifted our contexts of knowledge exchange and the relationships we are able to establish.

I begin with a word about my use of Nishnaabemwin (the Ojibway language). My use of the language follows the conventions of the Nbisiing Nishnaabeg dialect. I am not a language speaker; I work closely with language stewards and language learners. I intentionally refuse italicisation of Indigenous languages because this convention is deployed in publications to indicate foreign languages. Indigenous languages are



Katrina Srigley delivering keynote address at the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference. Photograph courtesy Judy Hughes.

## THE ETHICS OF ZAAGIDWIN

This article explores the ethics of zaagidwin (love), an approach to story listening and storytelling that I assert is a meaningful way to practice decolonial and indigenized feminist oral history, particularly when working with histories that have been shared with but do not belong to you. Here I consider zaagidwin as a Nishnaabeg principle that shapes being (ontology), knowing (epistemology), and doing (methodology) within historical research.<sup>2</sup>

As one of the Seven Grandfather Teachings, zaagidwin is a core principle shaping the ability to live a good life, defined as mino bimaadiziwin in Nishnaabeg thought. It

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not foreign to their territories and reasserting the normalcy of their relationships to territories and histories is an act of decolonisation. This is different from the position taken by Gregory Younging, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guide for Writing by and about Indigenous Peoples* (Toronto: Brush Education, 2018), who asserts that italicisation emphasises the importance of Indigenous languages. Gchi-miigwech/thank you to those who reviewed the article for publication, including Glenna Beaucage, Joan McLeod, Elder John Sawyer, Deputy Chief Muriel Sawyer, Skye Krichauff, and Carla Pascoe Leahy, for their generous and helpful feedback. All omissions and errors are my own.

- 2 While a discussion of the definitions and action of love in the Hebrew/Greek/Christian tradition or the overuse and oversimplification of love in some of our contemporary contexts is beyond the scope of this article, I want to thank my colleague and friend the Reverend Dr Derek Neal for encouraging me to think about the complexities of love as eros, agape, or philia and, in the spirit of this article, their divergences and synergies with the ethics of zaagidwin.

embodies a love for and acceptance of self and all of your relations, which encompasses kin in the natural and spiritual world in a non-hierarchical way: human, animal, and plant, as well as the land and waterways. To understand zaagidwin is to consider its relationship with the other Seven Grandfather teachings — debwewin (truth), dbaadendiziwin (humility), gwekwaadziwin (honesty), mnaadendmowin (respect) and aakwa' ode'ewin (bravery) — and we find mino bimaadiziwin (the good life) when we recognize, understand, and practice these interrelationships to the best of our abilities.<sup>3</sup>

As such, zaagidwin and other Seven Grandfather teachings also guide good action, including an unconditional giving and accepting of zaagidwin. As an ethical research framework, this process is deeply relational. It requires practitioners to position themselves in relation to spirit, territory, knowledges and people in order to meaningfully learn from stories of the past. It is non-hierarchical and circular, requiring humility (even as you reflect on your own ways of knowing and your learning journey) and, as Nishnaabeg thinkers explain, an open heart. It is dynamic, as relationships are established and re-established as contexts change. It involves the present, including readers or listeners, the past, and the future in its engagement with the histories of, in this case, Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Gchi-miigwech to Glenna Beaucage, Peter Beaucage, Terry Dokis, and John Sawyers for teaching me about the Seven Grandfather Teachings. See: Edward Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book: The Voice of the Ojibway* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). For circular and visual representations of the Seven Grandfather Teachings I encourage readers to explore the many beautiful versions available online from Indigenous organizations worldwide and artists such as Chief Lady Bird and Monique Aura. For more on the impact of love in action related to, for example, the self, community, research, knowledge, land and law see: John Borrows, 'Indigenous Love, Law and Land in Canada's Constitution', in Arthur Schfar and Steven Lecce (eds), *Fragile Freedoms: Human Rights in Global Context* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017); Islands of Decolonial Love Stories and Songs (Winnipeg, MB: ARP Books, 2015); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back: Stories of Nishnaabeg Re-creation, Resurgence, and New Emergence* (Winnipeg, MB: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2012).

4 As a result of the ways in which this framework shifts through time, I do not use a consistent tense in this article. While an exploration of the connection between Nishnaabeg ethics and extensive discussions about ethics within the field of oral history is beyond the scope of this article, there are certainly meaningful synergies and divergences to be explored with the other Seven Grandfather teachings.

What does it mean to do feminist oral history research with zaagidwin? It means practicing careful, critical, and deeply contextual historical research. Zaagidwin cannot be disentangled from debwewin (truth), gwekwaadziwin (honesty), mnaadendmowin (respect), and aakwa' ode'ewin (bravery). It informs historical practice by determining how you go about research and why you do it in the first place. To complete oral history research with zaagidwin is to enact dbaadendiziwin (humility), to acknowledge your relationship to what you are learning and sharing, and to conduct research that will contribute to the community and the well-being of the next seven generations.

Establishing a relationship between love and feminist oral history methodologies requires us to return (perhaps wearily) to discussions about objectivity and subjectivity. Oral historians have long grappled with these debates and convincingly argued that all sources, whether they be written or oral, are created in particular contexts and shaped by the time, place and person working with them. Further to this, all sources have strengths and limitations, depending on the historical questions you are seeking to answer. While we spend far less time addressing these questions than we used to, at least some of the response of oral historians has been to find ways to keep the objective in the subjective, to manage and control our biases and the limitations of our sources by applying scientific methods to what we are learning.<sup>5</sup>

This approach does not work if you want to practice the ethics of zaagidwin as a feminist oral historian working with Nishnaabeg histories. To do so requires another framework, another way of thinking about the purpose of storytelling and story listening; and zaagidwin is a meaningful entry point to research with Nishnaabeg histories that is ethical and has historical purpose. To complete historical research with zaagidwin is to work from your heart, as well as your mind, and to be brave, honest, humble, respectful, and wise in your exploration of what you learn. It is to think carefully about how what you are doing matters and for whom. And, there

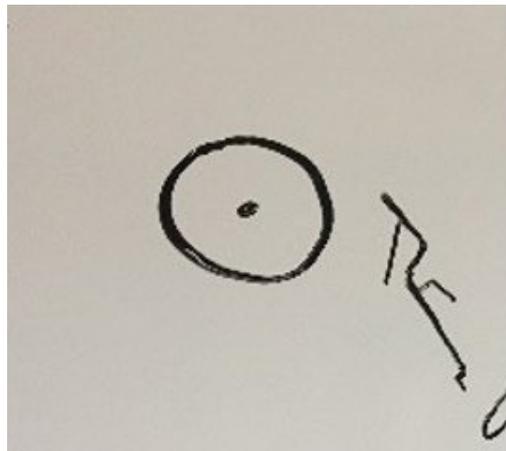
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5 Valerie Yow makes this argument in her oft-cited and important article, 'Do I Like Them Too Much?: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa', *Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (Summer, 1997): 55–79.

is no way to do it without placing yourself intimately in relation to self, territory, people, and to knowledge, no matter who you are.<sup>6</sup>

### SELF IN RELATION

This process of establishing self in relation is a fundamental part of storytelling and story listening and it has its origins in aadsokaanag (foundational sacred stories), including a version of the Nbisiing Nishnaabeg Creation Story carried by Terry Dokis (Dokis First Nation), a friend and now-retired colleague.<sup>7</sup> Here I focus on one aspect of the Creation Story, the circle within a circle, to establish the research framework centred here. This image appears across Nishnaabeg territory in pictographs and carries several teachings. As Terry has taught me, the circle within a circle is a symbol of the Creator. It also illustrates the beginning of time in the Nishnaabeg Creation Story, but this temporal description should not simply be understood as the beginning of linear time. The circle within a circle simultaneously represents the past, present and the future, an understanding of time essential to Nishnaabeg historical practice. Third, this circle within a circle is a framework for thinking about self in relation. As Nishnaabeg scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson and Elder Edna



Circle within a circle, drawing courtesy of Terry Dokis

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- 6 For teaching me about these connections, I say gchi-miigwech to Elder Peter Beaucage, Elder John Sawyer, and Deborah and Marion McGregor, 'Ethics and Relationships', Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute (MISHI), 20 August 2020. See also Benton-Banai, *The Mishomis Book*.
- 7 While I share teachings embedded in an aspect of this story, including the circle within a circle that starts the Creation Story and is represented here, I do not have permission (in fact I did not even ask) to print the full pictorial telling of this story that I shared during my talk. There are several reasons for this. Creation Stories are sacred stories understood to have spirit. They are stewarded, cared for, and shared intergenerationally by Nishnaabeg Elders. As a non-Nishnaabeg oral historian, I do not have the necessary authority for, relationships to, or knowledge of this aadsokaanag to share it in a permanent way in print, even when the story already exists in this form. To do so would signal my lack of respect for these protocols and would re-establish an extractive colonial relationship to these histories.

Manitowabi explain, it reminds us of the importance of seeing ourselves in Creation and reflecting on our positions, responsibilities, and roles within that space.<sup>8</sup> In the context I am focused on here, this means reflecting on what relationships, knowledge, and experiences I bring to this circle. It means remembering that I speak from my own learning journey and for myself. I do not speak for anyone else.

It is important then to introduce myself. I was born and raised on Dish with One Spoon territory now stewarded by the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, in Tkaronto (Toronto), Ontario.<sup>9</sup> This land of my upbringing and early adulthood has a diverse stewardship history, having been cared for by the Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Nishnaabeg Nations. My ancestors were settlers there, starting in the late-eighteenth century. My parents and most of my family still live on this territory and I am grateful that has been possible. In 2005, I moved to Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory (about four hours north of Tkaronto on the shores of Lake Nipissing) to take a job as a historian at Nipissing University. I am equally grateful to live as a partner, mother, and historian on this land.

This process of placing myself in relation makes it essential for me as a historian to think about the divergences and synergies between the knowledge and skills I carry from my academic training and those that are rooted in my learning on Nishnaabeg territory over the last fifteen years. This is essential relational work that challenges binaries and hierarchies, particularly those separating epistemologies (ways of

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8 Leanne Betasamosake Simpson with Edna Manitowabi, 'Theorizing Resurgence from within Nishnaabeg Thought', in Jill Doerfler, Niigaanwewidam James Sinclair and Heidi Kiiwetinepinesiik Stark (eds), *Centering Anishinaabeg Studies: Understanding the World through Stories* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 279–296. Many Elders have shared these teachings in print and orally, including Jim Dumont and Basil Johnston.

9 The Dish with One Spoon treaty was established by Nishnaabeg and Haudenosaunee Nations in the Great Lakes region to outline principles for sharing the land amongst the people living there, to eat well with one spoon from one dish (or kettle) in ways that protect the environment. It is accompanied by a wampum belt. It is first mentioned in European documents in the mid-seventeenth century. For more information see: John Borrows and Michael Coyle (eds), *The Right Relationship: Reimagining the Implementation of Historical Treaties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, 'Looking after Gdoo-naaganinaa: Precolonial Nishnaabeg Diplomatic and Treaty Relationships', *Wicazo Sa Review* 23, no. 2 (Fall 2008): 29–42. To view Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory in relation to Indigenous territories more broadly please visit [Native-land.ca](http://Native-land.ca) and locate Anishinabewaki and Lake Nipissing, which is northeast of Lake Huron.

knowing), ontologies (ways of being), and methodologies (ways of examining) the world.<sup>10</sup> To do this, I will briefly circle back to my academic training to point to some things that I had to ‘unlearn to learn’ to bring me into this relational framework. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith, K. Wayne Yang, Eve Tuck and others assert, the act of decolonization always requires action.<sup>11</sup> In this case, action involved putting some ways of knowing down, while I picked others up, and then reimagining their relationships as my work with Nishnaabeg histories moved forward.

As I have written about elsewhere, my graduate training at the University of Toronto focused on women’s and gender history, Canadian history, and feminist oral history. I carried that training, as well as a just-defended PhD, with me when I arrived on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory in 2005. I had just completed a feminist oral history project on working women during the Great Depression that involved listening to and analysing the stories of more than 100 women.<sup>12</sup> For this research, I engaged with feminist oral history methodology to complete interviews, marshalled black

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10 The importance of acknowledging this methodological and theoretical relationality, and placing yourself in relation in this regard, is something Indigenous Elders, scholars, and writers have said for a long time. Certainly, I learned this from my work with Elder John Sawyer since 2010. It is worth noting here that I intentionally do not provide a date or location for this or other teachings. Unlike a one-on-one interview that occurs in a particular time and place, learning from Elders is often ongoing, built from one conversation to the next and shaped by the teachings that are needed or to be gifted at that time. Here I also want to point to the work of award-winning author Lee Maracle (Stó:lō) who describes diverse methodologies and theories as ‘rafters’ used to build ‘our houses’ in ‘Dancing My Way to Orality’, in Smaro Kamboureli (ed.), *Memory Serves: Oratories* (Edmonton, Alberta: NeWest Press, 2015), 227; Chris Andersen (Michif) and Jean M. O’Brien (White Earth Ojibway) appeal for ‘methodological promiscuity’ in *Sources and Methods in Indigenous Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 1–11; Robert Alexander Innes (Cowessess First Nation) made this argument about Native Studies in, ‘Introduction: Native Studies and Native Cultural Preservation, Revitalization, and Persistence’, *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 34, no. 2 (2010): 1–9; Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013). This approach is essential in all disciplines committed to decolonization. This framework is at the heart of Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki and Franca Iacovetta (eds), *Beyond Women’s Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History for the 21st Century* (London: Routledge, 2018).

11 Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 1999); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (eds), *Indigenous and Decolonizing Studies in Education: Mapping the Long View* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, ‘Decolonization is not a metaphor’, *Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40.

12 Katrina Srigley and Autumn Varley, ‘Learning to Unlearn: Building Relationships on Anishnaabeg Territory’, in Deborah McGregor, Jean-Paul Restoule, and Rochelle Johnston (eds), *Indigenous Research: Theories, Practices, and Relationships* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar’s Press, 2018), 46–64; Katrina Srigley and Lorraine Sutherland, ‘Decolonizing, Indigenizing, and Learning Biskaaybiyang in the Field: Our Oral History Journey’, *The Oral History Review* 45, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2018): 7–28; Katrina Srigley,

feminist and anti-racist scholarship to reflect on power in the past and the present (inside and outside the interview context), and, I hoped, shared a different history of the Great Depression (long understood through the histories of men) by focusing on the stories of women. With my feet firmly planted on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg territory, as well as a tenure-track faculty position to fill and research program to develop, I was well positioned to complete another feminist oral history project that would reflect on practice, consider power dynamics, and contribute to the recuperative work necessary to challenge a historiography that had long ignored Nishnaabeg kwewak (women's) histories. Right? Wrong. Time was required to build trust, establish intentions, and set a research direction. I also had more learning to do. As part of that process, there were several aspects of my graduate school training in history that I had to unlearn, and new things I had to learn, among them: humility is more important than performing expertise; listening is often more important than talking; and a PhD is not everywhere an asset – in fact, you might want to keep your PhD a secret! It would take another five years before I sat down for a one-on-one interview and a further nine before I travelled with stories that do not belong to me, but have been entrusted to me.<sup>13</sup>

This process of unlearning to learn eventually brought me back to my disciplinary training and a clearer understanding of how various ways of thinking about the past can work together. There are important synergies (or relationships) between

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*Breadwinning Daughters: Young Working Women in a Depression-era City, 1929–1939* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).

13 While I have spoken on my own at conferences about ethics and relationship building, as well as storytelling and story listening, between 2013 and 2020 I did not share Nbisiing Nishnaabeg histories without a Nbisiing Elder or knowledge keeper or Nbisiing research partner present. It is essential to maintain relationships between stories, community, and territory (and not replicate extractive forms of research practice) in this way. I stopped attending professional conferences that did not have sufficient funds to support travel and conference fees for Nbisiing community members. In 2020, I received two invitations to travel and share histories and because of distance and the time involved I needed to travel alone. At this stage, my teachers who have taught me so much about how to do this historical work in a good way provided me with this direction: it was time for these particular stories to travel off the territory; they had the potential to do good work (build knowledge and understanding, and establish relationships) elsewhere. Glenna Beaucage, who is co-authoring *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Ma Nbisiing* and most often travels with me, worked with me to establish what we wanted to share. Elder John Sawyer sat with me in ceremony to talk about travelling with and sharing stories that are not my own. Placing myself in relation and being clear about who I am and the knowledge I do or do not carry is one step. Maintaining the connections between stories, spirit, land, and people in my sharing is another.

the work of feminist historians central to my academic community, my unlearning journey, and the relational approach of Nishnaabeg historians. Identifying these relationships is also an important act of decolonisation. It destabilises binaries, hierarchies, and structures of othering that sustain the colonial project. I intend for readers to see connections between what I share here and Luisa Passerini's call for historians to challenge Eurocentric methodological, theoretical, and epistemological frameworks; Gwendolyn Etter Lewis's focus on 'reclaiming the self'; Linda Shopes' and Penny Summerfield's reminders about the power of recuperative work; Sherna Berger Gluck's insistence that we listen well within different cultural frameworks; and Natalie Zemon Davis' long-made reminders about important connections between local and global stories.<sup>14</sup> When mobilized, these synergies create space for all oral historians to listen and learn beyond binaries, such as those that divide Indigenous and non-Indigenous methodological approaches, and in ways that perhaps we have not been doing as powerfully as we might have before.

Finally, as should already be clear, this circle within a circle involves readers establishing relationships to my story, to the lands where these stories unfold, and in the next part of this article, the histories that have been shared with me. Doing this allows you to place me and my learning journey, giving you a sense of the knowledge and training I bring to this conversation and who my teachers are, in order to better

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14 Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy 1968*, trans. Lisa Erdberg (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1996); Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta (eds), *Borders, Conflict Zones, and Memory: Scholarly Engagements with Luisa Passerini* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Gwendolyn Etter Lewis, 'Black Women's Life Stories: Reclaiming Self in Narrative Texts', in Daphne Patai and Sherna Berger Gluck (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 43–58; Linda Shopes, 'Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities', *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 20 (September 2002): 588–598; Penny Summerfield, 'Oral History as an Autobiographical Practice', *Miranda* 12 (2016): 1–15; Sherna Berger Gluck, *An American Feminist in Palestine: The Intifada Years* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1994); Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Iroquois Women, European Women', in Peter C. Mancall and James H. Merrell (eds), *American Encounters: Natives and Newcomers from European Contact to Indian Removal, 1500–1850* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 96–118; Natalie Zemon Davis, 'Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World', *History and Theory* 50 (May 2011): 188–202. There is an extensive scholarship in Indigenous Feminisms, including an exciting new collection edited by Sarah Nickel and Amanda Fehr, *In Good Relation: History, Gender, and Kinship in Indigenous Feminisms* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2020), which is essential to any larger conversation about the connection between feminisms and story listening or storytelling. Here I point to scholarship that was part of my training and the relationships that became clearer to me when I was listening and learning in different ways.



Map of Nishnaabeg (Ojibway) Territories in Southern Ontario, copyright Chris Brackley/Canadian Geographic, Indigenous Peoples Atlas of Canada, pp. 54-55

analyse (accept, reject, challenge) what I share with you. This is a process of what Nishnaabeg Elder Onaubinisay Jim Dumont calls oral footnoting.<sup>15</sup> In the discipline of history, we call it citation. This article focuses us on lands, peoples, and histories located at great distance from Yugarra Country, Nbisiiing Nishnaabeg territory on Turtle Island (North America). When reading the stories shared here I intend readers to think about these lands — the granite of the Canadian Shield, its fresh water lakes and rivers, the maples, elms, spruce and pine of the bush — and the people and animals who call the territory home. Establishing relationships between land and story, or animating land with stories, is a critical act of decolonisation. It reinscribes a Nishnaabeg presence in the past and the present, and for the future. It makes erasure, that powerful colonial weapon, far more difficult to sustain.<sup>16</sup>

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15 Onaubinisay Jim Dumont, 'Seven Fires of Creation', teaching, Garden Village, Nipissing First Nation, 9 May, 2014.

16 This is why I always acknowledge the land when I speak, to bring the territory into the room and the minds of those listening. The practice of land acknowledgement has been the subject of discussion, particularly in contexts where it appears pro forma and disconnected from action. For more on this debate:

The stories shared here emerge from the historical work I have been doing with Glenna Beaucage and many Elders, knowledge keepers, language stewards, and community members from Nipissing First Nation to listen to and record stories for *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing/Stories of Nbisiing Nishnaabeg*. Translated literally from Nbisiing Nishnaabemwin (the dialect of Anishnaabemowin spoken by Nbisiing Nishnaabeg) to English, *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing* means ‘the stories they told at Nipissing’.<sup>17</sup> We translate the title in the present tense to acknowledge that these stories are about the past, but they are also doing good work in the present and for the future. *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing* is, I argue here, an example of decolonised feminist oral history on the territory on which I live and work, that is rooted in relationality, in Nishnaabeg ways of documenting, understanding, and sharing knowledge of the past through stories (of which there are different types) in an effort to understand the present and set direction for the future.<sup>18</sup> Here, I will highlight this with a focus on two projects centred on oral histories. They consider dibaajimowinan (everyday stories) of the Nbisiing Warriors ice hockey team and the leadership of Nbisiing kwewak. These historical projects practice the ethics of zaagidwin to engage in recuperative historical work, challenge disciplinary hierarchies, binaries and frameworks, animate the land I have oriented you towards, and, finally, create space for the teachings about identity, belonging, and community that are at the heart of these stories.

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<https://www.cbc.ca/radio/unreserved/redrawing-the-lines-1.4973363/i-regret-it-hayden-king-on-writing-ryerson-university-s-territorial-acknowledgement-1.4973371>, last accessed 19 June 2020.

17 Gchi-miigwech to Elder and language steward Peter Beaucage for this translation.

18 While I do not have time to explore the different forms stories take in Nishnaabeg histories, it is important to point out there are many forms with different purposes and it is not always possible to divide them neatly. The Creation Story is one example of a story that holds within it both the sacred and the everyday. Indigenous nations define stories and/or histories in unique ways, but the division between aadsokaanag (sacred) and dibaajimowinan (everyday) have strong consistencies. See Margaret M. Bruchac, *Savage Kin: Indigenous Informants and American Anthropologists* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2018), 7; Doerfler, et al., *Centering Anishnaabeg Studies*; Niigonweddom James Sinclair, ‘Nindoodemag Bagijiganan: A History of Anishnaabeg Narrative’ (PhD diss., University of British Columbia, 2013); Srigley and Sutherland, ‘Decolonizing, Indigenizing’; Keith Thor Carlson, ‘Reflections on Indigenous History and Memory: Reconstructing and Reconsidering Contact’, in John S. Lutz (ed.), *Myth and Memory Stories of Indigenous European Contact* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 50–51.

## THE NIPISSING WARRIORS

The first oral history based research that I completed on Nbisiing territory was a history of the Nipissing Warriors ice hockey team. This project started in 2010 when Chief Marianna Couchie asked Glenna Beaucage (then the Nipissing First Nation (NFN) librarian and now the Culture and Heritage Manager at NFN) and I to focus on this historical theme. We were at this stage because, over the previous five years, I had learned that my research questions had to be driven by and foster the needs, interests and skills of Nbisiing Nishnaabeg. When we started working together I had no major research questions, no ten-point plan (though I will admit that I still really wanted one), or money from a large granting agency. What I did not realise at the time was that the dibaajimowinan (everyday stories) that were shared with us enacted the ethics and relational work of love.

The Nipissing Warriors were an all-Nishnaabeg ice hockey team that grew from the players (young men and women) playing on the ponds, lakes, and rivers of the territory when hockey started being played there in the late nineteenth century.<sup>19</sup> Organised local hockey leagues were well established by the 1950s, and by 1965 a Nishnaabeg team of Nipissing First Nation, Dokis First Nation, status and non-status Indigenous peoples, as well as one or two non-Nishnaabeg players, were playing in the area Industrial Hockey League. The Nishnaabeg members of the team also travelled across the province to play in all-Indigenous inter-reserve hockey. By the early 1970s, they were known as the Nipissing Warriors and were a remarkably successful team, winning often and with very high scores – 36–3 or 19–2 were not uncommon victories. As one committed fan remembered, ‘The other team got on the ice basically knowing they were going to lose. That was how good that team was’.<sup>20</sup> The 1972 team won everything it was possible to win in that season. In this sense, it was no surprise that Chief Couchie wanted us to document their history. Yet, as we conducted interviews with former players and fans, we came to realise that what was being emphasised was not hockey. We actually learned more about that from the

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19 Bruce Alan Craig and Kenneth Ross Craig, *Blades on the Bay: One Hundred Years of Hockey in North Bay and Area* (Sudbury, ON: Journal Printing, 1997).

20 Charlie Hebert, *The Nipissing Warriors*, documentary, Regan Pictures, 2015, [nipissingu.ca/warriors](http://nipissingu.ca/warriors), last accessed 4 March 2020.

documentary record. Rather, we were listening to dibaajimowinan (everyday stories) that highlighted the importance of this hockey team to identity and belonging for former players and fans across the territory.

There are a variety of reasons why this became clear as we listened to dibaajimowinan. First, through their stories, Nbisiing Nishnaabeg emphasised that the Nipissing Warriors brought people together. This included Nishnaabeg kin who otherwise found themselves divided on reserves by the spatial violence of colonialism. The reserve system is land set aside by the Canadian government, through treaty and the Indian Act (1876), for the exclusive use of Indigenous peoples. Reserve land was often the worst land and, when not, it has been continuously and often illegally encroached on for settlement, infrastructure (railways and roads) and resource extraction (timber, fishing, mining). In Nbisiing Nishnaabemwin the word for reserve is shkongon or that which is left over. The same Indian Act defined (and continues to define in amended form) who has status and, therefore, permission to live on reserve and in community. This highly invasive and colonial federal law separates people who in the past were family and community members, and in the process erodes identity and belonging.<sup>21</sup>

Irrespective of the legacies and realities of these colonial frameworks, the Nipissing Warriors hockey team included everyone: players who were status and non-status, those from Dokis and Nipissing First Nations, as well as the occasional non-Indigenous player connected with the Nipissing community. Community members laughingly share that EVEN the Catholic priest Father Van Hee took

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21 This is a complicated history that requires far more time and space than I can give it here. The reserve system is one example among many of the ways in which the Indian Act and colonialism divided communities and impacted identity and belonging. Gchi-miigwech to Elder Peter Beaucage, Language Steward and Deputy Chief Muriel Sawyer, and Elder John Sawyer for teachings on this history. See: Karl Hele, (ed.) *This is Indian Land: the 1850s Robinson Treaties* (Winnipeg, MB: Aboriginal Issues Press, 2016); Bob Joseph, *21 Things You May Not Know About the Indian Act: Helping Canadians Make Reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples a Reality* (Port Coquitlam, B.C.: Indigenous Relations Press, 2018); Bonita Lawrence, *'Real' Indians and Others: Mixed-Blood Urban Native Peoples and Indigenous Nationhood* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 2004); Katrina Strigley, "I am a proud Anishinaabekwe": Issues of Identity and Status in Northern Ontario after Bill C-31', in Robin Jarvis Brownlie and Valerie J. Korinek (eds), *Finding a Way to the Heart: Feminist Writings on Aboriginal and Women's History in Canada* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2012), 241–266; Alex Williams (director), *The Pass System*, documentary, Tamarack Productions, 2015.

to the ice for the occasional local game.<sup>22</sup> He was welcomed, though during those games players felt more compelled to apologise for their swearing. For non-status Nishnaabeg players on the team, it was particularly important to emphasise that when Chief Fred McLeod Jr. ignored colonial status designations and enacted kinship ties to put players on the Warriors roster, his actions had a lasting impact on their sense of identity and belonging. This experience of relationship to community continued in the arena, which was always packed to the rafters when the Warriors played. According to the fans, on game night house lights were always out across the territory because everyone was at the arena. In this space, Elders, aunties, uncles and youth cheered the team on. They felt pride and the players realised that. It made them play harder. Nishnaabemwin could also be heard in the stands, particularly when the Elders discussed the events of the week or gave directions to be taken to the players on the bench or in the penalty box. As a player, Elder John Sawyer remembers being told, ‘You can’t score from the penalty box!’<sup>23</sup> The use of Nishnaabemwin was important. As Muriel Sawyer (language steward and Deputy Chief, NFN) explained, ‘[we were] in a public facility in a non-Native facility and using our language freely and not really looking around to see if it was okay. It was very empowering!’<sup>24</sup> That team brought people together and, in the process, created a sense of belonging and strengthened identity for everyone involved.

Enacting the ethics of zaagidwin in our work meant amplifying these teachings in our mobilisation of these histories. As such, we did not start with an academic article or book, rather we created a historical exhibit to be shared on the territory and worked with teachers Ashley Porter and Lorraine Sutherland to develop lesson plans to be taught at Nbisiing Secondary School, Nipissing First Nation’s high school.<sup>25</sup>

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22 John Sawyer, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, North Bay, ON, 22 November 2010. All recordings and transcripts of interviews referred to in this article were conducted by Katrina Srigley. They are held by Katrina Srigley and the Culture and Heritage Department, NFN.

23 Elder John Sawyer, conversation with Katrina Srigley, 5 March 2015.

24 Muriel Sawyer, *The Nipissing Warriors*, documentary, Regan Productions, 2015, [nipissingu.ca/warriors](http://nipissingu.ca/warriors), last accessed 27 February 2020.

25 The documentary can be found at this link: [nipissingu.ca/warriors](http://nipissingu.ca/warriors). Within the documentary you will see the exhibit and classroom spaces at Nbisiing Secondary School, as well as teacher Ashley Porter who worked with us on these units. The documentary in the language will be available at this link by January 2021.

We produced a short documentary recorded first in English and most recently in Nishnaabemwin for language learners in the present and future. Language revitalisation is of highest priority for Nipissing First Nation. The Nishnaabemwin version of the documentary was recorded with four Nishnaabekwewak (women) language stewards, who are warriors in their own right. During my talk in Brisbane, I shared a one-minute clip of this version of the documentary to sound the language because it matters. It is alive. It belongs with the stories and, as anthropologist Keith Basso has noted, sharing the language honours the ancestors. It speaks to the past, present, and future. When we share Indigenous languages like Nishnaabemwin we bring listeners into relationship with them, meeting them at their own level of understanding and planting the seeds of language growth.<sup>26</sup>

#### CENTERING NISHNAABEKWEWAK STORIES OF LEADERSHIP

Another important aspect of our work in *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing* has been to centre, listen to, and share the stories of Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak (women). Centring the stories of women is deeply entwined with the goals of feminist oral history and, in this context, the ethics of zaagidwin in the ways that we listened to the stories shared with us. These stories carry, in particular, teachings about the importance of contributions to the community.

The Nipissing Homemakers Club (which I learned about while working on the history of the Warriors) was my entry point for exploring the leadership histories of Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak. ‘Indian Homemakers Clubs’ were officially created by the government of Canada in 1937. As other scholars have shown, the clubs were designed to enlist Indigenous women in the colonial project.<sup>27</sup> Based on assumptions

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26 Keith Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).

27 Lianne C. Leddy, “‘Mostly Just as a Social Gathering’: Anishinaabe Kwewag and the Indian Homemakers’ Club, 1945-1960”, in Kristin Burnett and Geoff Read (eds), *Aboriginal History: A Reader* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2016); Aroha Harris and Logan McCallum, “Assaulting the Ears of the Government”: The Work of the Maori Women’s Welfare League and the Indian Homemakers’ Clubs in the 1850s and 60s’, in Carol Williams (ed.), *Indigenous Women and Work: From Labor to Activism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 243–257; Sarah A. Nickel, *Assembling Unity: Indigenous Politics, Gender and the Union of BC Indian Chiefs* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2019); Heather Howard also finds that Indigenous women’s organizations are central to community in urban centres, see ‘Women’s Class Strategies as Activism in Native Community Building in Toronto, 1950–1975’, in Susan Applegate Krouse

about women and their roles, including the idea that women were not already doing this work in their communities, organisers hoped the clubs would contribute to the wellbeing of Indigenous communities and the Canadian nation by putting women to work developing good citizens and good homes.

What I realized after working with this organisational history of the Homemakers, particularly the history drawn from archival records, was that it was interfering with my listening. Whose stories was I listening to, through whose epistemological, ontological, and methodological frameworks, and for whom? In fact, I realised I needed to set aside the Homemakers Club and focus on Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak histories from their own perspectives. Once I did that, I more fully understood that the Homemakers Club was a leadership vehicle at a particular time and place, but it was not a starting or ending point for understanding Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak histories. Rather, they need to be thought about through teachings around contribution to community.<sup>28</sup>

When I ask Joan McLeod, daughter of Nbisiing leader Leda McLeod, about the women involved in the Homemakers Club, she reminded me that the women who would become part of the club were already working together. ‘In fact,’ she explained, ‘the Nipissing people have always placed great emphasis on caring for one another, it did not mean we all agreed, but there is plenty of historical documentation to make our care for one another clear’.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, when asked what kinds of activities the Homemakers were involved in, former Chief Phil Goulais, who is the son of prominent Homemaker Susan Goulais, posed a rhetorical question — ‘What weren’t they

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and Heather Howard Bobiwash (eds), *Keeping the Campfires Going: Native Women’s Activism in Urban Centers* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska, 2009), 105–124.

28 Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucauge, “‘Everything from our Hearts to our Hockey Sticks’: Nipissing Homemakers Club”, NFN newsletter, 2019, nfn.ca, last accessed 4 March 2020. On the importance of contributions to community see: Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Toronto, ON: Women’s Press, 2016); Leah Schneider, ‘Complementary Relationships: A Review of Indigenous Gender Studies’, in Robert Innes and Kim Anderson (eds), *Indigenous Men and Masculinities: Legacies, Identities, Regeneration* (Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press, 2015), 62–79.

29 Joan McLeod, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucauge, Garden Village, NFN, 12 August 2019.

involved in really? They were the band council before there was a band council'.<sup>30</sup> Elder, language steward, and long-time NFN counsellor June Commanda emphasised that one of the principal roles of the Nbisiing kwewak in this organisation was to contribute to community.<sup>31</sup>

Well before 1950 when the first Homemakers Club was established, Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak supported growth and learning among youth, and they concerned themselves with the well-being of their community and nation. There are several ways this happened inside and outside the Homemakers organization. The Homemakers hosted a range of social events to raise money, but the fish fries or community picnics were among the most popular events, drawing hundreds of people from across the territory. The picnics required three or more days of preparation, explained June Commanda. There was shopping to do. Coleslaw to make. Fries to prepare. In fact, they peeled so many potatoes that they ended up with blisters on their hands!<sup>32</sup> Fishing families donated fish and if you were a child or husband of one of the leaders you helped out. Joan McLeod remembers her nine-year-old self standing on a crate washing dishes, all the while longingly watching other children play on the beach. There was no question where she had to be.<sup>33</sup> The husbands fried the fish for hours on end, as the women dealt with the lines of people that seemed to go on all day.

All of these funds were turned back to the community in a variety of ways. The Homemakers organised one of the first Native Diabetes Associations in Canada. They provided donations to families in need, including diapers for new babies. They covered health care costs, particularly costly travel to Toronto for hospital visits. They provided funds for the Catholic church, including purchasing a new organ, paying for the priest's food, and the cleaning and furnishing of his apartment. When the priest tried to exert control over the funds generated from the picnic, the

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30 Phil Goulais, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, Garden Village, NFN, 19 October 2017.

31 June Commanda, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, Garden Village, NFN, 4 May 2017.

32 Commanda interview, 4 May 2017.

33 McLeod interview, 12 August 2019.

Homemakers refused, though most of them were deeply committed to the church. Funds from these activities went to support youth clubs and sports teams. These women purchased the Nipissing Warriors' first sweaters and their hockey sticks. They hosted celebratory dinners to acknowledge their successes. They built the first community hall. To this day, Nibisiing Nishnaabekwewak provide a Christmas meal for seniors and food for bereaved families. As Phil Goulais said, what weren't they involved in?!<sup>34</sup>

These contributions extended into the political sphere. When Phil Goulais was Chief he knew that nothing went forward in community without the support of the Homemakers. 'They showed up at the polls and voted, you know. IT mattered...If they decided you were out, you were out'. He remembered one community member coming to him and saying,

You know, Phillip you gotta get out from behind the desk and go talk to the Elders. You're getting close to the election here. If you wanna get re-elected you gotta get out... it doesn't matter what they talk about but get out there and listen'. I asked who he needed to get out to see. It was the women, he replied, the women were clear: 'This is what we want' and they'd talk amongst themselves. What do we want? Then they would say — That is our Chief — and they were right.<sup>35</sup>

Leda McLeod, who raised twenty children, was the President of Nipissing Homemakers Club for many years – this included acting as leader of the provincial Homemakers organisation during this time. She is remembered for her strong (even tenacious) leadership inside and outside community, particularly in the area of education. She was described as a feminist by family members for the ways in which she sounded her voice to make change, even when it was exceptionally tricky. As her daughter, Joan McLeod, explained:

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34 Commanda interview, 12 August 2019; Goulais interview, 19 October 2017; Jeanette Goulais, interview with Katrina Srigley and Glenna Beaucage, Garden Village, NFN, 29 June 2017; McLeod interview, 12 August 2019.

35 Goulais interview, 29 June 2017.

She was a dynamo. She was very strong... She was a woman born at the wrong time... but at the same time it was because of my mother and women like her that our community is as stable as it is today. They went through the most difficult years.<sup>36</sup>

There are several stories I can share about the changes that occurred at Nipissing as a result of Leda's leadership but I will focus on one that reflects her commitment to education and to children.

Leda led a successful four-year (1971–1975) campaign to get a trustee from Nipissing First Nation (NFN) on the Catholic District School Board. Both then and now, most children from NFN attended schools within this school board and, unsurprisingly, leaders in the community thought that Nipissing should have a voice on the school board. When a motion to create a trustee position for NFN was defeated in 1971, Leda led a campaign that involved letter writing, building relationships across the territory, gathering information, and organising protests. In 1971, Muriel Sawyer (then Commanda), wrote a letter to an area newspaper arguing that democracy was seriously compromised by this decision:

Occasionally it is forgotten that we live in a democratic society, in which every group should be represented to voice its opinions and ideas... Has it ever occurred to some people that we, the Indian people, also live in this country. That we, the Indian people, also must compete and survive in this 'great white culture'. We must educate ourselves to your ideas to make any sort of headway.<sup>37</sup>

When motions were defeated at subsequent board meetings, the protest momentum picked up among Nishnaabeg and non-Nishnaabeg community members. In 1973, Parent Teacher Associations from area schools wrote a letter in support. In 1974, the Minister of Education investigated the matter and noted that 107 NFN children

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<sup>36</sup> McLeod interview, 12 August 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Muriel Commanda, 'Indians and Democracy,' *North Bay Nugget*, 1971, Compact Disc 1, Newspaper Clippings, 1960–1979, File 45, Nipissing First Nation Heritage Collection at Nipissing First Nation (NHC).

attended separate schools in the area, making board representation mandatory under the Schools Administration Act. He stated that Indian Affairs would cut off funding from boards that did not allow for Indigenous representation. The school board disputed the number, saying six of the 107 had been incorrectly counted. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court of Ontario. By early 1975, things were getting heated. At the inaugural meeting of the year, Reverend Jim Hutton refused to bless the new school board, stating that the vote defeating representation for NFN indicated that ‘in his humble opinion the board needs more than a blessing it needs an exorcism’.<sup>38</sup> In the same week, 75 per cent of Our Lady of Sorrows students, which amounted to 265 pupils, walked out in a show of support. Walkouts occurred at sister schools in the nearby City of North Bay.<sup>39</sup> As the next vote approached, Leda McLeod asserted that NFN would be removing its students from the schools in the board as early as the following week.<sup>40</sup> At the February 1975 meeting over a 100 people appeared for the board vote. NFN community member Isadore Beaucage was sworn in as a trustee on 4 March 1975, a position that remains in place to this day.

Clearly, Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak made a wide range of contributions to community. Many community members lament the community’s loss of these teachings about contributions to community and perceive this loss as one of the most significant consequences of the last thirty years, which is why they think these histories need to be shared. One community member said:

When I think about all of those things [that the Homemakers did] it’s kind of emotional for me because you don’t see that anymore. How many things can those women do? You know, have a dozen kids and do all of those things?

Another agreed, ‘It is emotional for me too because the kids are looking for that... they know they are missing something’ when there are not abundant possibilities

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38 *North Bay Nugget*, 9 & 15 January 1975, CD 1, Newspaper Clippings, 1960–1979, File 103, NHC.

39 *North Bay Nugget*, 21 January 1975, CD 1, Newspaper Clippings, 1960–1979, File 106, NHC.

40 ‘Delegation to Press Bid for Indian Representation’, *Nugget*, 12 February 1975.

for their aunties and mothers and grandmothers to look after everything from their hearts to their hockey sticks.<sup>41</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I will end by returning to the ethics of zaagidwin and what it has taught me about practicing decolonised and indigenised feminist oral history. First and foremost, it is a deeply relational process that enriches the discipline of oral history by requiring practitioners to acknowledge, reflect on and, in some cases, unlearn the ways their ideas about listening to and sharing stories are rooted in particular ways of being, doing and knowing. It involves thinking about what it means to listen with your ears, heart, spirit and mind and to be responsive to context, to live and work in the framework that is a circle within a circle. To practice feminist oral history with the ethics of zaagidwin is to also acknowledge different forms of stories and ways of remembering them. As Winona Wheeler (Cree/Assiniboine/ Saulteaux) reminds us, when you are working in deeply relational ways you have to figure out what is being shared with you and why, and this will definitely not always happen with a cup of tea and a tape recorder.<sup>42</sup> It might happen driving to an event, crafting, eating food, or pulling carrots. Finally, for a story listener without kinship ties to these stories, this approach opens up space for learning that is not extractive or self-interested, but guided by love, honesty, wisdom, bravery, humility, respect, and truth.

In application, the ethics of zaagidwin deepens what we can learn from histories shared with us in this way. In this case, dibaajimowinan of an all-Nishnaabeg ice hockey team and the leadership of Nbisiing Nishnaabekwewak centres histories that have not been widely shared, uncovers the who, what, when and where of the past related to these stories, and shares the teachings the stories carry for the present and the future about identity, belonging, and the importance of contributions to community. We enact zaagidwin when we reanimate the land with these histories and teachings, bringing learners into relationship with them, so when they think about the histories of Nbisiing

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41 I have been asked not to attribute these quotes to any one person.

42 Winona Wheeler, 'Reflections on the Social Relations of Indigenous Oral Histories', in David McNab and Ute Lischke (eds), *Walking a Tightrope: Aboriginal People and their Representations* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2005), 189–214.

Nishnaabeg territory they think about the young men who skated and the community who cheered for the Warriors in the stands of that packed arena and Nishnaabekwewak whose leadership on and beyond community indelibly shaped the history of education in this region. This kind of historical work contributes to all of our communities, families and nations, making space for the teachings embodied in them to be enacted so we can see ourselves in relation to the stories of the lands on which we live and support the wellbeing of the next seven generations.

# Fragmented Histories: Transgenerational Memories of Democratic Kampuchea

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NAOMI FROST

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*An audio version of the author reading her paper is available at:  
<https://soundcloud.com/oralhistoryaustralia/journal-article-naomi-frost>*

In the aftermath of Democratic Kampuchea, as Cambodia was named under Khmer Rouge rule, over half a million Cambodians sought refuge through immigration abroad. This paper addresses how Cambodian Australian families have remembered, forgotten, or transmitted narratives of their family histories to the second generation following displacement, starvation, suffering, and loss under the Khmer Rouge. Through a series of interviews with second generation Cambodian Australians in Melbourne, I consider the sources of memory production and transmission that inform the next generation's understanding of Cambodian history within the family home. This paper considers how post-genocide memory production and transmission plays out within the Cambodian diaspora in Melbourne, and how these memories are further nuanced by temporal, spatial, or personal distance from family histories. An examination of the generational transmission of these family histories within the context of the Cambodian Australian diaspora illuminates the role of intersecting cultural identities, and the implications of personal, cultural, temporal and spatial proximity to historical events in the transmission of memory and family narratives.

## INTRODUCTION

On a cold Sunday morning my friend, Veronica, welcomed me into her home. She gave me a tour of the abundant family photographs that adorned the walls of her family's Oakleigh home in Melbourne, Victoria. The first photograph she showed me captures her mother and father standing side by side in the Thai refugee camp where they met. Veronica also paused at her favourite photograph: her mother's father, who died during the Khmer Rouge period. She expressed regret that she never had the chance to know him. As I sat in the same chair in which her father first shared his story with her, I came to understand, in part, why these photographs adorn the walls of her home and how profoundly they speak to Veronica's own journey toward understanding her family's past. Veronica's journey, however, involved more than just listening to her parents' stories. She described the frustration of not knowing why her grandparents were not around, and confusion when her home grew tense as she completed a family tree for school.<sup>1</sup> These experiences drove Veronica slowly to piece together the fractured history of her family, and to understand the place of the past within her own life.<sup>2</sup>

Between coming to power on 17 April 1975 and its fall in 1979, the Khmer Rouge regime caused the deaths of approximately two million people through execution, disease, forced labour and starvation.<sup>3</sup> During this period of Cambodian history, millions were displaced, forcibly separated from their families and stripped of their identities, as the Khmer Rouge demanded complete, unwavering loyalty to the Communist Party of Kampuchea, concealed from the public behind the word *Ângkar*.<sup>4</sup> The strategic destruction of familial, religious and social institutions under the Khmer Rouge regime constituted a profound rupture in the fabric of Cambodian lives and communities

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3 James Tyner, Savina Sirik and Samuel Henkin, 'Violence and the Dialectics of Landscape: Memorialization in Cambodia', *Geographical Review* 104, no. 3 (2014): 227.

4 *Ângkar* was the term used during the period of Democratic Kampuchea to refer to 'the organisation', or 'the party', meaning the Communist Party of Kampuchea. See Alexander Hinton, *Why Did They Kill?: Cambodia in the Shadow of Genocide* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 237, 127 for definition of *Ângkar*.

which continues to resonate far beyond the demise of Democratic Kampuchea (as the country was named under Khmer Rouge rule).<sup>5</sup>

The ways that the memory of the Khmer Rouge period resonate in the everyday lives of survivors and their descendants, and the transaction of these memories between generations, become particularly complex in the case of post-conflict refugee histories. As political scientist Khatharya Um eloquently notes, ‘memories, like the refugee bodies that they inhabit, are fractured, dispersed, multiple, and diverse, foregrounded and invisible’.<sup>6</sup> In the case of second generation Cambodian Australians, I argue that these memories are further fragmented by temporal, spatial, or personal distance from their family histories.

The largest migration of Cambodians into Australia occurred between 1979 and 1990, with many migrants spending a number of years in refugee camps before being processed and arriving in Australia.<sup>7</sup> By 1991, the area of Springvale in Melbourne’s south-eastern suburbs constituted the second largest concentration of Cambodian-born people in Australia (second only to Fairfield in Sydney). Through a series of interviews I conducted with second-generation Cambodian Australians in Melbourne, in this article I explore how second-generation Cambodian Australians learn about the Khmer Rouge past within the home.

I argue that the process through which survivors’ descendants learn about their family histories is multifaceted, and often results in fragmented and dislocated narratives of the past. The manifestations of trauma in the daily lives of the second generation, as well as perceived ‘walls of silence’ that shroud family pasts, constitute distinct forms

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5 For further historical background on the period of Khmer Rouge Rule (1975–1979) see: David P. Chandler, *The Tragedy of Cambodian History: Politics, War, and Revolution Since 1945* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996); Craig Etcheson, *The Rise and Demise of Democratic Kampuchea* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1984); Ben Kiernan, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia Under the Khmer Rouge, 1975-1979* (Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 1996); Khatharya Um, *From the Land of Shadows: War, Revolution, and the Making of the Cambodian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

6 Khatharya Um, ‘Exiled Memory: History, Identity, and Remembering in Southeast Asia and Southeast Asian Diaspora’, *Positions* 20, no. 3 (2012): 835.

7 Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne), Multicultural Equity and Access Program, *Cambodian Cultural Profile* (Melbourne, 2010), 1.

of indirect non-verbal communication about the past which can actively develop the historical consciousness of the second generation. Silence, in this regard, must be understood as an active means of communication about the past. Interviewees' encounters with the trauma of their family members, and with silences surrounding the Khmer Rouge past, also shape their interpretation of the fragments of the past they encounter in the home, and of the stories family members share with them.

### **INTERVIEWING SECOND GENERATION CAMBODIAN AUSTRALIANS IN MELBOURNE**

Four interviewees (Leda, Sophea, Bo and Jun Giang) were found through snowball sample selection methods via the social and family networks of existing interviewees (namely Veronica Lee and Moni Chhun) whom I knew prior to beginning this project. Closely reflecting the demographics of the Cambodian Australian population, my sample of six interviewees consists of people from Khmer and Chinese-Khmer ethnic and Buddhist faith backgrounds (although one interviewee was raised Catholic). My recruitment methods inadvertently favoured well-educated participants.

Interviewees' ages range from 23 to 28 years. All come from families who migrated from Cambodia to Australia between 1979 and 2000, and all were predominately raised in Australia. The aim was to gain meaningful qualitative data through in-depth interviews, with each interviewee having their own unique experience of growing up within the Cambodian community in Melbourne. The sample size of six interviewees allows us to understand both the common and distinct experiences of a relatively small group, revealing what Alessandro Portelli has referred to as a 'horizon of possibilities, the meanings and implications of a few significant narratives'.<sup>8</sup> With a small sample size, however, it is important not to over-generalise about the upbringings or experiences of second generation Cambodian Australians, a large and diverse group whose demographics are not completely represented within the scope of this research.

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8 Alessandro Portelli, 'The Apple and the Olive Tree: Exiles, Sojourners, and Tourists in the University', in Alessandro Portelli (ed.), *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 276.

What constitutes a 'generation', and the use of 'generations' as a concept has been widely debated.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as Alistair Thomson points out, historians 'often deploy generation when they mean birth cohort, and ill-defined usage leads to extravagant claims'.<sup>10</sup> It is therefore important here to note that I employ 'second generation' to refer to this group because my interviewees themselves used the term as a point of self-identification. I also employ Charles Price's definition of 'second generation', which acknowledges the crossover between overseas-born and Australian-born that occurs in many cases of migration. He defines the second generation as the Australian-born children of a member of the first generation, or an 'overseas-born person aged less than 12 years at the time of emigration'.<sup>11</sup> I am therefore referring to 'second generation' Cambodian Australians as a birth cohort, and also as a group with 'a self-conscious generational identity', based on their parent's migration from Cambodia to Australia following the collapse of the Khmer Rouge regime.<sup>12</sup>

As the general purpose of the interviews was to discuss family memory, a life stories approach was most appropriate, as the structure and omissions within accounts may be equally as important as the stories they choose to share. This relatively free-form style of delivery by the narrator, however, required minor mediation for the purpose of prompting reflections on their own processes of 'learning' memory. My interviews also posed ethical and personal issues in prompting interviewees to reflect on their family's history of the Khmer Rouge era, and on their own upbringing. Topics covered in the interview process, for example, may prompt interviewees to later approach their parents regarding topics that may cause emotional distress for their parents, or the family more generally. Interviewees may also feel emotionally distressed remembering aspects of their own childhoods or recalling their family narratives. Thus, I considered and implemented methods of interviewing that followed the standard practices and conventions of oral history, aimed at minimising

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9 Alistair Thomson, 'Australian Generations? Memory, Oral History and Generational Identity in Postwar Australia', *Australian Historical Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 41–42.

10 Thomson, 'Australian Generations?', 43.

11 Graeme Hugo, 'Economic, Social and Civic Contributions of First and Second Generation Humanitarian Entrants' (final report prepared for the Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Citizenship (Canberra, 2011), 19–21.

12 Thomson, 'Australian Generations?', 42.

the risk of emotional distress as a result of the interview process. Transparency in the purpose and subject matter of the interviews, careful preparation and pre-interview communication has been crucial. In addition, as Valerie Yow notes in relation to Thomson's reflections on interviewing Australian veterans of the First World War, it has been particularly important to find 'balance between sensitive probing and reading between the lines'.<sup>13</sup>

## TRAUMA AND COMMUNICATION

Emerging from the work of Sigmund Freud, Cathy Caruth points out that Western concepts of 'trauma' are generally considered 'the response to an unexpected or overwhelming violent event or events that are not fully grasped as they occur, but then return later in repeated flashbacks, nightmares and other repetitive phenomena'.<sup>14</sup> Many fields, and particularly medical disciplines, have debated whether Western concepts of trauma (and post-traumatic stress disorder) are able to encompass the experiences of people in non-Western contexts.<sup>15</sup> In a 2015 round-table discussion on the decolonisation of trauma studies, Stef Craps noted that imposing Western frameworks upon non-Western histories may in fact distort them.<sup>16</sup> The second-generation Australians that I have interviewed, however, have developed hybrid understandings of trauma, memory and Khmer Rouge history. Within the context of this article, interviewees' interpretation of this history and their place within it may be the product of both non-Western (Cambodian) and Western (Australian)

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13 Valerie Yow, 'Interviewing Techniques and Strategies', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2015), 170–171.

14 Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2007), 91.

15 See: Stef Craps, Bryan Cheyette, Alan Gibbs, Sonya Andermahr and Larissa Allwork, 'Decolonizing Trauma Studies Round-Table Discussion', *Humanities* 4, no. 4 (2015): 905–923; Carol A. Kidron, 'Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism: Comparing Jewish-Israeli Holocaust and Canadian-Cambodian Genocide Legacies', *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 6 (2012): 723–754; Richard J. McNally, 'Is PTSD a Transhistorical Phenomenon?', in Devon E. Hinton and Byron J. Good (eds), *Culture and PTSD: Trauma in Global and Historical Perspective* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 117–134; Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009); Beatriz Pérez Zapata, 'Decolonizing Trauma: A Story of Multidirectional Memory in Sadie Smith's "The Embassy of Cambodia"', *Humanities* 4, no. 3 (2015): 369–392.

16 Craps, Cheyette, Gibbs, Andermahr and Allwork, 'Decolonizing Trauma Studies Round-Table Discussion', 907.

conceptions of history, trauma and identity. In this sense, the interviewees serve as a bridge between Western and non-Western understandings of the impacts of the Khmer Rouge era.

Researchers in psychology and medicine have identified a range of Khmer ‘idioms of distress’, meaning phrases or metaphors used in the Khmer language to describe effects or symptoms that are best understood as related to the English concept of trauma.<sup>17</sup> Australian trained Cambodian psychiatrist, Dr. Sotheara Chhim, claims the symptoms understood in Western medicine as those of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are most commonly expressed in Khmer through the phrase ‘*baksabat*’, a culture-bound syndrome which translates to ‘broken courage’.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, in a study of Cambodian American refugees in Long Beach, California, Barbara A. Frye and Carolyn D’Avanzo identified ‘*koucharang*’, a culture-bound syndrome which describes ‘thinking too much’.<sup>19</sup> Survivors therefore may associate their feelings with Cambodian idioms of distress, like *baksabat*, as opposed to associating those feelings with symptoms or diagnoses of Western medicine, such as PTSD. None of my interviewees, however, described their parents’ experiences using the language of Khmer ‘idioms of distress’ or ‘culture-bound syndromes’, even in cases where narratives were delivered to them in Khmer.

All interviewees used the language of ‘trauma’ in reference to the effect of the Khmer Rouge period upon their parents. The distinction between Western and non-Western

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17 See: Sotheara Chhim, ‘Baksbat (Broken Courage): The Development and Validation of the Inventory to Measure Baksbat, a Cambodian Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome of Distress’, *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 36, no. 4 (December 2012): 640–59; Barbara A. Frye and Carolyn D’Avanzo, ‘Themes in Managing Culturally Defined Illness in the Cambodian Refugee Family’, *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 11, no. 2 (2011): 89–98; Devon E. Hinton, Vuth Pich, Luana Marques, Angela Nickerson and Mark H. Pollack, ‘Khyâl Attacks: A Key Idiom of Distress Among Traumatized Cambodia Refugees’, *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 34, no. 2 (June 2010): 244–78; Havi Karel and Rachel Cooper, ‘Introduction: Culture-bound Syndromes’, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Studies* 41 (2010): 307–308; Carol A. Kidron and Laurence J. Kirmayer, ‘Global Mental Health and Idioms of Distress: The Paradox of Culture Sensitive Pathologization of Distress in Cambodia’, *Culture, Medicine, and Psychiatry* 43 (2019): 211–235; Christine A. Stevens, ‘Perspectives on the Meanings of Symptoms Among Cambodian Refugees’, *Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (2001): 81–98.

18 Sotheara Chhim, ‘Baksbat (Broken Courage): A Trauma-Based Cultural Syndrome in Cambodia’, *Medical Anthropology* 32, no. 2 (2013): 161.

19 Barbara A. Frye and Carolyn D’Avanzo, ‘Themes in Managing Culturally Defined Illness in the Cambodian Refugee Family’, *Journal of Community Health Nursing* 11, no. 2 (2011): 89.

understandings of trauma complicates my interpretation of the use of the word 'trauma' by my English-speaking interviewees in relation to their parents. The differences between Western and non-Western concepts of trauma also bring into question how these interviewees may be able to articulate their parents' emotions, and their understandings of the impact of perceived 'trauma' upon their own lives. Moni Chhun discussed his understanding of trauma as a part of his everyday life. He said, 'growing up Dad would sometimes get really angry or upset and now that I've grown older, I see it as post-traumatic stress disorder'.<sup>20</sup> Moni's interpretation of his father's 'trauma' also suggests that he understands aspects of his own childhood experiences as a product of the Khmer Rouge past. When Moni talked about taking on the responsibility of raising his brothers, for example, he said:

I don't know, is it because of Dad having gone through that trauma? I feel like these duties are what dads are meant to do, right? Instead I'm doing it, and I wonder if that's because of trauma or that's because of something else, I can't really distinguish that. Yeah... I was also thinking in today's society in terms of us growing up we are, I feel like we are missing out on a lot of things because of the Khmer Rouge.<sup>21</sup>

Here, Moni emphasised a direct relationship between his parents' traumatic past and his experiences in the present, evoking the Khmer Rouge past as a means of articulating his own autobiographical narrative. Some interviewees referenced the concept of trauma as a measurement and a means of articulating their parents' emotional wellbeing, or 'their post-traumatic growth'.<sup>22</sup> In this regard, trauma emerged as a key concept through which the second generation interpret their family histories, and the effect of history on their own lives in the present.

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20 Moni Chhun, interviewed by author, 21 January 2019. Tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Chhun and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

21 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

22 Sophea (first name changed, and surname omitted at request of interviewee), interviewed by author, 28 February 2019. Tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Sophea and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

Interviewees' perceptions of their parents as having 'trauma' or having 'been through trauma' may be based on their own Western understandings of the concept, whilst their parents may not use this vernacular to describe their own experiences or emotions. This linguistic difference between generations impacts descendants' interpretation of their family histories. For example, native level proficiency in Khmer may facilitate communication about complex emotions and expressions, such as those associated with genocide and trauma. Someone without proficiency in Khmer, however, may understand the non-verbal signs of trauma, but may not understand verbal expressions of emotion as deeply or effectively. Language, in this sense, is a cornerstone of how traumatic experiences can be communicated between generations. Thus, the second generation's connection to, or awareness of, their family history cannot be understood in isolation from language and linguistic comprehension.

Bloch and Hirsch note that many interviewees find their heritage language to be more emotionally or intellectually expressive than English. One of Bloch and Hirsch's Tamil speaking interviewees, for example, claimed Tamil to be 'so emotional, every word means so much more'.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Moni Chhun explained,

I think for me when they tell us the story, telling us in Khmer definitely evokes a different kind of emotion. Because Dad is an interpreter and he's more than capable of telling us the stories in English, you know, but it doesn't have the same impact or meaning.<sup>24</sup>

Here, Moni reflects on the emotional and conceptual meaning of language in storytelling, and on the impact of this expressive disparity for the listener. Mary Besemeres, in reference to bilingual autobiographies such as Eva Hoffman's *Lost in Translation*, addresses the capabilities of languages in reflecting emotional experiences in different ways.<sup>25</sup> To demonstrate, she draws on a comparison made by Polish writer Stanisław Barańczak about the meanings of both the Polish and English words for 'happy' (*szczęś-*

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23 Alice Bloch and Shirin Hirsch, "Second Generation" Refugees and Multilingualism: Identity, Race and Language Transmission', *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 40, no. 14 (2017): 2450.

24 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

25 Mary Besemeres, 'Different Languages, Different Emotions? Perspectives from Autobiographical Literature', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 25, no. 2-3 (2004): 140.

*liwy* in Polish). Whilst in English the word is used frequently in a variety of everyday contexts, the Polish is 'reserved for rare states of profound bliss, or total satisfaction with serious things such as love, family, the meaning of life'.<sup>26</sup> Barańczak notes that 'the question one hears at . . . parties 'Is everybody happy?' if translated literally into Polish, would seem to come from a metaphysical treatise or a political utopia rather than from social chitchat'.<sup>27</sup> If, as Besemeres argues, different languages are able to express different emotions differently, language plays a central role in shaping how the meanings and emotions of the past are communicated between generations.

Western concepts of trauma form part of the framework by which the second generation understands the lived effect of the Khmer Rouge past. Often learned outside the family home and applied to encounters within the home, such concepts may not accurately or effectively describe the emotions felt by their parents. In cases where communication *about* trauma is absent, the second generation is often acutely aware of the manifestations of trauma not only in their conversational interactions with family, but also in silence.

### SILENCE AS AN ACTIVE PROCESS OF REMEMBERING

Many scholars have contended that silence is as much a part of communicating the past as verbal communication, such as storytelling.<sup>28</sup> My interviews with the descendants of survivors of the Cambodian genocide support this contention, and highlight the role of silence as an active process of remembering, and in communicating the weight of traumatic histories to the second generation.

The act of silence can serve many purposes and be employed in a multitude of ways. Silence can be used by survivors as an active mechanism to preserve and to guard memory. Khatharya Um contends that 'straddling the interstice between the need to speak and the inability to express, silence is, for many refugees, a self-imposed externally compelled strategy of survival'.<sup>29</sup> Silence may be a means of emotion-

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26 Besemeres, 'Different Languages, Different Emotions?', 142.

27 Besemeres, 'Different Languages, Different Emotions?', 142.

28 Marianne Hirsch, 'Surviving Images: Holocaust Photographs and the Work of Postmemory', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 14, no. 1 (2001): 9.

29 Um, 'Exiled Memory', 842.

ally protecting loved ones, or can provide survivors with a degree of agency and control in regard to their painful past experiences.<sup>30</sup> It can also simply be a means of protecting oneself from the emotional distress that comes with remembering traumatic events.<sup>31</sup> Harboring painful experiences within the self is not only an *act* of memory, but can also be an approach toward healing.

None of my interviewees, however, associated silence with forgetting. Rather they emphasised the intentionality of their parents' silence. Veronica Lee, for example, reflected on her mother's avoidance in talking about her past experiences:

She's not very open to this day about speaking about her experiences either. It's very hard for me to get a really honest answer from her, she's very fleeting in her details. She'll tell things, but very superficially and I know that she might say something, but there's an underlying tone or message, or she just refuses to answer me, or she'll answer me with a little bit of sarcasm or something. It's not truthful, I think I'm an adult now, I can tell when she's telling the truth or not, or when she just wants to shut something down, or she's saying something to me just so I won't poke any further.<sup>32</sup>

Although Veronica clearly expressed frustration toward her mother's silences, she also acknowledged her mother's intentional use of silence as a means of communicating boundaries. Veronica explained that to respect her mother's maintenance of silence, she would turn to her father who was more open about discussing his experiences of the past.<sup>33</sup>

Silence can also be adopted by the children of survivors.<sup>34</sup> This can be in an attempt to avoid emotional topics for their own emotional comfort, or it may be due to a desire to protect their parents from the negative emotions that come with discussions about

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30 Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country: Women of the Vietnamese Diaspora* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2009), 39.

31 Nancy J. Lin and Karen L. Suyemoto, 'So You, My Children, Can Have A Better Life: A Cambodian American Perspective on the Phenomenology of Intergenerational Communication about Trauma', *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma* 25, no. 4 (2016): 403.

32 Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

33 Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

34 Nguyen, *Memory Is Another Country*, 47.

the past. Jun Giang admitted speaking to other relatives instead of his mother or father because of the emotional distress the Khmer Rouge past causes them. My interviewees also referenced instances in which they detected the emotional distress of their parents in everyday situations. Veronica, for example, recalled noticing her mother's emotional distress when grandparents were mentioned in conversation, even if it was not in the context of her own family. These unvoiced interactions can signal to the second generation that the topic is best avoided for the comfort of both themselves and their parents.

Though they respected silences and approached sensitive topics with care, interviewees emphasised the value of communication about the Khmer Rouge past. My research in Melbourne, however, somewhat conflicts with the findings of Carol Kidron in the Canadian diaspora. Researching second-generation Cambodian Canadians in Montreal, Kidron reported that interviews with the descendants of survivors 'repeatedly highlighted the personal and collective benefits of forgetting'.<sup>35</sup> Kidron noted an absence of traces of the genocide in everyday family lives and homes in the Cambodian community in Montreal.<sup>36</sup> While my interviewees explained reasons for respecting and maintaining silence, they consistently stressed the importance of remembering and communicating about the past. A number of interviewees also expressed a deep sense of 'responsibility, where it's up to me to remember'.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, the second generation engage in a balancing act between respecting others' silences, maintaining it themselves, and seeking answers that will allow them to piece together the fragments of their family histories.

## FRAGMENTS

Members of the second generation may also learn about their family past through what I refer to as 'fragments'. Particularly in cases where storytelling is not direct or explicit, descendants of survivors may learn about family histories less directly, through non-narrative fragments of the past that they encounter through objects, photographs, behaviours, or conversations in their everyday lives. In some cases,

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35 Carol A. Kidron, 'Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism: Comparing Jewish-Israeli Holocaust and Canadian-Cambodian Genocide Legacies', *Current Anthropology* 53, no. 6 (2012): 723.

36 Kidron, 'Alterity and the Particular Limits of Universalism', 724.

37 Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

encounters with these kinds of fragments may precede storytelling, or prompt conversations within the home. In this section I turn my attention to voiced and visible fragments, and specifically photographs, objects, and family interactions.

Our understanding of the past and our own place within it, is constructed within the processes of everyday life. Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwartz and David Sutton have noted that if we are to consider everyday conversations and interactions, or encounters with the past through ‘intimate cultural forms’ such as letters or photographs, as history, ‘it is history under extreme pressures and privation’.<sup>38</sup> They argue that, ‘usually this history is held to the level of private remembrance. It is not only unrecorded, but actually silenced. It is not offered the occasion to speak’.<sup>39</sup> Oral history offers these sources of narrative construction the opportunity to speak, and to be understood. I argue that in order to explore how a sense of the Khmer Rouge and the Cambodian past is constructed by members of the second generation, who are temporally and spatially distanced from this history, it is of paramount importance to treat these ‘intimate cultural forms’, or fragments, as historically significant.

The second generation’s encounters with everyday remnants of the past play a key role in the construction of historical imagination, often prior to storytelling. In the context of Holocaust photography, Marianne Hirsch coined the term ‘postmemory’, describing ‘the relationship of children of survivors of cultural or collective trauma to the experiences of their parents, experiences that they “remember” only as the narratives and images with which they grew up, but that are so powerful, so monumental, as to constitute memories in their own right’.<sup>40</sup> In both the absence and presence of shared stories, fragments assist the second generation to form connections between imagined and shared narratives of their family histories. In cases where parents have communicated spoken narratives to their children, fragments, such as photographs,

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38 Gregor McLennan, Bill Schwartz and David Sutton, *Making Histories: Studies in History Writing and Politics* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 210.

39 McLennan, Schwartz and Sutton, *Making Histories*, 210.

40 Hirsch, ‘Surviving Images’, 9.

also provide descendants with a visual imagination of the setting in which particular narratives took place.

Family photographs often prompted members of the second generation to think about and question their family histories. In family photo collections, they were very unlikely to uncover photographs of the Khmer Rouge period, as private ownership in all forms, and particularly products of art or technology, were symbols of disloyalty to the regime and its ideology, and were thus destroyed or never created in the first place. Thus, a visual imagination of the Khmer Rouge period was usually ascertained by the second generation when they came across photographs taken by the regime, found online or in books. Some families did, however, manage to keep photographs from before April 1975 or from Thai-refugee camps, and many took photos during their early settlement in Australia.

Photographs from the Khmer Rouge period are almost always absent from family photo albums, but the period is evoked by other images. In some cases, photographs of relatives killed by the regime adorn the walls of family homes. These photographs may have been descendants' first encounters with the Khmer Rouge past, as they learnt who that person was and what happened to them. These photographs are often revered by the descendants of survivors. Veronica Lee showed me her favourite photograph – the one of her grandfather who died during the Khmer Rouge, which I described in the introduction of this paper. For Veronica, this photograph represents not only the emotional weight of *his* story, but also the loss of *all* of her grandparents during the Khmer Rouge period. In her interview Veronica explained that she's never seen photographs of her other grandparents, and to this day does not know what they looked like.

Most interviewees made reference to photographs in their interviews, most often in the context of how they learned particular parts of their family history. Photographs not only help shape the second generation's imagination of their family's past, but also help them create their own place within their family narratives. Leda Ly, for example, described a collage that she made which occupies a prominent place above her desk. It featured various photographs and a couple of newspaper clippings. She pointed to



Ly Family in Villawood Detention Centre (date unknown). Photographer unknown, personal possession of Leda Ly.

her favourite: a candid picture of her family sitting on the grass in Villawood Detention Centre eating dinner (above). This photograph, she claimed was her favourite, ‘because you can see the fencing, and then it’s just us huddled over what probably is a really shit dinner [laughter]... It’s just a good picture of like, us not having our freedom. It really shows what we went through. Like, it’s just one fence, but it means so much’.<sup>41</sup> To Leda, the photograph not only represents the Khmer Rouge past that brought her family to Australia, but is a visual representation of where she fits in relation to her family past – it places the Khmer Rouge past within the development of her own autobiographical narrative. Indeed, in Leda’s articulation of her own life story, she returned regularly to the fact that she was born in Villawood Immigration Detention Centre, emphasising the impact of the Khmer Rouge past not only in the lives of her parents, but also the lives of herself and her sister.

Many Cambodian refugee families have no photographs of their family or their lives prior to the Khmer Rouge taking power. Indeed, as for Veronica Lee, not having photographs of those who were killed during Democratic Kampuchea intensifies feelings of loss and absence. Some families spent years searching for images or traces

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<sup>41</sup> Leda Ly, interviewed by author, 4 January 2019, tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Ly and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

of those they lost. Sophea's mother miraculously came across an image of her father in footage featured on what Sophea believes was a news program:

So, she used this video to kind of, she found an artist to help paint my grandpa because she obviously really wanted something in memory of him or to have a piece of him. So, I remember when I was little that she would pause the video and that's how she showed that artist what he looked like and who he was ... So that's how my mum got this image of her dad. And this is the only picture that we have of our Grandpa.<sup>42</sup>

Holding the painting, Sophea proudly explained how the painting came to be, and described in detail the uniform her grandfather wore as a soldier before the Khmer Rouge took power. This painting embodied his story, and her mother's determination to remember and honour him.

Fragments of survivors' experiences were also communicated to their children through anecdotes and fleeting references to the past in everyday conversation, often without historical context or elaboration.<sup>43</sup> For many interviewees, references to the Khmer Rouge or to 'Pol Pot time' occurred in everyday conversations as a time reference. Bo said, 'for example, they [her family] could be talking about a relative. And they would say, "oh yeah, he was alive during Pol Pot". You know? And it's not even like talking about the situation, but it's just more like it's a time reference'.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, Veronica reflected, 'I don't know about the general public, but if you're Khmer and you say "Pol Pot time", you know exactly that they're referring to the Khmer Rouge time. They don't even have to use the words Khmer Rouge. And to shorten it they say, "P.P. time", they don't even speak his name'.<sup>45</sup>

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42 Sophea interview, 1 May 2019.

43 Carol A. Kidron, 'Universalizing Trauma Descendant Legacies: A Comparative Study of Jewish-Israeli and Cambodian Genocide Descendant Legacies', in Vigdis Broch-Due and Bjørn Enge Bertelsen (eds), *Violent Reverberations: Global Modalities of Trauma* (Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 71.

44 Bo (first name changed, and surname omitted at request of interviewee), interviewed by the author, 13 April 2019. Tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Bo and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

45 Lee interview, 3 May 2019.

Everyday conversations within the home are a powerful source of indirect memory transmission. In some cases, however, seemingly harmless interactions with parents could become a source of tension for reasons unbeknownst to the second generation. Veronica recalled one of her first glimpses of her mother's sensitivity around the topic of grandparents, when she was invited to the birthday party of a friend's grandparent:

I sort of told them, 'I'm going to so and so's grandmother's birthday', or something. And then Mum was a little bit, kind of standoffish about it, and I didn't really understand. I just thought she didn't want me to go out, and then I remember that evening when I came home, Dad sort of pulled me aside, he didn't really tell me off, but he's like 'don't ask Mum, or don't speak about grandparents around Mum', and I was like, okay, that's a bit odd.<sup>46</sup>

On a separate occasion, Veronica asked her parents for help with a family tree assignment for school. Veronica recalled being confused when they 'brushed it off', and then grew silent and distant. Finally, it was her father who, after a week hesitantly drew a family tree on the back of a piece of paper for her. She submitted this family tree with no photos, names, dates or locations. She said that she couldn't understand why they wouldn't help her or answer her questions:

They brushed me off by saying 'no, you need to do your own homework, we can't help you', and I was like, 'but, I *don't know*, what are our grandparents' names?', 'how many siblings do you have?', and you know 'how many cousins do we have?', and 'where do we *come* from? *Where* in Cambodia?' And these questions, whilst at the time I didn't realise were so invasive, were almost very hurtful for me to ask my parents, because of the trauma that they'd *been* through. And for them, having to remember the reason why I didn't have a grandmother or a grandfather to survive or the reason why we don't have certain cousins, it's *because* of that. And that's the beginning of why I asked all these questions. My mum completely just ignored me for about a week, because I kept asking her questions about this project. And I

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<sup>46</sup> Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

just became very hostile towards her, because I'm like, 'you need to help me, I'm at school, it's an assignment, I'm going to fail'. I never realised the impact of my questions on her... probably not until ten years later.<sup>47</sup>

The topic of grandparents was a frequent source of tension in the Lee household. Unlike many interviewees, Veronica did not know anything about the Khmer Rouge until she was a teenager. In her early teenage years her questions began to break through the silence that had clouded the past for so many years.

These kinds of fragments, whether as part of spoken narratives or as silences, shape the historical imagination of the second generation. Everyday interactions with family members, and discoveries of physical remnants of the past around the family home, can provide the second generation with small clues, fragments and pieces of information that help them to piece together and navigate otherwise disjointed narratives.

## STORYTELLING

The stories that survivor parents choose to tell their children, as well as those which they choose to not tell, profoundly shape the historical consciousness of their descendants. While in some cases storytelling delivers the most complete and contextualised narratives of family histories, these voiced narratives can also be fragmented. How members of the second generation interpret these narratives depends not only on the connections they make between a multitude of stories, but also the connections they make between all of the voiced, unvoiced, and visible fragments of the past that they have encountered throughout their lives. How narratives are prompted, shared, delivered, interpreted and retold play an important role in how the descendants of survivors make meaning from these family stories. Moreover, the family narratives that the second generation choose to retell, and how they tell these stories, reveal an important component of how they understand themselves in relation to the past – a crucial mechanism in the construction of identity.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Elaine Reese, Robyn Fivush, Natalie Merrill, Qi Wang and Helena McAnally, "Adolescents' Intergenerational Narratives Across Cultures", *Developmental Psychology* 53, no. 6 (2017): 1142.

Based on their research of second-generation Cambodian Americans, Lin and Suyemoto conclude that the narratives shared by their interviewees suggest that the most ‘complete and personally connected learning’ came out of direct conversations about the past with family members, and during which ‘a whole trauma narrative’ was shared.<sup>49</sup> Some of my interviewees could not recall the first time they learned about the Khmer Rouge, and reasoned that references to ‘Khmer Rouge’, or to the ‘Pol Pot time’, were present from such a young age that they couldn’t pinpoint their first encounter.<sup>50</sup> Although present from an early age, such stories or references to the Khmer Rouge past may not have become meaningful to the second generation until later in life when they were able to more deeply and contextually understand the history of the Khmer Rouge regime. Sophea, for example, reminisced positively about being ‘surrounded by the stories and experiences’ growing up.<sup>51</sup> She said it was primarily storytelling, both from her family, community members, and accounts she read, that informed her dominant understanding of the Khmer Rouge era.<sup>52</sup>

While everyday family interactions can help the second generation to connect various family narratives, they can also prompt further questions. Jun Giang Heng, for example, explained how ‘the question of why becomes stronger and stronger’.<sup>53</sup> He recalled how he learned that prior to migration, his father had a second family in Cambodia:

I actually found out that story accidentally because my auntie blurted it out when I was 16 years old ... I think it just makes me wonder more about... well like I said before, when my parents are just ‘nobody in our family died, nobody in our family died’, seeing and hearing my dad say that story, that makes me think that gut instinct of, I don’t think my parents aren’t telling the truth, like it’s true something else has happened in our family through

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49 Lin and Suyemoto, ‘So You, My Children, Can Have A Better Life’, 411.

50 Bo interview, 13 April 2019.

51 Sophea interview, 28 February 2019.

52 Sophea interview, 28 February 2019.

53 Jun Giang Heng, interviewed by author, 29 April 2019. Tapes and transcripts of this and subsequent interviews held between Heng and the author referred to in this article are held by the author.

this war and it just makes you wonder, what else is there? But at the same time, you know, despite it being family, how much can I pry? You know, last thing I want to do is upset my parents.<sup>54</sup>

In instances where details that members of the second generation perceive as significant are not shared, such as unknown relatives in Jun Giang's case, children may begin to doubt aspects of their parents' stories. Perhaps it is because they seem to be, as Veronica said 'far-fetched', or because they feel like that have not been told the entire story by their parents. Interviewees may feel a sense of mistrust, or an uncertainty that the stories they have been told are entirely true.

Interviewees were often aware of the potential for their questions to provoke a negative emotional response from their parents. Some identified this as a key reason for actively avoiding discussions about the Khmer Rouge period. Interviewees described taking a cautious approach to such conversations in the home, in which, as Lin and Suyemoto explain, they both 'understand and appreciate their elder's story while watching for signs of their emotional pain'.<sup>55</sup> My interviewees recalled instances where they avoided engagement with particular topics because of their concern for their parents' emotional wellbeing. Jun Giang explained that 'I avoid asking my mum because my mum is very emotional, so I know she'll cry and if she cries then I cry [laughter]'.<sup>56</sup> Conversations about the past may be avoided both out of concern for a loved one's emotional wellbeing, but also to protect oneself from the emotional effect of witnessing a parent's pain.<sup>57</sup>

During the interview process, the second generation often retold narratives about their parents' survival and the hardship they endured under the Khmer Rouge. These kinds of stories are likely to hold particular significance within shared family narratives. The stories to which Veronica consistently returned in her interview were those of how her grandparents on both sides of her family were killed under the Khmer

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54 Heng interview, 29 April 2019.

55 Lin and Suyemoto, 'So You, My Children, Can Have A Better Life', 411.

56 Heng interview, 29 April 2019.

57 Lin and Suyemoto, 'So You, My Children, Can Have A Better Life', 411–412.

Rouge. These stories were the most emotional for her to recall, as they are intertwined with the deep loss that she feels regarding the absence of grandparents in her own life:

So she was heavily pregnant, they forced her into labour and they took her away and killed her ... And for me to realise that the reason why I didn't have grandparents is not because they had passed away long before I was born due to natural causes or whatever, it's because they were forcibly removed from my family. It wasn't this thing where my grandfather died of old age in his bed surrounded by his family, he died because during the labour camp he was starved to death, he was weak and you know, he couldn't hold on anymore. And the reason why I don't have grandparents on my mother's side is because she was taken to be killed because she was pregnant. Like, that's so, that makes me so angry [tears], angry I think, for me, but also for my parents.<sup>58</sup>

The emotional weight of this narrative is deepened by the silence which surrounded it for so many years. Veronica's rearticulation of the narrative not only details the deaths of family members, but is interwoven into a recollection of emotional pain growing up, a longing for answers to the unacknowledged absence of grandparents in her life.

Interviewees most readily recalled those stories which were told to them in a narrative format. During the interview process, they retold these narratives seemingly determined to include all of the finer details that had been shared with them. Interviewees emphasised details pertaining to hardship, or survival in extreme circumstances; starvation, injury, death and the separation of family members featured in almost every interviewee's recollection of their family history. As recipients of their parents' memories and narratives, the second generation may feel a responsibility to retell stories in a particular manner, particularly in cases where stories have been told and retold in great detail. Moni recalled a story told to him by his father:

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<sup>58</sup> Lee interview, 16 September 2018.

One experience that I remember my dad telling, and he's told us many times before and he does get really quite emotional, is the story of how his father, my grandfather, was taken during the Khmer Rouge ... And yeah, that story, every one of us in the family knows very well and has been told, and we can pretty much just imagine it really vividly.<sup>59</sup>

As Moni retold this story, he suddenly stopped part way through and said, 'wait, can I start over?' He restarted the story, this time beginning with an explanation of the specific kind of Cambodian axe that his grandfather sharpened in anticipation of the day that Khmer Rouge soldiers would come to take him away. He also emphasised the exact number of soldiers that his father, then a young boy, remembered coming for his father. Moni was careful and intentional in his delivery, and his determination to tell the story in the way that it was told to him implied both a deep connection with the narrative and a perceived responsibility to retell the story correctly, and to deliver the narrative in a manner that was respectful to the memory of his father and grandfather. This sense of responsibility in the way that Moni relays family narratives is also evident in the way that he told the story of how his family fled from Cambodia to Thailand. He said, 'Dad has told us this story several times, so I should know it back to front'.<sup>60</sup>

Moni told the story of the seven trips across the Thai border that his father made in order to get the entire family to safety in Khao I Dang, and the significance of this story to his entire family:

And even now when we go to Adelaide, like all our relatives and stuff will tell us that story, how my dad heroically brought them all to the refugee camp. And if that didn't happen, none of them would be in Australia and which they are super thankful for, you know. So that basically happened and in that border crossing, there's like, there is like rogue soldiers, ex-soldiers

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<sup>59</sup> Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

<sup>60</sup> Chhun interview, 1 May 2019.

and mines and like trip wires, everything like that. It's a story within itself. I recommend you asking him one day. He would love to tell you.<sup>61</sup>

The stories of hardship told and retold among families, such as this story told to Moni by his father, become dominant narratives retold by the second generation. Moni's story emphasises hardship, as most stories of the Khmer Rouge period do, but also highlights his father's bravery and the journey of migration. Indeed, as Moni and I wrapped up our final interview, his father emerged and asked us how the interview went. Moni mentioned the story of the border crossing, and indeed, his father's eyes lit up. While Moni and I listened intently, his father then proudly, yet humbly, relayed the story to us. He described how hard it was to cross the border even once, and that it took seven crossings to successfully get the entire family to safety in Thailand.

In some cases, stories about migration were shared by families in lieu of stories about the Khmer Rouge period. Survivors may emphasise stories about migration because they more closely associate the process of migration with their successful survival, as opposed to their experiences of victimhood and suffering under the Khmer Rouge regime. Even in narratives of migration, however, the most frequently recalled stories involve hardship, determination and survival, including in the second generation's retelling of these stories. Leda Ly recalled:

My mum will talk about the boat as the most memorable memory that she has because she was pregnant [laughter], and she was sea sick as well as vomiting from the pregnancy, and they had nothing to eat and they were being hidden by the people shipping them over – so they were stopped often by authorities and they had to hide inside the boat [laughter]. Which is pretty terrifying.... But yeah, it's pretty amazing that they did that.<sup>62</sup>

Narratives of her parents coming 'by boat' hold particular significance for Leda and emerged frequently in her recollections of her family histories. Leda's emphasis on

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61 Chhun interview, 1 May 2019.

62 Ly interview, 4 January 2019.

the journey closely resembled her mother's storytelling, which also focussed closely on the journey to Australia and their lengthy stays in immigration hostels and detention centres.

While stories of hardship are passed down, parents may not share all of these stories with their children. Leda's mother, for example, told her daughter stories of arriving in Australia by boat whilst pregnant, and even told her children about the difficult decision she had to make about whether or not to put her daughters up for adoption when the Australian government sent them back to Cambodia. Leda only learned about other painful details of her mother's experience in Villawood through newspaper articles that were collected by her aunt. Leda's mother and aunt were interviewed by the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1996.<sup>63</sup> Leda said:

I don't have like, bad memories of it [Villawood]. But yeah, my mum and my auntie did have experiences of people trying to commit suicide there by drinking shampoo and yeah, all this crazy stuff. But actually she's never talked about that personally, but I've just read it in a Herald Sun article.<sup>64</sup>

Leda featured cut-outs of these articles in the collage she created and placed above her desk for inspiration.<sup>65</sup> Leda's creative process highlights the significance of her family's stories of migration and settlement in her understanding of her family history. Also featuring photographs of her and her family in Villawood together, the collage is a creative visual expression of her own autobiographical narrative, and her place within the past. In a sense, the collage is a visual representation of how Leda has placed herself within her family narrative over time.

Stories of hardship and suffering are often communicated between parents and their children with a moral purpose. Food was a key topic of anecdotal communication

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63 Claudia Tazreiter, 'All locked up and nowhere to go – features', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1997, 15.

64 Ly interview, 4 January 2019.

65 For featured newspaper articles see: Cynthia Banham, 'From Cambodian killing fields to law graduate, via Villawood', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 April, 2004: 3; Fergus Shiel, 'Epic odyssey from Cambodia's killing fields to rarefied corridors of the Supreme Court', *The Age*, 14 December, 2004: 7; Claudia Tazreiter, 'All locked up and nowhere to go – features', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 July 1997, 15.

about the Khmer Rouge period. Scarcity of food, for example, emerged as a recurring theme in the family stories that the second generation retold in their interviews. Moni, for example, recalled that many of the stories he was told:

Would be like trying to pass on values, like, every now and then still, ever since, he [his father] would always go, you know, ‘back in the Khmer Rouge I’d have this small amount of meat and this much rice if we even got rice’, just trying to pass down values of always finishing your food and appreciating what you have.<sup>66</sup>

Kidron also noted references to the Khmer Rouge era in educating and disciplining children.<sup>67</sup> She writes that, ‘scarcity of food, hunger and the struggle to skilfully survive are the most common themes of Khmer mythic tales of survival’.<sup>68</sup> This is also reflected in how the second generation retell these stories. Referring to her parents’ experiences coming by boat to Australia, and their long and complicated journey to be granted permanent residency, Leda said, ‘It’s a survival story, for sure. And my mum always says actually, “we Cambodians, we know how to survive” [laughter]’.<sup>69</sup>

Moreover, it is these moral or purposeful stories, communicated directly by family members to their children, that become the dominant narratives that are passed on and therefore are retold by the second generation. Moni, for example, noticed that most of the stories that his parents had told him about the Khmer Rouge past were about ‘the harshness of it’, and that these stories were often perceived by his brothers and him as ‘lectures’, when their parents wanted to pass down values to them.<sup>70</sup> While my interviewees retell these stories with a sense of responsibility to the past and to the memory of their family members, they also renegotiate and adapt these narratives in accordance with their own broader encounters with, and understandings of, their family past.

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66 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.

67 Kidron, ‘Universalizing Trauma Descendant Legacies’, 71.

68 Kidron, ‘Universalizing Trauma Descendant Legacies’, 72.

69 Ly interview, 4 January 2019.

70 Chhun interview, 21 January 2019.



Negotiation of these narratives also shapes the development of descendants' own autobiographical voice and narrative.<sup>71</sup> A lack of communication about the past may also be a motivating factor driving the second generation to engage in memory work and share family narratives. Kidron notes that, particularly in cases where survivors 'resist testimonial voice', descendants may be motivated to act as surrogates for their parents, 'testifying to their own childhood memories in the shadow of genocidal suffering or to their recollections of fragmentary accounts of genocide suffering'.<sup>72</sup> This process shapes the second generations' understanding of themselves in relation to the past, which in turn imbues family narratives with further meaning.

## CONCLUSION

In the diasporas which formed in the aftermath of Democratic Kampuchea, survivors and their descendants continue to be impacted by the Khmer Rouge past. Second-generation Cambodian Australians in Melbourne continually negotiate and reconcile their own relationships to the past and the meanings that the past holds in their own lives. This process, however, is multifaceted and often results in fragmented and dislocated narratives of the past. When the descendants of survivors retell these narratives, in part they reveal how they have interpreted these silences, fragments and stories, and the meanings they hold. Through these narratives we are able to understand the process through which members of the second generation find their own place within the stories they have been told, and how their family histories have become integrated with their own autobiographical narratives.

Storytelling and the sharing of narratives is, of course, one of the primary means by which the descendants of survivors have learned about the Khmer Rouge past. How the second generation interprets these narratives, however, requires negotiation of all of the voiced, unvoiced, visible and invisible fragments of the family past encountered throughout their lives. Each of these sources of historical imagination play integral roles in the construction of a 'sense of the past' and are consistently interactional and

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71 Reese, Fivush, Merrill, Wang and McAnally, 'Adolescents' Intergenerational Narratives Across Cultures', 1143.

72 Kidron, 'Universalizing Trauma Descendant Legacies', 60.

intersecting. Furthermore, the ways that these narratives are evoked, shared, delivered and retold play an important role in how the second generation is able to make meaning of their family histories.

I recall here the words of Steven High, Edward Little and Thi Ry Duong, who write, 'a life story is best understood as a living thing, forever changing'.<sup>73</sup> My interviewees will continue to learn and challenge, negotiate and renegotiate, construct and reconstruct the narratives of their family histories. This process will continue as they pass these narratives down to their own children, implicating multiple generations in processes of narrative transaction that both shape and are shaped by family narratives of the history of Democratic Kampuchea.

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73 Steven High, Edward Little and Thi Ry Duong (eds), *Remembering Mass Violence: Oral History, New Media and Performance* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014), 4.

# Recording Lives in Journalism: Reflections on Oral History and Journalism Methods in Life Histories

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This article considers some of the similarities and differences between journalism and oral history interview methodologies that arose in the course of developing and realising an oral history project that focused on the life stories of 60 Australian journalists whose positions were made redundant since 2012 due to digital disruption. As all of the researcher interviewees are former journalists, the article engages with the positionality of the interviewees in the recording of life histories, and the underlying assumptions in oral history and journalism that inform processes involving controversial

and potentially defamatory material. These include the absence of the normative journalism practice of the right of reply within oral history interviewing, a factor that we believe is becoming more problematic at a time when oral history is becoming more accessible due to the increasing availability of recorded material through digitisation.

## INTRODUCTION: LIVES IN JOURNALISM DISRUPTED

Over the last decade, thousands of journalism jobs in Australia have been lost due to digital disruption of news media. The depletion of so many roles was initially triggered by steep declines in revenue flowing from the once lucrative ‘rivers of gold’ of classified advertising in print media as more and more citizens began sourcing their news online, often for free, or at a cost that failed to cover the losses of print advertising revenues.<sup>1</sup> More recently, particularly since 2015, the hard-won gains made by media companies in building digital advertising revenue have also been corroded by the growing dominance of behemoths Google and Facebook, which now receive the majority of online advertising revenue in Australia and have captured more than 80 per cent of growth in online advertising since 2016.<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, additional revenue losses triggered by the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic on advertising revenue were leading to further job cuts and newspaper closures.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout this period, and especially since 2012, journalist job shedding has become a regular occurrence across all media platforms. While precise numbers remain elusive, in 2017 the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA), which is the Australian journalists’ union, estimated that 3,000 roles had disappeared in

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- 1 Tim Burrowes, ‘The Data is Finally in. Newspapers Aren’t Going to Get Enough Digital Subscribers’, *Mumbrella*, 17 February 2014. Accessed from [http://mumbrella.com.au/data-finally-newspapers-arent-going-get-enough-digital-subscribers-206839?utm\\_source=DailyNewsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=Daily-17-02-2014&utm\\_content=PostTitle](http://mumbrella.com.au/data-finally-newspapers-arent-going-get-enough-digital-subscribers-206839?utm_source=DailyNewsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Daily-17-02-2014&utm_content=PostTitle)
  - 2 *Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report*, 2019: 119. Retrieved from [https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital platforms inquiry - final report.pdf](https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf)
  - 3 See, for instance, Kellie Lazzaro, ‘Mildura’s *Sunraysia Daily* and Other Regional Papers Close as Coronavirus Wipes out More Than a Century of Tradition’, *ABC Gippsland*, 24 March 2020. Accessed from <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-24/coronavirus-has-impact-on-local-newspapers/12084548>; Amanda Meade, ‘News Corp Australia Warns of Coronavirus Crisis Job Cuts as Smaller Regional Papers Close’, *Guardian Australia*, 25 March 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/media/2020/mar/25/news-corp-australia-warns-of-coronavirus-crisis-job-cuts-as-smaller-regional-papers-close>

the previous six years.<sup>4</sup> By most reckonings this amounts to around a quarter of journalism positions nationally. Our Australian-based New Beats project has developed and published a timeline of media reportage of journalism job losses which is posted on our project blog.<sup>5</sup> In all, around 100 instances of job loss between 2012 and 2020 are represented on the timeline. And according to the 2019 Digital Platforms Inquiry final report conducted by the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), 106 local and regional newspaper titles closed between 2008-09 and 2017-18. This represents about 15 per cent of the total.<sup>6</sup>

What has become of those whose jobs were lost? What kinds of careers have they forged since leaving newsroom roles? Have they been able to find meaningful work, in journalism or elsewhere? Since 2014, the New Beats project has been using two main methods to investigate what happened to those who took a redundancy package. The first of these has been through four annual surveys of a group of 225 journalists whose roles were made redundant between 2012 and 2014. Key findings from these surveys were published in the project's 2018 report,<sup>7</sup> and in a number of journal articles.<sup>8</sup> Findings were also incorporated into submissions to two senate inquiries.<sup>9</sup>

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4 Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) 'Submission to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Future of Public Interest Journalism' (2017): 6.

5 New Beats project, 'Redundancy Timeline' (2020). Accessed from <https://www.newbeatsblog.com/redundancy-timeline/>

6 Australian Competition and Consumer Commission, *Digital Platforms Inquiry: Final Report* (2019): 321. Retrieved from [https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital platforms inquiry - final report.pdf](https://www.accc.gov.au/system/files/Digital%20platforms%20inquiry%20-%20final%20report.pdf)

7 Lawrie Zion, Merryn Sherwood, Penny O'Donnell, Tim Marjoribanks, Matthew Ricketson, Andrew Dodd, and Monika Winarnita. 'New Beats Report: Mass Redundancies and Career Change in Australian Journalism', (2018). Accessed from [http://www.newbeatsblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/New\\_Beats\\_Report.pdf](http://www.newbeatsblog.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/12/New_Beats_Report.pdf)

8 See, for instance, Matthew Ricketson, Andrew Dodd, Lawrie Zion, and Monika Winarnita, "Like Being Shot in the Face" or "I'm Glad I'm Out": Journalists' Experiences of Job Loss in the Australian Media Industry 2012–2014', *Journalism Studies* 21, no. 1 (2020): 54-71.

9 Lawrie Zion, Andrew Dodd, Tim Marjoribanks, Penny O'Donnell, Matthew Ricketson, Merryn Sherwood, Monika Winarnita and Robin Harper, 'New Beats Submission #37 to the Senate Select Committee Inquiry into the Future of Public Interest Journalism' (2017). Accessed from [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Future\\_of\\_Public\\_Interest\\_Journalism/PublicInterestJournalism/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Future_of_Public_Interest_Journalism/PublicInterestJournalism/Submissions) and Penny O'Donnell, Lawrie Zion, Matthew Ricketson, Andrew Dodd, Tim Marjoribanks, Merryn Sherwood, Monika Winarnita and Robin Harper, 'Senate Select Committee on the Future of Work and Workers Submission 140', (2018). Accessed from [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Future\\_of\\_Work\\_and\\_Workers/FutureofWork/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Future_of_Work_and_Workers/FutureofWork/Submissions)

The second method has been through 60 ‘whole of life’ oral history interviews with a subset of the survey group conducted in collaboration with the National Library of Australia (NLA), as well as with several interviewees who did not complete the surveys. Unlike the surveys, which mostly focused on the challenges faced by career transition over time following journalism job loss, the main mission of the recorded interviews was to curate a collection for future Australians of the lives of journalists whose careers developed prior to digital disruption. So while all the interviews would include discussion of the experience of the subject’s departure from roles in newsrooms (often after several decades in the same workplace), this was, by design, to be only one component of the life histories that would also include extended discussion of childhood, education, the early stages of journalism careers, and other work undertaken both before and after the journalism roles that they left. In this respect it is worth noting that these life histories all include a mix of recent and early memories. Further details of the process of selecting interview participants are provided below. The main themes that emerged from the life interviews are the subject of a book that is in production. In this article we focus not on those themes, but on some of the cross currents between oral history and journalism practice that were brought to life through the process of preparing and conducting the interviews.

### **ORAL HISTORY AND JOURNALISM PRACTICE**

The genesis and recording of these life history interviews has led us to reflect on and engage with the similarities and differences between the methodologies of two kinds of storytelling: journalism, which draws extensively on a range of interviewing techniques to develop content deemed to be reportable and in the public interest, and oral history, where the interviewing methodologies, while sometimes overlapping, are not primarily directed towards producing stories for a daily or weekly publication, and are conducted according to a series of protocols, some of which differ from standard journalism practices.

Accordingly, before focusing on the methodology of the interviews themselves, we will consider how oral history methods might be seen to align with or diverge from conventional journalism interviewing practices. In doing so, we recognise that neither oral history, nor journalism, can be seen as static or discrete sets of practices.

Oral history, as Alistair Thomson has noted, has also gone through four paradigm transformations since World War Two: ‘the post-war renaissance of memory as a source or “people’s history”’; the development, from the late 1970s, of ‘postpositivist’ approaches to memory and subjectivity; a transformation in perceptions about the role of the oral historian as interviewer and analyst from the late 1980s; and the digital revolution of the late 1990s and early 2000s’.<sup>10</sup>

Since Thomson’s article was published, digitisation has further affected how oral history is produced and disseminated. Previously, those wanting to gain access to an oral history interview normally needed to listen in the same location where it was physically stored, or rely on typed summaries of the interview. Today, many oral history interviews can be accessed remotely by anyone, and can be searched by keywords or names, without the need to listen to the whole interview. Segments of online interviews can then be easily shared with others through websites or social media. Podcasts, in particular, have provided another platform to popularise and extend the reach of oral recordings. As an article posted on the website of the Oral History Association recently enthused:

Lots of oral history institutions are getting into podcasting – talking about and featuring their material. It’s a great opportunity to have the content reach broader and more diverse audiences. It gives our collections longer lives and a wider geographic and demographic scope. Our interviews become more flexible and versatile if shared in this way.<sup>11</sup>

One effect of this shift to digitisation is to loosen the neat, tight ties on the accessibility of oral history, which, we will argue, sharpens the need for oral history practitioners to consider issues that are commonplace to journalists, namely right of reply and defamation.

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10 Alistair Thomson, ‘Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History’, *The Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2006): 49.

11 Molly Graham, ‘Oral History & Podcasting/Radio Storytelling’, Oral History Association website (2018). Accessed from <https://www.oralhistory.org/2018/06/13/oral-history-podcasting-radio-storytelling/>

Oral historians have acknowledged some of the issues generated by technological innovation. Commenting on the challenges they present for practitioners, Elinor Mazé has argued that, 'We must often be the first to see possible ethical and legal consequences, as well as historiographical ones'.<sup>12</sup> And in his 2011 'status report' delivered to the International Oral History Association, Donald Ritchie said that 'providing sound along with transcripts poses new problems for those projects that permitted interviewees to edit their transcripts'. Ritchie questioned what oral historians should do if the transcript was revised and didn't match the recording. 'Should the entire sound recording be made available if the interviewee deleted portions in the transcript?' he asked, noting that 'some projects have steered around this problem by depositing only audio excerpts rather than the entire interview'.<sup>13</sup> But despite new debates over method and theory, he argued that basic interview techniques had not changed:

Interviewers need to prepare themselves thoroughly, know how to use their equipment, treat interviewees with respect, establish rapport, ask meaningful questions, listen carefully, follow up with further questions in response to the interviewees' answers, and oversee the final treatment of the interview, whether transcribed or preserved in audio form. At its core, oral history depends on the human relations between the interviewer and interviewee. It rests on mutual trust and a desire to capture and preserve memories of the past.<sup>14</sup>

In concluding, Ritchie said that 'as a technologically driven methodology, oral history has constantly undergone transformation, but the interview process itself has remained consistent'.<sup>15</sup>

Over the last decade journalism has been visibly transformed by the digital revolution on both industrial and practice levels, with once settled questions such as 'what is

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12 Elinor Mazé, 'Deconstruction Without Destruction: Creating Metadata for Oral History in a Digital World', in Douglas A. Boyd and Mary A. Larson (eds) *Oral History and Digital Humanities*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014): 155

13 Donald A. Ritchie, 'What in the World? A Status Report on Oral History', *Words and Silences* 6, no. 1 (2011): 2.

14 Ritchie, 'What in the World?', 4.

15 Ritchie, 'What in the World?', 5.

journalism?’ or ‘who is a journalist?’ now activated by the impact of technology and the digital economy in profound ways, raising questions about whether an array of practices by non-professional journalists could be seen as journalism.<sup>16</sup> In the 2000s, an early manifestation of this debate centred on whether blogging could be understood as journalism.<sup>17</sup> Since then, massive job losses, along with the rapid evolution of social media, online comments, practices of verification by citizens and automated reporting have all challenged the notion that journalism is a practice primarily conducted by professionals in newsrooms. As Carlson and Lewis note, journalism is ‘a constantly shifting denotation applied differently depending on context. Whatever is distinct about journalism must be continuously constructed’.<sup>18</sup>

Moreover, journalism has never been about just one kind of output. In the case of journalism interviewing, for instance, pinning down a set of norms is complicated by the large variety of genres, styles and forms which deploy interview material. Interviews can be designed to produce information, to hold those in power accountable for their actions, or to explore themes and ideas, as well as combinations of all of these. As former ABC broadcaster Peter Clarke has noted:

We should acknowledge many ‘interviewings’ across all the many variables that shape the character of a specific interview, including the medium, the genre and the audience as well as the differences of approach, skills and ‘weight’ of the interviewers themselves.<sup>19</sup>

In the case of oral history, perceptions differ between the popular realm, where it is seen as being as expansive and wide-ranging as journalism, and in the academic

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16 See, for instance Seth C. Lewis, ‘Journalism’, in Tim Vos and Folker Hanusch (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Journalism Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118841570.iejs0001>; Sally Young and Andrea Carson, ‘Who is a Journalist?’, *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 3 (2019): 452–472.

17 Alan Knight, ‘Who is a Journalist: Journalism in the Age of Blogging’, *Journalism Studies* 9, no. 1 (2008): 117–131.

18 Matt Carlson and Seth C. Lewis, *Boundaries of Journalism: Professionalism, Practices and Participation* (London: Routledge, 2015): 2.

19 Peter Clarke, ‘The Contemporary Journalistic Interview: A Hollow Dance Looking for New Moves?’, in Matthew Ricketson (ed.), *Australian Journalism Today* (South Melbourne: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012): 64.

realm, where it is more clearly defined ‘and has been painstakingly studied across many disciplines that use it in research’.<sup>20</sup> It is perhaps due to these perceptions that Studs Terkel, who popularised oral history on the airwaves and produced the highly praised books *Hard Times* and *The Good War*, based on interviews, claimed to be uncomfortable with the ‘oral historian’ label. On receiving the 1997 National Humanities Medal from President Clinton, which honoured him as ‘America’s oral historian’, Terkel was asked what it meant to be one of the great oral historians of the century. ‘I don’t know what it means,’ Terkel told Alan Harris Stein. ‘I call myself a “guerrilla journalist”, that is I know my terrain’.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to Terkel’s prodigious outputs, oral history approaches have long been crucial to the genre of long-form feature articles in magazines such as *Vanity Fair*, as journalist Keith O’Brien explains: ‘Since 2000, the magazine has published lengthy oral histories on “The Simpsons,” Guantánamo, and the birth of the Internet, among other topics, building them out of detailed interviews and writing them in the voices of the characters themselves’.<sup>22</sup> The oral history/journalism seam has also been dramatically extended through podcasting, a platform that has proved popular with journalists.<sup>23</sup>

For all this overlap, attempts to investigate the connections between journalism and oral history have been sporadic. Mark Feldstein’s 2014 article ‘Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History’ notes superficial similarities between the two – namely, both record information, are concerned with accuracy, and rely on interviewing. But the most visible difference between them is that while the journalist is concerned with current events, oral historians focus on the interpretation of events after they have occurred. So even though both deal ‘with parallel issues of empathy, ethics,

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20 Ashley Wright, ‘An Assessment of Applications from Oral History Interview Methods to Journalism’ (Masters Thesis, Carleton University, 2011): vi.

21 John de Graaf and Alan Harris Stein, ‘The Guerrilla Journalist as Oral Historian: An Interview with Louis “Studs” Terkel’, *The Oral History Review* 29, no. 1(2002): 88.

22 Keith O’Brien, ‘The Power of Oral History as Journalism’, *Nieman Storyboard*, 5 March 2016. Accessed from <https://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/the-opposite-of-writing/>

23 See, for instance, Siobahn McHugh, ‘How Podcasting is Changing the Audio Storytelling Genre’, *The Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast and Audio Media* 14, no. 1 (2016): 65–82.

and evidence', the difference between them 'is more than just a matter of time. Ultimately, the two have different purposes, different standards and norms, different techniques. Yet at the same time, each has much to teach the other'.<sup>24</sup>

For their part, journalism scholars have certainly reflected on the potential of oral history to inform journalism practice. For example, Bonnie Brennan argued in 1996 that oral history has long played a crucial role as a methodology in journalism history, pointing out that oral histories can shed light on the working conditions, expectations, and the pressures that rank and file news workers confront in their social and economic existence. At the same time, she argued that oral history methods had tended to focus on press elites 'such as owners, publishers and editors of the media, and they have been used to support, maintain, and reinforce the dominant ideological perspective'.<sup>25</sup>

Ashley Wright recommended that journalists could augment their skills 'by borrowing techniques from oral history methodology that involve shared ownership (or "shared authority", as it's called in oral history studies) of the story they're covering'.<sup>26</sup> This more collaborative approach, she suggested, could offer the interviewees a greater stake in the narrative, resulting in more meaningful interviews. But the limits to this approach for everyday journalism are also acknowledged:

In oral history interviews, the weight attributed to the narrator's version of events is elemental, whereas in journalism the concept of balance would prevail in many cases. Also, a journalist's independence from influence, as well as their ability to present the story in a fair and impartial manner, would need to be considered before partaking in any form of shared ownership. In controversial stories, or in situations that involve reluctant interviewees, this concept would not apply.<sup>27</sup>

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24 Mark Feldstein, 'Kissing Cousins: Journalism and Oral History', *The Oral History Review* 31, no. 1 (2004): 5.

25 Bonnie Brennan, 'Toward a History of Labor and News Work: The Use of Oral Sources in Journalism History', *The Journal of American History* 83, no. 2 (1996): 571.

26 Wright, 'An Assessment of Applications', 164.

27 Wright, 'An Assessment of Applications', 165.

This example, especially its closing caveat, points to significant differences between the conventions of oral history and journalism. Much emphasis has been placed in oral history scholarship on assessing potential issues with how events are recalled. To quote Thomson:

As historians we need to interrogate our interview sources critically, as we do any historical source, and to understand the ways in which memory stories have been shaped by the particular circumstances of the event and the complex processes of remembering.<sup>28</sup>

But memory is not the only issue when the opinions or events recalled involve others whose reputations might be affected by a singular interpretation. In the case of journalism, a single voice is not normally meant to tell the whole story: the right of reply is built into much of how journalism is practiced. ‘Do your utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply’, is one of the edicts in the Code of Ethics published by Australia’s Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, to cite one of many possible examples.<sup>29</sup> Where alternative voices have not been sought in an initial interview (such as in live-to-air broadcast interviews), it is commonplace to provide mechanisms to challenge controversial statements, especially when reputations are at stake. In life history interviews, however, where interviewer and ‘narrator’ might spend days together, interrogating statements that reference other people must be undertaken without seeking direct responses from those named in interviews.

Given the absence of built-in right of reply mechanisms, how well placed are oral history practitioners when it comes to dealing with notions of fairness and balance, not to mention potentially defamatory material? While oral history codes of practice and oral history scholars acknowledge a range of legal and ethical issues that can arise while interviewing, the focus tends to be more on whether to erase or withdraw questionable material, rather than to instil a sense of how to navigate potentially defamatory terrain that might arise in the course of an interview. For instance, on its website, the United Kingdom’s Oral History Society offers the following advice on dealing with defamation and libel:

They should record these instances (with time codes) on an Interview Sensitivity Review Form as the interview is being summarised (or transcribed) and then subsequently bring any concerns to the attention of interviewees and project leaders so that everyone involved can weigh up the likely risks of disclosure involved. This ensures that risks have been assessed and that decisions made resulting in the closure or partial closure of the interview have been properly documented.<sup>30</sup>

The *Oral History Australia Guidelines for Ethical Practice* also draw attention to the need to be aware that what is said in interviews could have legal consequences. The guidelines state the importance of 'being aware of defamation laws and the implications, for all parties concerned, of recording potentially defamatory material'.<sup>31</sup> Not evident in these codes, however, are suggestions as to how historians might approach such material in interviews or how, as a practice, it might engage with ways to provide a right of reply to those who are discussed in interviews. With oral history collections now increasingly digitised and accessible globally, how do oral historians deal with the fact that those mentioned in interviews may want to challenge the recorded version of events? We will return to this issue through our discussion of the interviews recorded for this project.

## THE INTERVIEWS

A critical component of the development of this project was establishing whose stories would be told. Out of a pool of more than 150 survey participants who were willing to be interviewed, we applied a range of criteria, in close consultation with NLA staff, to develop a proposed list of 60 interview participants. The initial list was subject to revisions both before and during the interview process, which commenced in 2015 and continued until 2019, due to a number of factors including the availability of interviewees.

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30 Oral History Society, 'Is Your Oral History Legal and Ethical?'. Accessed from <https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/ethical-and-legal/4/>

31 Oral History Australia, 'Guidelines of Ethical Practice' (2007). Accessed from [www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/guide-ethical-practice/](http://www.oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/guide-ethical-practice/)

While mindful of the demographic characteristics of the survey participant cohort, we did not seek to directly replicate these in our selection of interviewees. For instance, while 58 per cent of the participants in the first of the four annual surveys were male, we sought to achieve equal gender balance in the interviews. In selecting potential interviewees, we were also keen to ensure that we had strong representations that covered a broad range of geographic locations, age groups, specialty rounds, and a diversity of newsroom roles, including subeditors, photographers, cartoonists, regional newspaper editors, and specialty magazine writers and editors. To achieve these aims, in a number of cases we went outside the survey population and invited journalists whose roles had been made redundant to be interviewed. These include at least three journalists who became redundant after the completion of the surveys in 2017. At the point of writing, two of the sixty interviews have still to be completed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

We also ensured that while some of the interviewees were high profile, journalists whose career achievements were not as publicly known were also included, in order to provide as broad a cross-section as possible of journalism roles and careers. In this sense we aimed to take a different approach to the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia (NFSA)'s online collection of interviews with ten high profile TV journalists. The blurb accompanying these interviews on the NFSA website begs some questions in asserting that 'these interviews highlight the importance of preserving news coverage and their recollections underline the value of journalistic integrity in a digital age'.<sup>32</sup> Absent in this statement is any reference to the potential value of stories of any of their off-screen news-workers. From this, one could infer that it is the stories of familiar presenters that should be privileged over those of their behind-the-scenes colleagues who might play critical roles in upholding journalistic integrity, such as editors, producers, researchers and others whose daily contribution to the news cycle are essential for quality programming.

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32 National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, 'Oral History – TV Journalists', nd. Accessed from <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/curated/oral-history-television-journalists>

The assumptions behind the development of the academic/industry collaboration ‘Press Photography in Australia’ are more closely aligned with the aims and methodologies of the New Beats project. Both projects have involved collaborations with the NLA, supported by the Australian Research Council Linkage Grants scheme, to record the life histories of around 60 participants. The Press Photography project, which predates the New Beats project, was established to focus on ‘changes and continuities in how the Australian press has used photographs over time, including examination of the impact of technological change on news photography and the ethical and editorial issues surrounding news photography’.<sup>33</sup> The selection of its interviewees encompasses a broad range of participants, many of whom would have little previous public recognition of their contribution to the news-making process.



Sky News Australia outside broadcast, photographed by Bidgee. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0.

## POSITIONALITIES

In developing the protocols of life history interviews in association with the NLA, a decision was made that the interviews would be conducted by researchers who were themselves former journalists, because this approach was more likely to foster

deeper and richer conversations, including the posing of contextual and follow-up questions to develop themes that emerged in the recollections. The authors of this article, plus another member of the research team, Penny O'Donnell, have all worked extensively as journalists, including for periods alongside some of those who took redundancy packages, sometimes in the same newsrooms. These former associations also proved helpful in recruiting prospective interviewees. The approach of commissioning people with intimate knowledge of a subject area over trained interviewers is common to several oral history projects auspiced by the NLA. This reflects the NLA's view that interviewers with inside knowledge will steer deeper conversations and, in the process, provide future listeners with more revealing and useful content. As such, interviewers for this project had both intimate knowledge of the subject and were trained interviewers. In some respects, therefore, the authors of this article might be characterised as 'insiders'. But such a designation also has its complexities and limitations. As Christina Chavez noted in 2008:

The insider positionality, the aspects of an insider researcher's self or identity which is aligned or shared with participants, has gone without definition, since to date no single articulation exists that describes what configuration or degree of social experience warrants the designation of insider.<sup>34</sup>

There were clear benefits for the project team of having deep background knowledge of the profession and, in many cases, the interviewees' workplaces and careers while the audio recorder was rolling. That knowledge inevitably influenced the line of questions and the tenor of responses throughout many of the oral history interviews. The interviewers' familiarity with the subject matter can be seen in this exchange, in which the interviewee is explaining how, as a young journalist, he found himself suddenly having to cover a wide range of topics.

A I knew nothing about it, I'm a city boy and suddenly I'm writing about cows and understanding it and going to Eisteddfods.

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<sup>34</sup> Christina Chavez, 'Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality', *The Qualitative Report* 13, no. 3 (2008): 475.

Q: That's one of the things about journalism isn't it, you get this daily education on the job and you learn about anything and everything.

A: Yeah that's right. You become an expert on a few things but you know a little bit about everything by the end of it.

Q: You might have already had this moment by this stage but there's often a moment or there's usually a moment for journalists in their early years when it's a kind of light bulb moment when you realise "I can do this, this is something I can do and do well". Was there a particular moment or story or incident when you suddenly thought "yeah, this is me"?

A: A couple of things yeah. Well when I realised that I was the court roundsman myself, that I wasn't being overlooked, there wasn't someone overlooking my shoulder. This is in my first year, so I'm covering Magistrates Courts and District Court, and this is pretty technical stuff and I wasn't making mistakes, I could do it. And there was a moment that said "hey, I think this is starting to work for me here".

However, this approach also created the requirement for researchers/interviewers to consider any specific issues that may have arisen due to their positionality, especially whether they have worked in the same office or for the same company either contemporaneously or at different stages of their respective careers. While positionality, or the consideration of the differing and respective subjectivities of the interviewer and interviewee is a central preoccupation in the oral history literature, in journalism there is little consideration of the respective subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee in the crush of daily news reporting, partly because there is little time for it, and in part also because in news reporting the positionality of the interviewer isn't normally considered to be part of the subject matter of the story. When journalists write longer feature stories, or conduct extended audio or video interviews, there is

greater awareness of the respective subjectivities of interviewer and interviewee, on the part of both, and a more developed academic literature about it.<sup>35</sup>

In the New Beats project, one way of dealing with the legacy of such previous interactions in the interview context was for the researchers to declare any such work connections during the recording, offering, for instance, that they also recalled a certain incident while working at the same publication at the time as relevant incidents were discussed, sometimes using such interjections to further develop (or politely challenge) the recollection. On some occasions, interviewers were invited into the discussion by the interviewee, as occurred in this exchange:

A: [I] took along my folio and I was interviewed by [name withheld]. Do you remember [name withheld]?

Q: I do. He interviewed me for a cadetship about three years later.

A: Okay.

Q: For a journalistic cadetship.

A: Okay yes. So I was interviewed by [name withheld] and...

Q: Many people have been interviewed by [name withheld].

A: Oh I know, I know. The stories you hear about it are quite enlightening.

Yet such disclosures, while offering a degree of transparency for future listeners, did not address all the issues that arose in these contexts. On a practical level a recurrent issue was that interview subjects, recalling their stories to interviewers with considerable knowledge of their life histories, might need to be reminded more frequently that the interview was designed for an audience of non-journalists decades in the future who would be unfamiliar with the names of editors, co-workers, and even publications referred to in their answers. In a similar vein, interviewers sometimes

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<sup>35</sup> For a more extended discussion of these issues, see Matthew Ricketson, *Telling True Stories: Navigating the Challenges of Writing Narrative Non-Fiction* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2014), 87–115.

prefaced a question or interjected with a clarifying comment so that a listener, at some future time, could better understand the interviewee's story.

This happened on occasions when interviewees made references that might have seemed obvious to current listeners, as can be seen in this exchange after an interviewee made the comment: 'Funnily enough, I got an offer from the *AFR* and *The Australian* at the same time'. In response, the interviewer noted: 'We should just say "*AFR*" is *The Australian Financial Review*'. It also happened in cases where even current listeners might struggle to follow the thread of an interviewee's answers without some intervention. However, it was sometimes difficult to provide clarifying comments because interjecting would adversely affect the flow of the interview.

Another positionality factor in play was the awareness of both interviewer and interviewees that while those asking the questions had moved from roles as journalists into academia well before the major redundancy rounds of 2012, those being interviewed were often still dealing to varying degrees with the often chaotic aftermath of exiting long term jobs. So while they might previously have shared space in the same newsrooms, working under broadly similar conditions and occupying commensurate degrees of seniority within the ranks of their organisations, their current professional circumstances now differed in substantial ways. While all four interviewees were tenured, middle-aged, full-time academics at the time the interviews were conducted, findings from our project surveys (from which the group of interviewees was predominantly drawn) showed that in the years following their departures from newsrooms, those who had taken redundancies, while also predominantly middle-aged, were likely to be earning significantly less, to be undertaking irregular work,<sup>36</sup> and to be dealing with issues relating to professional identity.<sup>37</sup>

While this juxtaposition was not raised overtly in the recordings, we were aware that many of those being interviewed were still coming to terms with disrupted careers

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36 Lawrie Zion, Andrew Dodd, Merryn Sherwood, Penny O'Donnell, Tim Marjoribanks and Matthew Rickertson, 'Working for Less: The Aftermath for Journalists Made Redundant in Australia between 2012 and 2014', *Communication Research and Practice* 2, no. 2 (2016): 117–136.

37 Merryn Sherwood and Penny O'Donnell, 'Once a Journalist, Always a Journalist? Industry Restructure, Job Loss and Professional Identity', *Journalism Studies* 19, no. 7 (2018): 1021–1038.

while telling their life stories to former professional peers who had successfully embarked on new career trajectories in a different sector. So if the interviewers were in some respects ‘insiders’, they were also simultaneously ‘outsiders’ too, though both frames are limited by the fact that all those involved in the interview process could be seen to have multiple positionalities in their professional (and personal) lives, with the common denominator being at least some of that time spent working as journalists. However this varied in significance from one interview to the next.

Whatever the extent of our prior knowledge and engagement with interview subjects, as interviewers we sought to distinguish between offering corrections to errors relating to names or dates and attempting to challenge the meanings that interviewees ascribed to events in their lives while recalling them. We note also the observation made by oral historian Lynn Abrams that ‘the interview is a process that involves the dynamic interaction of subjectivities’ and that interviewers, like interviewees, draw on their pasts and their own contexts to project particular ‘selves’, which interviewees respond to in turn.<sup>38</sup> This inter-subjective, dialogic characteristic of oral history interviews has particular pertinence to a range of interview-based journalism genres, most particularly the profile interview with the important caveat, discussed below, that journalists, unlike oral historians, typically provide a right of reply when it appears reasonable to assume that the account of the interviewee could be challenged.<sup>39</sup>

In the case of the New Beats project, the ‘interaction of subjectivities’ began well before the recordings themselves through the routines and procedures leading to the face to face interview. Interviewees were extensively briefed in advance by the researcher conducting the interview, usually by phone and/or email, and were also provided in advance with relevant participant information sheets and ethics forms. They were reminded of the overall aims of the project and the context of the oral history interviews within the project was explained. The researchers told the interview subjects that they were free to rule in or out any aspect of their career and lives,

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38 Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2010), 58.

39 See, for instance, Sue Joseph and Richard Lance Keeble, *Profile Pieces: Journalism and the ‘Human Interest’ Bias* (New York: Routledge, 2016).

while being encouraged to talk candidly and openly about any areas they did want to discuss. In some cases, a no-go area was acknowledged in advance because interviewees could identify an aspect of their lives or relationships that they considered off limits. In other cases, interviewees signalled during the interview that they were uncomfortable discussing a particular topic.

A purely journalistic methodology might, at this point, lead to questions to test the resolve of the interviewee's reluctance to discuss something. But the oral history method, as well as the ethics protocols that we, as researchers, upheld, necessitated greater acceptance of the interviewee's wishes. That's not to say the topic in question might not be re-raised by the interviewer later, from another angle, to gauge whether the interviewee was prepared to discuss a different aspect of the same issue. But ultimately the interviewee's wishes were respected and honoured. In this regard there is an obvious difference between these interviews and those conducted for some forms of journalism, where a subject's reluctance or refusal to answer a question could itself become a line of enquiry by the interviewer, who might see their role as a representative of the audience seeking to hold power to account. The interviewer's ethical obligations in those sorts of encounters are more closely associated with finding and reporting the truth and acting in the public interest.

#### **DEFAMATION AND RIGHT OF REPLY**

Career journalists tend to have a good understanding of defamation law as most have grappled with its complexities throughout their careers. Media law is commonly taught in journalism degree programs, and most of Australia's large media companies conduct in-house training about defamation so that reporters are aware of its existence, and the potential risks of being sued by people who are either named or otherwise identified in stories they write. Losing a defamation action can prove costly for a media outlet; damages awarded, not to mention the costs of defending an action, can run into hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars.<sup>40</sup> Journalists tend to have a keen interest in the subject, along with other aspects of media law, such as contempt of court, because the more they understand, the better they are at telling complex and controversial stories. In-house training and key media law manuals stress when to flag an issue with a lawyer



The Age Headquarters, Melbourne, 2010, photographed by Elekh. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0

and when to get a story ‘legalled’.<sup>41</sup> They understand how to truly de-identify someone or, conversely, why it is important to be forthright and precise about naming the subject of a highly critical story. They understand that truth is the principal defence against an action of defamation, but that truth is something they, as a journalist or a defendant in a legal case, must be able to prove. And they know that this is often far from simple, especially when proof might require testimony from an anonymous source whose identity the journalist has promised to protect. They also understand that other defences are available, even in cases where a story ends up being wrong, but many of those defences rely on being able to demonstrate that the story was written within the norms of responsible journalism, including whether a right of reply was granted to a person who has allegedly been defamed.

In consenting to take part and be on-the-record, the interview subjects were participating in the publication of content. The fact that this content had many end uses was explained. As well as being searchable on the NLA’s oral history catalogue, the

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<sup>41</sup> Mark Pearson and Mark Polden, *A Journalist’s Guide to Media Law: A Handbook for Communicators in a Digital World*, sixth edition (Crows News: Allen & Unwin, 2019).

interviews could also be used for academic journal and media articles, and in one or both of the books generated by the project. The subjects were given options to opt out of any of these non-NLA outputs, although very few did. The subjects were also allowed to place restrictions on public access to the oral history recording within the NLA's database. This last point is significant because it changes the nature of publication and because it allows for material to be suppressed until after the interviewee or the subject of the criticism have died. Under Australian defamation law, a deceased person, or their estate, generally can neither sue nor be sued.<sup>42</sup>

However, with so many potential end users, the interviewees would have been acutely aware that they needed to observe the laws of defamation, although interestingly this was not explained in the 'Interviewer's Introduction to the Interview' provided by the NLA, which was read to the subject at the start of each interview. Instead of caution, the preamble said: 'We hope you'll speak as frankly as possible knowing that the interview material will not be released without your authority'.<sup>43</sup>

Nevertheless, as people with at least a working knowledge of defamation law, the interviewees knew they needed to exercise caution if they said anything that ridiculed others, brought them into disrepute, caused them to be shunned or avoided, or damaged them in their business or trade. Each of these is a separate basis for the tort of defamation. But rather than having a chilling effect on conversations, the interviewees' familiarity with the rules may have emboldened them to speak out. Indeed, many opted to say critical things about former managers or editors or colleagues. The targets of this criticism were often not named, although on several occasions the people concerned could be identified due to the small circles in which the interviewee was operating. Criticism of 'a senior editor' on a named publication, for example, narrows the list of potential candidates down to perhaps a handful. This also underscores the importance of specificity, as defamation law allows each of

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42 'Defamation Act 2005 (Victoria) Section 10, clause a and b': 'No cause for action for defamation of, or against, deceased persons' with equivalent clauses in each Australian state and Territory except Tasmania. Sighted 5 September 2020 [http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/da200599/s10.html](http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/da200599/s10.html)

43 National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore unit's 'Interviewer's Introduction to the Interview', read to all interviewees 2014-2020, and recorded and transcribed with each interview.

those senior editors on that publication to take actions for defamation as they may be perceived to be the editor being criticised.

On several occasions people were identified by name and openly criticised by the interviewee. And in many cases publications or companies were also described in unfavourable terms. Criticising institutions is generally not controversial for journalists, as most professional reporters are familiar with the provisions of Australia's uniform defamation laws, which since 2005 have allowed for criticism of for-profit or large civic organisations.<sup>44</sup> Working journalists are also generally aware that there are defences which allow for the expression of robust views. The 'honest opinion' defence, for example, permits direct and strong criticism of individuals if there is supporting evidence and the capacity to substantiate whatever claims are made. It is also necessary to demonstrate that the opinion was honestly held at the time it was expressed.<sup>45</sup>

At the end of the interviewing process the interviewers, as part of a larger research team, sought to group material garnered from the life histories around common themes for a book on the lives of journalists before and during digital disruption. The book's chapters are based in large part on the interviewees' rich anecdotes, which reveal the lived experiences of newsrooms and the craft of reporting, as well as the emotional and often wrenching stories of redundancy.

Although the interviews were commissioned by the NLA, the book, which is in preparation at the time of writing this article, was always an intended additional outcome. And this is where at least one of the methodologies of long-form journalism seems at odds with the practices of oral history, namely how to deal with potentially defamatory material through the granting of a right of reply. The NLA operates with a longer time lens in that it can and often does lock contentious material away from the public for extended periods of time, thus avoiding the threat of an action for defamation and reducing at least the legal imperative for rights of

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44 *Defamation Act 2005* Section 9 Certain corporations do not have cause of action for defamation. Accessed from [https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/da200599/s9.html](https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/vic/consol_act/da200599/s9.html)

45 *Defamation Act 2005* Section 31 Defences of honest opinion. Accessed from [https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/da200599/s31.html](https://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/viewdoc/au/legis/vic/consol_act/da200599/s31.html)

reply. But this was not an option for the book's editors. Accordingly they knew they needed to be vigilant in identifying material that might prompt legal action. When content of that nature was included in the book, it was assessed in much the same way contentious material is dealt with by news media editors.

The process for that assessment was relatively straightforward, although it often involved complex decisions. The starting point was generally to determine whether there was public interest in what was being said and therefore whether it was important to include a contentious anecdote in the book. If it concerned a matter of public concern or revealed important insights about the nature of the media industry it was generally determined to be of sufficient importance to warrant inclusion. Then came the question of whether the person who might be potentially defamed should be identified. The editors sometimes concluded that the story could be told with integrity without naming or identifying anyone. On other occasions they decided it was important to identify the people concerned because the anecdote was as much about those people as the environment in which they worked. Then came a question about the veracity of a contentious claim, which was where complexities might emerge. This was especially so in cases where there was no corroborating evidence or witnesses to ensure two-source verification.

Every journalist knows that it is highly problematic to publish contestable material without the most basic elements of verification. Media outlets would be taking considerable risks in publishing such a story. However, journalists also know that this problem can sometimes be addressed by granting the person who has allegedly been defamed a right of reply. And defamation laws determine that this must be given in good faith by explaining the nature of the allegation being made, and by giving the person concerned ample opportunity to respond and then by treating their response with respect.

This is good practice in a legal sense, and also ethically because it provides balance and ensures fairness, both of which are considered central tenets of good news-writing. This concept is drilled in to news reporters in journalism courses, textbooks

and within newsrooms.<sup>46</sup> Most reporters also know that in matters of defamation, providing a right of reply can help demonstrate that the journalism was produced ‘responsibly in the circumstances’ which can be used to bolster several defences in defamation proceedings. The Defamation Act states that it can form part of a defence to an action of defamation if ‘the matter published contained the substance of the person’s side of the story and, if not, whether a reasonable attempt was made by the defendant to obtain and publish a response from the person.’<sup>47</sup>

The book’s editors dealt with such cases in the way professional journalists would, by taking the allegation to the people who might potentially be defamed and by recording and faithfully representing their views. In such cases – known as ‘he said-she said’ exchanges – a journalist is often content to leave the reader to make up their own mind about what really occurred. This is common practice for journalists and serves the added purpose of ensuring there are no nasty surprises after the book is published.

## CONCLUSION

The life history project conducted by this research team revealed both similarities and tensions between the practices of oral historians and journalists. As former journalism practitioners who have embarked on academic careers, the process of interviewing former journalists, whose professional milieu the authors once shared, raised questions of positionality in the way that the interview process was approached. The authors’ close proximity to the subject was considered an asset by the NLA because it provided insights that could further illuminate the topics under discussion and because it invited the prospect of deeper questioning and greater reflection. But such close proximity also challenged some of the foundational precepts of journalism, especially the idea that in most forms of journalistic interviewing the positionality of the interviewer should not factor in the recorded discussion because the interview is meant to be about the interviewee, and that the person asking the questions is

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46 See, for instance, Denis Muller, *Journalism Ethics for the Digital Age* (Brunswick: Scribe, 2014): 47-53.

47 *Defamation Act 2005* (Victoria) Section 30, clause 3 (h) and in all other Defamation Acts in Australian states and territories. Accessed from [http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol\\_act/da200599/s30](http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/legis/vic/consol_act/da200599/s30)

there to act as a conduit to the audience and not as a subject in their own right. Yet while this was observed by the researchers as noteworthy, they did not consider it onerous, in part because the interviews lent themselves to greater interaction, and partly because the craft of interviewing is not static and requires constant adaptation and multiple approaches.

The longstanding practice in oral history of imposing restrictions on public access until affected parties have died has had the effect of avoiding the need to consider the right to reply for anyone criticised, or defamed, in an oral history interview. The more that digitisation extends the ease of accessibility and expands the reach of oral history interviews, the more urgent the need for practitioners to consider questions about the right of reply and potential defamation actions. Further, the process of gathering oral histories and then archiving them for future public access has at its core a potential ethical bind for journalists who are trained to seek rights of reply from those who are criticised. Under this model of gathering oral history material, the criticised are not given that right, while what is said about them is preserved in perpetuity. That certainly challenges the first clause of the Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance code of ethics which, as noted earlier, calls on journalists to do their 'utmost to give a fair opportunity for reply'. In the book that will be based on the interviews, the authors will address this by extending the journalistic necessity of a right of reply to people who are criticised and identified. To not do so would seem to journalists unethical and could pose the risk of a defamation action against the publication. Given the increasing popularity and accessibility of oral history interviews, we believe it is timely to draw attention to these issues which perhaps oral historians can consider afresh so that the narrator's privilege does not occur at the expense of fairness to those others who are recalled in interviews without a right of reply.

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# The Digital Story Bank: A Novel Means of Archiving, Organising, and Accessing Oral Histories

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Communities and organisations, whether corporate, community-centred or volunteer-driven, hold rich histories and often keep important collections, yet the recording and archiving of this history and historical ephemera can be overlooked. When archiving is carried out, the stories of communities may be removed from their context and transferred to a central location. This raises ethical considerations about supporting communities' ownership of the stories they have created. This article demonstrates how a new tool – the 'Digital Story Bank' – allows communities and organisations to manage and archive their own stories and historical material. This article subsequently proposes that by making use of the tool, communities' and organisations' ability to manage their own history could open up further potential to allow stories to remain in the places they were made – where they are most meaningful. This paper demonstrates how the Digital Story Bank, created by researchers at Queensland University of Technology (QUT), was designed

and piloted, and explores the potential for the tool to support place-based narratives, particularly in remote communities where issues of place and story are particularly powerful.

## INTRODUCTION

Data and information about the history of organisations and communities is often recorded in electronic and paper-based formats that are stored, but not necessarily archived. Over time, the task of archiving this material can become overwhelming and beyond the scope of volunteers or employees without expertise in history or information management. Meanwhile, this material history is accompanied by oral stories that complement and contextualise it – but these oral stories are often not captured or recorded. It may become difficult to access information about a particular time, event, or place in a timely manner, and the stories that illustrate a material archive are lost as people move to other organisations, locations, or retire. These issues are common in organisations (large and small), in communities and local councils, schools and libraries, and in non-profit and volunteer-led organisations such as historical societies or sporting and recreational clubs. Many such organisations and groups secure funding to engage their communities in local, narrative-based arts projects. Keeping track of project material such as photographs, snippets of research and writing, and digital content is challenging but increasingly important as the emphasis on meaningfully measuring and articulating the impact of these types of programs has grown into an acquittal requirement.<sup>1</sup>

A particular challenge facing communities and organisations who seek to preserve their stories is presented when staff or volunteers move on or retire. For example, with twenty years' experience planning, creating and (in recent years) evaluating narrative-based arts projects in local communities, our research team member Helen Klaebe has found that a change in a committee, board or of government funding often means the keepers of the organisation's archives inevitably move on, and

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1 See for example: Claudia Fontes, 'The What and the How: Rethinking Evaluation Practice for the Arts and Development', in Katerina Teaiwa and Polly Stupples (eds), *Contemporary Perspectives on Art and International Development* (Routledge, 2016), 258–72; Kim Dunphy and Vicki-Ann Ware, 'Evaluation Practices in Participatory Arts in International Development: Findings of a Systematic Literature Review', in Katerina Teaiwa and Polly Stupples (eds), *Contemporary Perspectives*, 221–237.

valuable resources become hard to find or lost. Klæbe regularly receives hopeful requests for assistance in utilising past project materials. Too often, organisations rely on a small number of staff and volunteers who hold considerable institutional knowledge – when they move on, they take stories about places and events with them. Even when historical documents such as minutes, photographs, reports and transcripts *are* archived, this information is rarely in an accessible form from which users can easily extract the human side of historical events or find content that can be repurposed.

This occurs in a context where more and more communities are seeking small grants aiming to increase participation in the arts, to celebrate or commemorate key anniversaries, strengthen a unique sense of place and pride, or build resilient and inclusive communities.<sup>2</sup> While these projects are carried out by organisations embedded in their own communities, they often rely on the expertise of visiting scholars or historians to supply specialised knowledge or tools that build capacity and support the work. With the benefit of this expertise comes an increased risk that stories may leave with the professional team who helped create them, rather than remain in place. Similarly, until recently, many stories created in small communities have been archived in centrally-based institutions and repositories that are not necessarily the most effective or appropriate location for community stories or artefacts (due to the very localised and place-based nature of such material). The theory and practice of creative placemaking, which privileges the specificity of place and the unique stories and experiences of communities in project design and delivery, provides an avenue to better understand this issue.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on this theoretical groundwork, the Digital

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- 2 Andrew Mason, 'Art in Response to Crisis: Drought, Flood and the Regional Community', in Robert Mason and Janet McDonald (eds), *Creative Communities: Regional Inclusion and the Arts* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2015), 124–134. Also see UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, 'Community Story Telling', which was set up in 2018 to make a significant and wide-reaching impact on civil society and cultural life by taking storytelling out into a range of communities and to increase start-up professional community storytelling companies (UK Arts and Humanities Research Council 'Community Story Telling' available from <https://ahrc.ukri.org/research/case-study-archives/community-storytelling/>). Accessed 19 May, 2020.
- 3 While creative placemaking has been defined variously, we refer particularly to the USA cultural policy model of creative placemaking, and the definitions and models exemplified by the National Endowment for the Arts through projects such as Our Town (see National Endowment for the Arts, 'Our Town: Program Description', available from <https://www.arts.gov/grants/our-town/program-description>). Accessed 19 May 2020.

Story Bank allows stories to remain in place, where they are most meaningful, and the Story Bank's simple, digital nature gives organisations the power to disseminate stories more broadly (since many oral histories are collected because they are interesting and useful beyond their context) while respecting their localness and specificity. A further purpose of the Story Bank is to provide a method for organising primary and first-person material for future remixing and repurposing, rather than offering a 'complete' history or narrative.

This article begins by considering the ways in which stories are meaningfully tethered to place, and the advantages of supporting communities to not only author, but effectively preserve, use, and re-use their stories. We then provide this as a basis for the rationale behind the Story Bank concept and provide a summary of its features with reference to its pilot project at Brisbane's South Bank Corporation. We outline the distinct needs of organisations such as the South Bank Corporation in narrating and archiving their own histories, then turn to explore the Digital Story Bank's potential for wider application in documenting, accessing and repurposing organisational and community histories.

### CREATIVE PLACEMAKING

The value of stories for not only reflecting place, but for shaping place and community in positive or meaningful ways is reflected in the rich field of practice and growing body of international scholarship on creative placemaking.<sup>4</sup> Creative placemaking positions arts and culture at the heart of community development initiatives and engages community members as participants and collaborators in developing localised solutions to complex problems.<sup>5</sup> This model recognises the specificity of place, and the role of arts and creativity in shaping and reshaping localities, settings, and whole communities.<sup>6</sup> A defining feature

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4 See for example Jill Sonke, Tasha Golden, Samantha Francois, Jamie Hand, Anita Chandra, Lydia Clemmons and Stacey Springs, *Creating Healthy Communities through Cross-Sector Collaboration* [White paper], (The University of Florida Center for Arts in Medicine and ArtPlace America: Florida, 2019), available at <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding-finder/great-place-scheme>; Eleonora Redaelli, 'Connecting Arts and Place: Cultural Policy and American Cities', in Cara Courage and Anita McKeown (eds), *Creative Placemaking: Research, Theory and Practice* (Abingon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

5 Redaelli, *Connecting Arts and Place*, 156.

6 Sonke et al., *Creating Healthy Communities*, 8.

and success of creative placemaking is that it engages deeply with a community's stories, values and lived experiences in determining the physical and social character of places. As Redaelli finds, such creative, place-based and community-led initiatives not only animate or draw attention to the unique histories of a place but involve communities in processes of authoring themselves and their shared visions for the future.<sup>7</sup> From this perspective, stories are usefully tethered to place and may not have the same significance or meaning for their community if shifted. One of the potential uses and, we hope, benefits of a resource such as the Digital Story Bank, is the provision of a methodology and tool that communities can use to keep their stories 'in place', and reimagine and reuse them in ways they find meaningful and relevant.

The relationship between place and storytelling can be ruptured when stories are removed from their setting. While the State Library of Queensland has managed and acquired Queensland oral history and multimedia collections and has been particularly interested in those from regional communities for several years, the centralised curation of archival material and creative responses to place is increasingly open to question. As Thompson writes, the 'co-operative nature of the oral history approach has led to a radical questioning of the fundamental relationship between history and the community. Historical information need not be taken away from the community for interpretation and presentation by the professional historian. Through oral history the community can, and should, be given the confidence to write its own history'.<sup>8</sup> Van Luyn demonstrates that writing that arises from and responds to regional communities is often influenced by a sense of isolation from larger cities.<sup>9</sup> The symbiotic relationship between place and storytelling and the city/regional dichotomy raises questions, therefore, about the appropriateness of removing stories from the communities that forged them to be stored in city repositories.

Supporting regional communities to author their own histories requires not only development of oral history and storytelling skills, but also close consideration of

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7 Sonke et al., *Creating Healthy Communities*, 174.

8 Paul Thompson and Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2017), 15.

9 Thompson and Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, 249.

where and how these stories will be kept, which influences how they can be heard and used. Even the South Bank Corporation's own archive, despite its urban location, had been neglected and distributed over time, with many artefacts finding their way to state-based, central locations, where their significance and utility was diminished. The impact on regional communities tends to be more erosive to historical records, with fewer people to maintain archives, and central repositories located very distant from the stories' origins and communities where they have greatest impact.

Many scholars and practitioners involved in the collection of personal or life stories express concerns about preserving, and reframing or recontextualising, the storyteller's account.<sup>10</sup> Discussing listening environments for digital stories, Matthews and Sunderland delineate the complex and overlapping ways in which institutions and platforms frame stories and shape their reception in ways that may support and enhance, or sometimes undermine, storytellers' original intentions. In moving stories from the context in which they were produced, and repositioning them in new listening environments, the forms of oppression and power that facilitated storytelling practices essentially aim to disrupt may in effect be reinforced or reproduced.<sup>11</sup> Through operating as curators, hosts or caretakers of stories, organisations such as libraries and museums function as meta-orators who contribute a layer of contextual meaning to stories, and hence play roles that are ethically and politically significant.<sup>12</sup>

The shaping role of institutions is not necessarily problematic – rather, large libraries and museums can usefully expand the audience for stories, and in some ways legitimise them by contextualising them as part of broader public narratives.<sup>13</sup> However, it is useful to acknowledge that institutions and platforms are not neutral spaces; rather, they are 'contexts shaped by power (political, economic, organisational, and indi-

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10 Nicole Matthews and Naomi Sunderland, *Digital Storytelling in Health and Social Policy: Listening to Marginalised Voices* (Routledge: New York, 2017), 38.

11 Matthews and Sunderland, *Digital Storytelling*, 26, 32–33.

12 Matthews and Sunderland, *Digital Storytelling*, 31.

13 Nancy Thumim, "Everyone has a Story to Tell": Mediation and Self-representation in Two UK Institutions', *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 12, no. 6 (2009): 632–633.

vidual)'.<sup>14</sup> Empowering communities to own their stories and histories necessarily involves building their capacity to host and re-represent, distribute, and remix them on their own terms. As Sheffield finds of grassroots community archiving projects, many communities are determined to remain autonomous from formal heritage or collecting institutions, preferring direct ownership and physical custodianship which keeps collections or artefacts in the community.<sup>15</sup> For under-represented communities and minority cohorts, community archiving practices can be an important act of resistance and collective identity-construction, and an opportunity to tell stories that counter dominant narratives preserved in formal heritage institutions.<sup>16</sup> Retaining control of its own collections may be an important social and political act for a community.

Heritage and collecting institutions such as museums and libraries are increasingly moving beyond their traditional roles as repositories or interpreters and 'gatekeepers' of history and information to involve communities as co-curators of cultural artefacts, thereby facilitating community expression and voice.<sup>17</sup> Co-curation or shared stewardship supports communities to not only engage more deeply with collections but to exercise some control over representations of their lives and stories through becoming co-constructors and co-interpreters of a shared past.<sup>18</sup> Despite democratising objectives and possibilities, however, participation and engagement are inevitably defined and delimited by the inviting institution, its agendas and conventions. A potential use and value of the Digital Story Bank is it may provide a template for how communities might hold onto and usefully repurpose their artefacts in ways more autonomous than is possible with artefacts held in institutional settings.

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14 David Wallace, 'Archives and Social Justice', in Heather MacNeil and Terry Eastwood (eds), *Currents of Archival Thinking* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2017), 276.

15 Rebecka Sheffield, 'Community Archives', MacNeil and Eastwood, *Currents of Archival Thinking*, 351–376.

16 Sheffield, 'Community Archives', 366.

17 Daniel H Mutibwa, Alison Hess and Tom Jackson, 'Strokes of Serendipity: Community Co-curation and Engagement with Digital Heritage', *Convergence* 26, no. 1 (2020): 157–177.

18 For information on shared stewardship, see Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage, *Shared Stewardship of Collections* (2019). Available at <https://folklife-media.si.edu/docs/folklife/Shared-Stewardship.pdf>. Accessed 19 February 2020; Co-curation is described by Mutibwa et al., 'Strokes of Serendipity', 159.

Digital technologies have vastly expanded the potential for co-curation and meaningful and sustainable community access and use of collections. One could argue that collections (in digital format at least) can be housed and accessed in both the community in which it comes from, as well as in a public institution such as the State Library of Queensland – and such is the aim of the Digital Story Bank. Increasingly, in a multi-platform digital environment, organisations are expected to not only keep the records of history, but to re-use collections across different digital platforms such as websites, blogs, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to attract, grow and keep prospective audiences engaged in meaningful, authentic ways. Any organisation (or business for that matter) will know the value of a competent web administrator or content creator is now critical to their business. In 2015 Facebook introduced ‘On This Day’ curating memories of our Facebook life.<sup>19</sup> The Digital Story Bank is a pilot attempt of thinking more deeply about how organisations and communities can ‘regain control of our narratives online’.<sup>20</sup>

Still, not every collection or report needs to be accessioned into and searchable in public depositories – so there is a gap and, we would argue, a need, for simpler ways for smaller organisations to data manage their historical artefacts internally. Symons and Hurley state that ‘people need to be equipped with techniques and tools that ‘give permission’ to be creative’.<sup>21</sup> So how can we support communities and organisations to better manage their general data and collect, keep, archive and share (if only internally) material? How might those delivering programs or carrying out evaluations empower communities to better store and access their collection internally? Symons and Hurley also suggest that a ‘reconceptualisation of creativity... can encourage people outside the so-called “creative sectors” to consider themselves

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19 Artie Konrad, *Facebook Memories: The Research Behind the Products that Connect you with your Past* (September 6, 2017). Available at <https://research.fb.com/blog/2017/09/facebook-memories-the-research-behind-the-products-that-connect-you-with-your-past/>. Accessed 15 January 2020.

20 Leigh Alexander, ‘What Facebook’s On This Day Shows about the Fragility of our Online Lives’, *The Guardian*, 25 Jan 2016. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jan/25/facebook-on-this-day-tweets-status-updates>. Accessed 11 January 2020.

21 Jessica Symons and Ursula Hurley, ‘Strategies for Connecting Low Income Communities to the Creative Economy through Play: Two Case Studies in Northern England’, *Creative Industries Journal* 11, no. 2 (2018): 121–136.

as having creative potential’ – we hope that concepts like the Digital Story Bank can help inspire inexperienced individuals to more readily explore their historical ephemera, weaving together history, storytelling, and archiving in a readily accessible format.<sup>22</sup> Despite the fact that the pilot was produced in a corporate, and indeed, metropolitan setting, the Story Bank tool has potentially broader application for other organisations wanting to manage their historical data because it has been designed to be accessible, repurposable, and scalable.

### **SOUTH BANK AND THE DIGITAL STORY BANK**

In 2017, a team of QUT researchers led by Klæbe partnered with South Bank Corporation, which manages Brisbane’s most significant urban open space, to design a solution to these problems.<sup>23</sup> The result was the curation of ephemera we called the ‘Digital Story Bank’: a new tool that serves as an accessible archive of the organisation’s history, woven together with stories, and facts about people, places, and events.

Working with the South Bank Corporation to celebrate its 25th anniversary, QUT researchers embarked on a project to collect the organisation’s history and enhance these with oral history accounts for use in anniversary celebrations. The material was organised in a Story Bank, providing story chapters based on oral history accounts, facts, and a summary index that preserves the history of the South Bank Corporation so it can be virtually accessible ‘at your fingertips’ on a corporate e-bookshelf. This pilot program demonstrates how, through its accessible format, the Story Bank has the potential to address issues faced by smaller organisations in urban, regional and remote communities, whose oral histories and other outputs of creative projects might be difficult to access in the future or, at worst, lost with the passage of time.

The archival material used to create the pilot Digital Story Bank dated from 1992 to 2017 (based on the South Bank Corporation’s timeline) and included a significant number of documents and ephemera, including annual reports, old decommissioned websites, minutes, images, video, and correspondence in storage, and our researchers

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22 Symons and Hurley, ‘Strategies for Connecting Low Income Communities’, 121–136.

23 South Bank Corporation homepage available at [southbankcorporation.com.au](http://southbankcorporation.com.au). Accessed 19 September 2019.

found the Queensland State Archives and the State Library of Queensland's John Oxley Library also contained many documents, images and film that were rarely accessed or shared with the organisation or the public. Background research focused on providing information about key milestones, people and places, and these formed the basis of the Story Bank's structure. The Story Bank is not designed for the public to access, but for communities to use internally so that staff and volunteers can quickly and easily access information, and add to as the history of the organisation continues. The Story Bank aligns with the principles of community-based archiving in that its aims are to empower members of a community (however 'community' is perceived) to be actively involved in the self-documenting of their community.<sup>24</sup>

### RESPONDING TO ORGANISATIONAL AND COMMUNITY NEEDS

Oral history in the corporate organisational setting tends to be poorly and inconsistently collected, if at all. Perks argues that this is usually due to a lack of interest and resources on behalf of the corporations themselves.<sup>25</sup> He also notes that it may be because oral historians tend to focus on stories that are either individual or more openly public than organisational history allows.<sup>26</sup> Oral history by its very nature is a democratic undertaking, and corporations tend to sit awkwardly within the general ethos of oral history. Corporate history, however, deserves the attention of oral historians because, as Matthew Bailey and Robert Crawford put it, oral history 'holds potential to fill significant gaps in our understanding of the past, and indeed, open new lines of enquiry'.<sup>27</sup> Further, the democratic and therapeutic principles of oral history are likely as relevant in organisational and 'elite' settings as they are in community settings as oral history offers an opportunity to give voice to

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24 Ruohua Han, 'Building Companionship between Community and Personal Archiving: Strengthening Personal Digital Archiving Support in Community-based Mobile Digitization Projects', *Preservation, Digital Technology & Culture* 48, no. 1 (2019): 6–16.

25 Robert Perks, 'Corporations are People Too! Business and Corporate Oral History in Britain', *Oral History* 38, no. 1 (2010): 36–54.

26 Perks, 'Corporations are People Too', 36–54.

27 Matthew Bailey and Robert Crawford, 'Shop Talk: Revisiting Business History and Oral History', *Oral History Australia Journal* 38 (2016): 29–35.

underrepresented employees, and may reveal discordant or alternative understandings and experiences.<sup>28</sup>

Julian Meyrick, Tully Barnett, Heather Robinson and Matt Russell assert that:

All organisations generate a narrative that shapes understanding of their activities, managing the message of success or failure, depending on its capacity to weave together stated expectations and demonstrable proof. In time, such narrative accounts supply the primary content for official or anniversary organisational histories.<sup>29</sup>

Organisations' archival needs are generally different from those of public institutions such as libraries, and so call for accessible approaches and the use of simpler technological platforms. When applied in community settings run by volunteers for example, a historical organisation usually requires archives that can be accessed by individuals without any specific training or digital know-how, and who may only devote a small percentage of their time or workload to managing historical material. As Sheffield notes of digital community archiving models, 'digital repositories require infrastructure to ensure that platforms are developed and supported over time, which can have implications for communities that cannot support these endeavours on their own and wish to remain autonomous'.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, the archiving system needs to present resources that can be repurposed for a range of applications, from marketing, to signage, to speech-making, to reports, to grant applications and acquittals.

With this important factor forming the foundation of the tool's design, the finished tool provides an index of primary material, accompanied by developed story summaries derived from oral history accounts, and is presented via interactive PDF with

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28 Sjoerd Keulen and Ronald Kroeze, 'Back to Business: A Next Step in the Field of Oral History - The Usefulness of Oral History for Leadership and Organizational Research', *The Oral History Review* 39, no. 1 (2012), 15–36; Perks, 'Interviewing in Business and Corporate Environments', 283.

29 Julian Meyrick, Tully Barnett, Heather Robinson and Matt Russell, 'What's the Story? "Credible" Narrative in the Evaluation of Arts and Culture', *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society* 49, no.6 (2019): 375–388.

30 R. Sheffield, 'Community Archives', in MacNeil and Eastwood, *Currents of Archival Thinking*, 356.

an accompanying index in Excel. Unlike a chronological book, each component of the Story Bank can easily be read and interpreted in isolation, while also connected to other story chapters and ephemeral data, all correlated in the Excel index. While programs such as Excel have less functionality than Digital Asset Management systems (DAMS) typically used in large-scale archival operations, they have the advantage of being accessible and require little training or IT skills to use. With the flexibility afforded by the Story Bank, organisations for whom collecting and archiving stories might be a secondary function – for example, a sporting or cultural body – have access to a simple means with which to collect and store historical material.

In many ways, the difficulties experienced by small organisations mirror the difficulties we encounter when working on rural and remote community projects in Australia. Although most resources (Queensland's State Library and State Archives, for example) were geographically located close to the researchers, the organisation itself had little capacity to manage or repurpose its historical material or capture its oral history. Furthermore, a proportion of its historical multimedia had been distributed to centrally-based libraries and archives – as often tends to be the case in community projects in the regions. And like smaller or regional organisations and community groups, South Bank Corporation required a tool that could be easily used in-house, but that also supported the dissemination of stories to the wider public or other communities as desired. Given these parallels, we are particularly interested in the potential usefulness of the Story Bank for regional organisations and communities because it responds to the need to hold stories in place, while offering the possibility for them to be shared more broadly should communities wish.

### **ABOUT SOUTH BANK**

The suburb South Bank was originally a meeting place of the Turrbal and Yuggera people, the traditional owners of the land. South Bank occupies land on the Brisbane River opposite the central business district, but in the early years after colonisation, South Bank was the CBD of Brisbane. After the floods of 1893, when much of the area was destroyed, businesses moved to the northern side of the river where the CBD stands today and South Bank became derelict, housing vaudeville theatres,

brothels and boarding houses. Malcolm Snow, CEO of South Bank Corporation from 2005 to 2012, said that he remembered:

someone a lot older than me saying that as a proportion there were more pubs, police stations and brothels in that part of Brisbane than anywhere else. He was probably right but it was a good sort of encapsulation of just how rough it was – Expo changed all of that.<sup>31</sup>

The major event Expo '88 revived the area – and following a public campaign the land was reopened as public parklands in 1992. It is now one of Brisbane's best-known attractions for tourists and locals, and it is estimated that 11,000,000 people visit each year (pre-COVID-19 estimate).<sup>32</sup> The Digital Story Bank was used to trace this journey.



South Bank was a working-class industrial area until it was revived in the late 1980s for Expo '88. South Brisbane waterfront, 1950 (now South Bank Parklands), City Archives, Brisbane City Council, BCC-B54-712.

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31 Malcom Snow, interviewed by Grace Kirk, 25 June 2017. Transcript held by Queensland University of Technology.

32 Visit Brisbane 'About South Bank', [https://www.visitbrisbane.com.au/south-bank/about?sc\\_lang=en-au](https://www.visitbrisbane.com.au/south-bank/about?sc_lang=en-au). Accessed 20 September 2019.

South Bank itself is an important example of how corporate oral history can be powerfully entwined with a broader history of a city, a state, and even a nation. The evolution of South Bank begins with Expo '88 and ends with a city that embraced its riparian lifestyle, and the 42-hectare site has evolved at the crossroads of major residential, recreational, educational, cultural, retail, medical, and commercial developments. South Bank's history traces a key period in the evolution of Brisbane when, as one of the project's interviewees, Michael Kerry (Board Member, South Bank Corporation 1992–2004), put it, Queensland's capital 'grew up', evolving 'from big country town to city':

I think Brisbane grew up throughout the nineties where [sic] a lot of things happened. Where [sic] a lot of things we take for granted now actually happened during that time. The outdoor dining, the ferries on the river, the busways, lots of new high-rise buildings. Expo was a catalyst for change and then of course that change kept happening.<sup>33</sup>

With South Bank Corporation approaching its 25th anniversary celebrations, the organisation wished to compile historical data that could be accessed and repurposed for its anniversary, and well into the future, whether creating narrative driven content for newsletters, marketing material, visitor information, blogs or other social media platforms, or simply for internal purposes.

### **CREATING THE DIGITAL STORY BANK**

The research team drew on experience working on regional and small-scale arts projects to design the layout featuring a spine of milestones, with each chapter (people, places, events) connecting a creative story, keywords and summary, that was index-linked to documents, oral histories, and externally held ephemera. A graphic designer was then engaged to make the templates in Adobe InDesign, a widely-used desktop publishing program. The result was drawn together with an indexed summary map held in one e-document, that could also be printed and accessed as

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33 Michael Kerry, (Board Member, South Bank Corporation 1992–2004), interviewed by Grace Kirk, 25 June 2017. Transcript held by Queensland University of Technology.

easily as a book. Over several months the QUT research team undertook to develop the pilot Story Bank, and key people, places, and events formed nodes of intersection in the Story Bank content around which it is organised. Background research informed interviews with the key people identified from boards, community, and industry in order to collect personal oral accounts of the history of South Bank. Fifteen audio interviews were recorded in situ at South Bank.

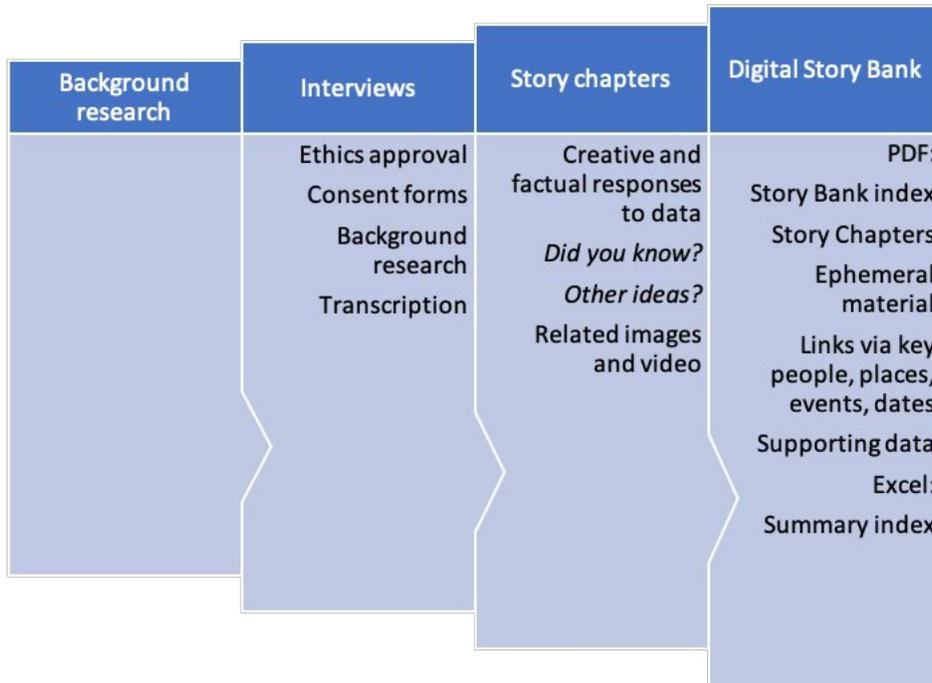


South Bank bore the brunt of Brisbane's 2011 floods and restoring the area became symbolic of the city's recovery. South Bank precinct in South Brisbane flooded, 2011. Photograph courtesy Allan Henderson, CC BY 2.0

Material was organised based on archival research and the stories arising from interviews. Researcher Grace Kirk wrote all creative story pieces, historical overviews, and profiles for the identified people, places, and events that together form twenty-eight 'Story Chapters'.<sup>34</sup> The Story Chapters are accompanied by relevant multimedia such as images and video and are headlined with significant dates, keywords, a summary, and accompanied by useful tools such as 'Did you know?' and 'Other ideas' segments constructed alongside the Story Chapters. This packaging of information in digestible

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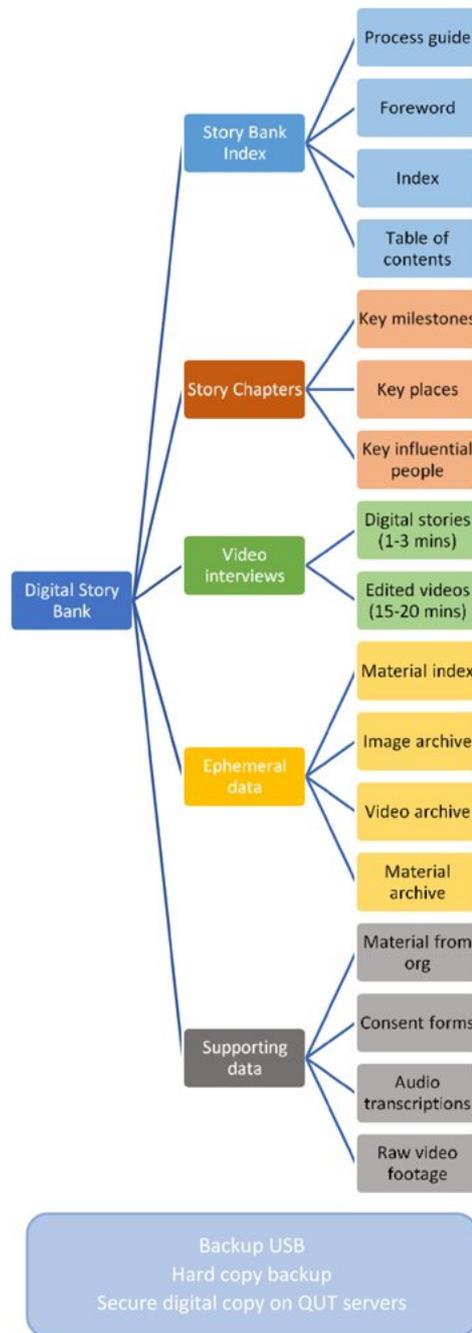
<sup>34</sup> Grace Kirk was the primary research assistant on The Digital Story Bank Project. She recorded the oral histories and wrote much of the creative content for the project. The authors also acknowledge the work of Lena Volkova, who was a research assistant on The Digital Story Bank project.



Creating the Digital Story Bank for South Bank Corporation

formats is simple and easy for staff to access and repurpose at any time for promotion information or public interest. The Story Bank is easily browsable, with all material readily searchable via an Excel spreadsheet 'Archive Index' for ready reference.

The Story Bank is presented in a PDF of 150 pages available in both digital and printed formats. Each component can easily be read and interpreted separately and asynchronously, while linking to other story chapters and ephemeral data. For example, a story chapter on the 2011 Brisbane floods links the reader with key people and places that also played roles in this event. Story Chapters have not been written with a specific audience in mind, but are designed to be 'lifted', edited and repurposed to suit different applications and audiences across various platforms and publications as required. Place settings, summaries, fast facts and suggestions for interesting ways to use the information also feature to help prompt engagement. In this way, the Story Bank works more as a web than an index, both referencing and cross-referencing relevant related stories, places, and media from across the archive to create the building blocks of different stories. The multimedia information referred to within the Story Bank (including archived physical records) is correlated on a master Excel database for quick reference. The ownership of stories and data stays with the organisation.



South Bank's Digital Story Bank structure

Like many research projects, we learnt a great deal from what did not go to plan as well as what did during the project. The initial proposal from QUT researchers to

South Bank Corporation included a second phase for the development of digital stories and transcripts to accompany the audio oral histories, and a collection of new images. However, in 2018 key people who had instigated the project, including the Chair of the Board, the CEO and General Manager of Marketing and Communications, left the organisation and this significant component of the project wasn't pursued after the original Story Bank was created. In 2019, when the organisation was again future-focused, Klæbe was contacted by South Bank staff asking for information about the project. Current staff were unable to locate a copy of their Digital Story Bank, and staff who had previously been involved in the project were no longer working for the organisation. Fortunately, the research team were able to provide a hard and digital copy. While not an ideal situation, one positive outcome has been to raise the research team's awareness of a shortcoming in the Story Bank's processes, as well as the renewed opportunity for more material to be added in future and for ongoing collaboration with South Bank Corporation.

This loss of the pilot Story Bank raised a question about whether the Story Bank was fulfilling its intended purpose of helping organisations manage their history *despite* staff or volunteer turnover. Considering this event, QUT researchers returned to the Story Bank's model and revised some key components. Given that the pilot hardcopy Story Bank was misplaced by South Bank Corporation when personnel left the organisation, in future iterations, QUT will seek ethics approval to securely store the data associated with the finished Story Bank on university servers so that a backup is available (the Story Bank intellectual property (IP) will remain with the commissioning organisation). Researchers were also working on the mistaken assumption that because the software used to manage the Story Bank (such as Microsoft Excel and Adobe PDF programs) is commonplace, no further support would be necessary to safeguard the files. Instead, future Story Banks will be accompanied by a simple but robust process guide for editing and saving the archive, and a password protected USB backup to ensure that this important historical archive can be recovered if original versions are lost. Another important component of safeguarding organisational history within the Story Bank will be to furnish organisations with a simple process guide for editing and saving the Story Bank, relying on its use of accessible software like Microsoft Excel and Adobe PDF programs.

## FURTHER APPLICATIONS OF THE DIGITAL STORY BANK: KEEPING STORIES IN PLACE

As researchers and writers with long histories of community-engaged local history and regional storytelling work, we are also interested in the potential for the Story Bank to address the needs for small communities to keep their stories ‘in place’. Community-centred or volunteer-led organisations and groups have myriad reasons for wanting to participate in or facilitate local storytelling projects which collect first-person information. Motivations include a desire to preserve community histories, and to retain local knowledge and memories of people and places. In many communities, oral history and related processes of remembering and documenting lived experiences and personal stories have formed an important part of community development work.<sup>35</sup> Community oral history projects are more than archival activities; rather, they are deeply social practices, tools for community engagement, for supporting social cohesion and community resilience.<sup>36</sup> In such projects, aims around empowerment and other social outcomes may emphasise the value of the processes of remembering, documenting and story-sharing as much as the historical resource or product.<sup>37</sup> Despite the varied objectives underpinning oral history projects in community and corporate settings, the long-term management of historical and narrative material collected and produced during a project is a challenge shared across contexts.

A related issue is that of storing artefacts and qualitative narrative data for the purposes of funding acquittal and the evaluation of creative, community-based

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35 See for example Helen Klæbe and Ariella Van Luyn, ‘In the Wake of Cyclone Yasi: Facilitation and Evaluation in Community Narrative-Driven Projects’, in Isabelle Bartkowiak-Théron and Kathryn Anderson (eds), *Knowledge in Action: University-Community Engagement in Australia* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014): 132–150; Wendy Madsen, ‘Using the Past to Strengthen the Present: Intersections between Oral History and Community Resilience’, *Oral History Australia Journal* 37 (2015): 56–62; Margaret Ridley, ‘Community Development and Community Memory – Remembering Racism?’, *Oral History Australia Journal* 40 (2018): 9–13.

36 Wendy Madsen, Sarah McNicol and Cathy O’Mullan, ‘Engaging with the Past: Reflecting on Resilience from Community Oral History Projects’, in Wendy Madsen, Lynette Costigan and Sarah McNicol (eds) *Community Resilience, Universities and Engaged Research for Today’s World* (London: Palgrave Pivot, 2015), 56–62.

37 R. Perks & A. Thomson, ‘Introduction to the Third Edition’, in R. Perks and A. Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (Routledge: New York, 2016), xiv.

activities such as storytelling and oral history projects. Over the past few years, researchers at QUT have developed methodologies for this purpose which incorporate digital storytelling, fieldwork, interviews and the analysis of multimedia assets. The resulting frameworks allow communities to apply evidence-based research on arts engagement to develop future investments, enhance jobs growth and liveability factors. The application of these frameworks is demonstrated in reports such as ‘The impact of libraries as creative spaces’,<sup>38</sup> ‘Evaluation of Artslink Queensland’s Animating Spaces’<sup>39</sup> and the evaluation of community narrative-driven projects delivered in the wake of Cyclone Yasi.<sup>40</sup> As these projects demonstrate, the aim has been to align with a larger goal of supporting the strategic development of the arts, particularly in regional areas. QUT researchers have recently begun work on a three-year Australia Research Council Linkage Project called ‘The Role of the Creative Arts in Regional Australia: A Social Impact Model’, which will address the long-standing problem facing regional and remote communities in Australia of how to strategically communicate and effectively evaluate the social impact of the creative arts in their communities.<sup>41</sup>

With these programs and the challenge of evaluation comes the challenge of how and where to archive, store and access the artefacts that are created as these programs are delivered. A key issue within this question is the relationship between what is created, the place in which this is created and where these artefacts are kept. In our experience, ‘place is everything for regional communities’, and those communities need solutions that acknowledge the geographical and social contexts of their experiences, histories, and self-representations.<sup>42</sup> As Van Luyn and Klaebe suggest,

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38 Ben Light, Kirralie Houghton, Jean Elizabeth Burgess, Helen Klaebe, Roger Osborne, Stuart Cunningham, and Greg Hearn, *The Impact of Libraries as Creative Spaces* (Brisbane: QUT Digital Media Research Centre, 2016).

39 Helen Klaebe, Elizabeth Ellison, Cate Gilpin, Grace Kirk and Kathleen Webster, *Evaluation of Artslink Queensland’s Animating Spaces 2013-2015: Final Report 2016* (Brisbane: Artslink Queensland, 2016).

40 Helen Klaebe and Ariella Van Luyn, ‘In the Wake of Cyclone Yasi’, in Isabelle Bartkowiak-Theron and Kathryn Anderson (eds) *Knowledge in Action : University-Community Engagement in Australia* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 132–150.

41 The Role of the Creative Arts in Regional Australia: A Social Impact Model (LP180100477 Gattenhof; Hancox; Klaebe), [research.qut.edu.au/raasi/](http://research.qut.edu.au/raasi/).

42 Gabrielle Chan, *Rusted Off: Why Country Australia is Fed Up* (Penguin: Sydney, Australia, 2018).

storytelling projects in regional areas should empower local communities by freeing them to ‘narrate their own place stories in a manner that encourages the development of a shared community worldview’.<sup>43</sup> Supporting communities to retain and manage their stories and histories of place is part of this process. Creative engagement not only helps draw communities together, it also draws attention to the relationship between creativity, memory and place. Van Luyn refers to work conducted by Fuller to propose that this shared community worldview can constitute a ‘regional textual community’, describing the reading, writing, and publishing community generated in the act of creating and sharing stories grounded in place.<sup>44</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Organisational records can serve to illuminate histories of people, places, and events, but organisations often find their archived material too cumbersome, expensive and time-consuming to manage or repurpose. A Digital Story Bank can offer a simple framework or index using a timeline as its spine to support the organisation and accessibility of primary and secondary sources such as journals, reports, minutes, oral histories (audio and transcripts), images and video. The Digital Story Bank is a method of gathering the human stories that enrich the official record to create a comprehensive summary of an organisation’s history. This can then be readily accessible internally to leaders, administrators and volunteers helping organisations better manage the large scope and scale of their organisational history.

QUT researchers engaged in ‘The Role of the Creative Arts’ project intend to offer the Digital Story Bank template to its regional community partners, so that stories and creative outputs created during the project can be curated, stored, and accessed in place (if they wish) along with any evaluation reports produced. The value of such a tool for communities is that it may ameliorate some of the ethical complexities and access issues associated with material being housed by larger, external institutions. It

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43 Ariella Van Luyn and Helen Klæbe, ‘Making Stories Matter: Using Participatory New Media Storytelling and Evaluation to Serve Marginalized and Regional Communities’, *Creative Communities: Regional Inclusion and the Arts* (2015), 159.

44 Ariella Van Luyn, ‘Sharing Place-based Stories using Digital Tools’, *Sharing Qualitative Research: Showing Lived Experience and Community Narratives* (2016), 239.

may also address practical complexities of managing community artefacts, and the often fragmentary, experiential and narrative data that is created through community storytelling projects. Such artefacts are significant to communities as a means through which they author themselves, record their histories, and shape shared futures. We hope the Digital Story Bank concept offers a step toward addressing this data management quandary that many organisations and communities face in relation to their own histories, and the archival of creative projects.

# Home Cooks and Little Singapore Stories

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KAH SENG LOH

*Kah Seng Loh is a historian of Singapore and an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Western Australia. He is interested in all things that happened in the history of a city. He is the author of the award-nominated Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore (NUS Press 2013) and Tuberculosis – The Singapore Experience, 1867-2018: Disease, Society and the State (with Hsu Li Yang, Routledge 2020). He runs Chronicles Research and Education, a research consultancy on the rich and varied heritages of Singapore – housing, industrial, medical, and culinary.*

Oral history with home cooks tells us much about history and memory in Singapore. The three oral testimonies discussed here might be understood as ‘little Singapore stories’, in reference to the popular account of the island’s history promoted by the government, commonly called the Singapore Story. The women I spoke to, who had prepared family meals for most of their adult lives, recounted micro-narratives that sometimes reinforced well-known themes in the city-state’s history. At other times, when culinary experiences in the private realm of the home differed from the norm, my storytellers provided new perspectives that coalesced into a more nuanced and variegated narrative of modern Singapore. Speaking with home cooks were insightful in three ways. It highlighted the agency of little-heralded social actors, showing my narrators to be independent-minded Singaporean women, workers, wives, and mothers. They also had to make do with the historical circumstances, carrying out an under-appreciated form of work amid rapid socio-economic development. Finally, oral history enriches our understanding of personal, familial and national histories in modern contemporary Singapore. Studies of food, women, work, the family, and the nation may not be complete without efforts to speak to the people who cooked meals at home.

## INTRODUCTION

Oral history with home cooks tells us much about history and memory in Singapore. The women I spoke to, who had prepared family meals for most of their adult lives, recounted micro-narratives that sometimes reinforced well-known themes in the city-state's history. At other times, when culinary experiences in the private realm of the home differed from the norm, my storytellers provided new perspectives that coalesced into a more nuanced and variegated narrative of modern Singapore. Of the home cooks themselves, oral history highlighted the agency of little-heralded social actors, while also showing how they had to make do with historical circumstances. The oral history of home cooking in Singapore is ultimately of immense value.

The oral testimonies might be understood as 'little Singapore stories', in reference to the popular account of the island's history promoted by the government, commonly called the Singapore Story. The term was coined in 1997 when Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong launched the National Education programme in schools, explaining, 'our young must know the Singapore Story – how Singapore succeeded against the odds to become a nation'.<sup>1</sup> Where the official account narrated history from the vantage point of the political leaders and followed the trajectory of major historical milestones and government policies, little Singapore stories revolved around people's perspectives and experiences – history from the ground. In oral histories with home cooks, the big events of the Singapore Story could be seen in the background, but the memories of home and its meals also clarified and deepened the history of the making of modern Singapore over the last 60 years.

My interviews were part of a heritage research project on Singapore's culinary past.<sup>2</sup> The project centred on six dishes that illuminated different periods and aspects of the island's history.<sup>3</sup> The research was mostly based on documentary sources but it also delved into the little-studied history and memory of home cooking, utilising a mix of oral and written sources. As the project's main oral and social historian, I conducted thirteen interviews with home cooks, often with one or more family members present. All the home cooks I spoke to were women.

Our interviewees came from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Among them were a significant number from the ethnic minorities: two Malays, six Indians and four Chinese Peranakan among the Chinese. The interviewees ranged in age from their fifties to their nineties, covering the evolution of cooking practices from the colonial era prior to World War Two to the 1970s and beyond, when Singapore had transformed into a developed nation-state. One of our interviewees was Irene Lim, a 93-year-old Chinese Peranakan who subsequently published her memoir, which included great detail on the dishes she ate.<sup>4</sup> Some of the women, like Lim, were well-educated, able to converse in English, and from upper-class backgrounds. Others had little or no formal education, or supported working-class families, including a former hawker, cleaner and factory worker.

In this paper I focus on three interviews, with Eileen Kiong, Syamala Senan and Zaiton binte Abdul Rahman. Though detailed and illuminating, these should not be thought of as the ‘best’ or most representative interviews. Rather, they were chosen to highlight salient themes in home cooking and the wider context in which meals in Singapore were prepared and consumed. They indicate a range of socio-economic experiences and they had family members participating in the interview, always to great effect. Most crucially, their memories of home-cooked food offered new insights into the recent social history of Singapore and the position of women in this time.

#### HOME COOKS AND THE MAKING OF MODERN SINGAPORE

There is a growing body of work on the social history of Singapore, spanning the colonial and post-independence periods in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Some of this scholarship utilises oral history, while others rely mostly on archival sources, such as coroner’s records. Such social history has taken the narrative of Singapore history beyond the trope of a successful entrepôt or a well-governed nation-state. James Warren’s work on the rickshaw pullers enabled him to conceive of colonial Singapore as a grim ‘coolie town’, taking away the predominant focus on the

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<sup>4</sup> Irene Lim, *90 Years in Singapore* (Singapore: Pagesetters, 2020), with contributions from Kah Seng Loh and Linda Lim.

port's political and economic elites.<sup>5</sup> Conversely, Brenda Yeoh's study of shophouses uncovered dynamic subalterns who contested and frustrated municipal control.<sup>6</sup>

Likewise, oral histories conducted with lightermen, urban kampong dwellers, trishaw riders, and Chinese Singaporeans, used in conjunction with archival and published sources, have excavated the lives of hitherto-neglected social and occupational groups, broadening the basis of Singaporean history.<sup>7</sup> Many Singaporean narrators have departed from accounts based on documentary sources or elite vantage points, providing more sophisticated accounts of well-trodden historical events such as the Japanese Occupation.<sup>8</sup> While providing new perspectives, oral history has also given various social groups a place, a role, a voice, and some measure of agency in Singaporean history.

Conversations with home cooks are especially important on a number of levels. Topically, like the aforementioned works, they move beyond elite politics and perspectives to areas that have received far less attention in Singaporean history: economic development, the formation of nuclear families and the understated role of women in both. In particular, the small stories told by home cooks enable us to penetrate the veiled history of the Singaporean home. This was a private space where work – which includes the making of family meals – was often informal, invisible, undocumented, and deemed inconsequential by the state. Through oral history, my storytellers were not only able to qualify mainstream accounts of Singaporean history but, more crucially, to relate their own narratives in detail.

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5 James Francis Warren, *Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore, 1880-1940* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

6 Brenda S.A. Yeoh, *Contesting Space in Colonial Singapore: Power Relations and the Urban Built Environment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003).

7 Stephen Dobbs, *The Singapore River: A Social History 1819-2002* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2003); Jason Lim, *A Slow Ride into the Past: The Chinese Trishaw Industry in Singapore, 1942-1983* (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2013); Kah Seng Loh, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press and Asian Studies of Australia Association Southeast Asia Series, 2013); Ernest Koh, *Singapore Stories: Language, Class, and the Chinese of Singapore, 1945-2000* (Amherst, N.Y.: Cambria Press, 2010).

8 Kevin Blackburn, 'Family Memories as Alternative Narratives to the State's Construction of Singapore's National History', in Kah Seng Loh, Stephen Dobbs and Ernest Koh (eds), *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Memories and Fragments* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 25–41.

It is worth repeating that oral history is a viable, indeed necessary, research method for understanding Singaporean history, though this point requires a caveat. Since the late 1970s, the National Archives of Singapore has systematically conducted a large number of oral history interviews.<sup>9</sup> The structure of these interviews has tended to follow closely the accepted milestones of national history and the government's socio-economic policies. My research on a historic kampong fire found that people often repeated the official account of the island's public housing development, or seemed unwilling to speak openly about contentious issues, such as the origin of the fire.<sup>10</sup> As is true of oral history in general, what people say in an interview corresponds to their life experiences in the society in which they live.

Interestingly, the little Singapore stories of home cooking were more challenging to uncover than I had initially anticipated. For home cooks to recount their recipes and meals, I had simplistically thought, would be a straightforward or even benign undertaking, as it would not involve contentious political events. But I learned that conversations about eating at home are rich and insightful precisely because they stand



A recipe archive, with Loh Choe Jin and her granddaughter Isabel Drake, 2019. Photograph by Kah Seng Loh.

at the threshold between private and national history; they reached beyond food to connect with a person's private life, family and work, and also with moments of national time. These were not always topics about which people wanted to speak openly.

The main hurdle I encountered in oral history was the personal. A number of my requests for an interview were turned down. Although rejection is a normal part of oral history work, it is worth reflecting on here. In many instances, the reason was unclear. In one case, a friend

who tried to arrange for me to speak with her mother and her brother's mother-in-law – both experienced and excellent cooks – was nonplussed when they declined; she

could only say that her mother was in ill health and perhaps not well enough to participate in an interview.<sup>11</sup>

The reason was more apparent in another case. When explaining the rejection, another friend suggested that her mother, being strong-willed (the family called her the 'Iron Lady'), may not want outsiders to critique her cooking, even though it was communicated to her that this was not my intent.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, I had previously interviewed the 'Iron Lady' about her experience as an assembly line worker in a semiconductor factory. Then, she had talked freely and excitedly about her dedication to work, her pride in it – how 'not one unit of her wiring has been rejected' – and her ability to reconcile her job and raising the children.<sup>13</sup> There was something telling here about when and how far an elderly person was willing to speak on subjects in her realm of experience. This may have something to do with the private nature of the home and the family, the food made inside it, and its wider connections with the society and nation.

Singapore experienced transformative economic, urban and social change after the tiny city-state in Southeast Asia became independent in 1965. In the 1970s and 1980s, it made a successful shift from entrepôt trade in the colonial era to export-led manufacturing driven by foreign capital investment. Economic growth was tied to demographic and housing developments in ways that involved Singaporean women. The industrialisation programme aimed to provide jobs for a rapidly growing population after World War Two. This population, comprising nuclear families from inner city tenements and squatter areas, was also being rehoused en masse to new public housing towns. Public housing was a physical and environmental upgrade but had a socio-economic effect: it required regular, rather than casual, employment to pay for the new housing.<sup>14</sup>

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11 Shamira Barr, Whatsapp correspondence with author, 3-4 January 2019.

12 Prasakthi Allagoo, personal conversation with author, 13 August 2019.

13 Supammal Peramal, interviewed by author, 26 February 2018.

14 M. Castells, L. Goh and R. Y.-W. Kwok, *The Shek Kip Mei Syndrome: Economic Development and Public Housing in Hong Kong and Singapore* (London: Pion, 1990).

Public housing connected to the government's industrial policy and drew the nation's nuclear families into the wage economy. This was a momentous experience for the young women and mothers who became part of a pioneer generation of full-time factory workers, mostly employed in industrial estates near their homes.<sup>15</sup> In its pursuit of economic growth, the government encouraged women to undertake such employment, although this often left them struggling to bear the twin burdens of salaried and domestic work.<sup>16</sup> Cooking still remained largely women's work, and was made more difficult by the demands and stress of working salaried jobs. Reports of working wives' and mothers' fatigue appeared in the mass media in the 1970s and 1980s, though one newspaper article also warned of parenting as a major disruption of one's life.<sup>17</sup>

It was in this period that the quality and frequency of home cooking apparently declined, or at least shifted in substantive ways. Many women began to prefer shopping at supermarkets like Cold Storage, once the preserve of expatriate wives, though this was also partly due to a turn towards canned, frozen or Western food; Yeo Hiap Seng's tinned chicken curry quickly became a local favourite.<sup>18</sup> The mass media responded by advertising culinary courses on local dishes offered by expert cooks, including 'survival cooking' for the 'career housewife', though some of these had costly fees that were beyond the means of working-class women.<sup>19</sup> The press also began to run stories of exceptional males: an emerging minority of 'new local men' who had begun to shoulder domestic work. These men were apparently younger, middle class and more progressive; they were 'under 35, mostly English educated and widely travelled' and had experienced first-hand the culture of shared domestic responsibilities in Western countries.<sup>20</sup> The media left the national imperative of economic growth unquestioned.

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15 Janet W. Salaff, *State and Family in Singapore: Restructuring a Developing Society* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988).

16 Linda Y.C. Lim, *Women in the Singapore Economy* (Singapore: Chopmen, 1982).

17 Esther Tzer Wong, 'Balancing Work', *Straits Times*, 30 March 1984, 2.

18 'The Big Jump among Asian Customers', *New Nation*, 30 April 1973, 18.

19 Deborah Chia, 'Cooking Course with More to It', *New Nation*, 17 June 1980, 12.

20 Nancy Byramji, '...But the New Local Hubby is Not Far Behind', *Straits Times*, 28 October 1979, 11; Siew Hua Lee, 'At Home with Mr Mum', *Straits Times*, 19 April 1987, 1.

My oral history interviews with home cooks brought out personal strands of these vast demographic, socio-economic and housing changes, in addition to what was prepared and eaten at home. As some scholars have noted, flavours of food consumed at home may create ‘sites of memory’ that document wider processes of social change.<sup>21</sup> But this intimate connection between cooking and society also presented a difficulty for oral history fieldwork: people may not be willing to speak to a researcher about their private lives in a period of change and disruption, in addition to having their cooking scrutinised by others.

Another question concerns the official narrative. The dramatic developments in Singapore’s recent history were driven by the People’s Action Party government, including the new public housing and multinational investment that impinged on people’s lives. Oral history could be intertwined with memories of the activist government. Since the 1980s, the government has also promoted an official narrative of national development, attributing the success story to far-sighted and effective policies; in 1997, this officially became the Singapore Story.<sup>22</sup> Singaporeans may thus frame their memories around this account.

Would oral history elicit little Singapore stories or a personal version of the Singapore Story? This brings context and nuance to an emerging scholarship on the social and oral history of food and of homemade meals in particular. While food has become an increasingly salient field of historical research in recent years, oral histories – excluding those with prominent chefs – remain comparatively rare. There is much scholarly potential in listening to people’s voices. In her ‘culinary chats’ (*charlas culinarias*) with Mexican and Chicana working-class women, Meredith Abarca thoughtfully surmises these subalterns as ‘grassroots theorists’ whose speech about their craft came across as personal and

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21 Jeffrey M. Pilcher, ‘The Embodied Imagination in Recent Writings on Food History’, *The American Historical Review* 121, no. 3 (June 2016), 869; Pascal Ory, ‘Gastronomy’, in Pierre Nora (ed), *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Vol. 2: Traditions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 442–467.

22 Kah Seng Loh, ‘Within the Singapore Story: The Use and Narrative of History in Singapore’, *Crossroads: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (1998): 1–21; Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang, *The Scripting of a National History: Singapore and Its Pasts* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2008).

powerful.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, Amy Trubek et al. in their research find home cooking to be an act of agency, revealing its practitioners to be skilled craftworkers.<sup>24</sup> These conclusions largely resonate with my own.

Conversely, oral history can complement or clarify interpretations of home cooking derived from other forms of historical evidence. Scholars of food history and domesticity have unearthed discursive representations of the housewife across the twentieth century, having become a subject of social commentary made by others. For instance, she has been dismissed as a mere ‘can opener’ rather than a cook, who in deciding to join the workforce was blamed for the decline of home cooking.<sup>25</sup> Ruth Cowan notes that the appearance of modern culinary equipment and new recipes did not reduce women’s domestic workload, leaving them with demanding dual roles in economic production and social reproduction.<sup>26</sup>

Oral history offers a way to explore these perspectives and experiences from the vantage points and voices of the women themselves, providing greater narrative nuance and richness. These personal stories can transcend one of the major problems in the home cooking discourse – the nostalgia of third-party commentators (such as the children of homemakers) for an idealised home and its comfort food.<sup>27</sup> Oral testimonies can also lend empirical weight to Richard Wilks’ argument that homemade meals are quality food, beneficial for the health of families and even larger communities.<sup>28</sup> This is a point to ponder with regards to the perceived decline in home cooking during Singapore’s industrial development. As a source, oral history also contributes to social history and

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23 Meredith E. Abarca, *Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican American Women* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 9.

24 Amy B. Trubek, Maria Carabello, Caitlin Morgan, and Jacob Lahne, ‘Empowered to Cook: The Crucial Role of “Food Agency” in Making Meals’, *Appetite* 116 (May 2017): 297–305.

25 Samantha Barbas, ‘Just Like Home: “Home Cooking” and the Domestication of the American Restaurant’, *Gastronomica – The Journal of Food and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2002), 43.

26 Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

27 Jean Duruz, ‘Home Cooking, Nostalgia, and the Purchase of Tradition’, *Traditional Dwellings and Settlements Review* 12, no. 2 (2001): 21–32.

28 Richard Wilk, *Home Cooking in the Global Village: Caribbean Food from Buccaneers to Ecotourists* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2006).

the history of the labouring classes, in contrast to cookbooks that, even when read in discerning ways, represent the viewpoints of the dominant group.<sup>29</sup>

In Singapore, there has been little academic research on home cooking, whether through oral history or other means. This differs from contemporary interest in hawkers, which has grown in recent years due to state support for hawker culture and cuisine, culminating in its nomination by the government for UNESCO intangible cultural heritage status in 2019.<sup>30</sup> Vineeta Sinha observes that home cooking in the city-state, as in modern contexts elsewhere, has declined as working women prioritised wage employment ahead of domestic work. While many Singaporean women today possess a degree of culinary ability, cooking at home is episodic rather than regular – akin to a form of play. Sinha refrains from lamenting this as a diminution of home cooking but wonders about the possible social consequences of frequently eating out, such as the decline of culinary skills transfer within the family.<sup>31</sup> Oral history, as we will see, takes us closer to understanding these developments.

#### **EILEEN KIONG: A FAMILY HISTORY**

My interview with Eileen Kiong and her extended family threw light on many of these issues. This was a lively, multi-vocal discussion with the 91-year-old matriarch and cook, joined by three daughters, a son, and a granddaughter. The family is of Peranakan (Malay-Teochew) descent, a minority ethnic group in Singapore. Doris Teo, one of the daughters, did most of the talking and translating with Eileen, though she understood English, content to listen in consent, speaking on occasion to underline or clarify a point.

The presence of three generations of the family, residing in the same house, signified their collective approval of Eileen's homemade meals. The conversation was

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29 H. Le Dantec-Lowry, 'Reading Women's Lives in Cookbooks and Other Culinary Writings: A Critical Essay', *Revue Française d'études Américaines* 116, no. 2 (2008): 99–122.

30 Melody Zaccheus, 'Singapore Submits Unesco Bid to Recognise Hawker Culture', *Straits Times*, 29 March 2019.

31 Vineeta Sinha, 'Mapping Singapore's Culinary Landscape: Is Anyone Cooking?', in Lily Kong and Vineeta Sinha (eds), *Food, Foodways and Foodscapes: Culture, Community and Consumption in Post-Colonial Singapore* (Singapore: World Scientific, 2015), 159–184.

spontaneous, with people speaking at the same time and over one another, and filled with laughter. As with most of my interviews, the participation of family members made the conversation more pointed and rewarding. Near the end of the interview, the granddaughter, who had stayed at the margins of the conversation but had listened intently, described her grandmother's *laksa* (a popular spicy noodle dish) as '*lemak* (rich, fatty) yet not *lemak*'. Eileen's *laksa* was different from commercial versions: she did not use cockles and made her own *sambal* (chilli paste). Her *laksa* story thus distinguished the dish from the narrative of public hawker fare, transplanting it to the home and family.<sup>32</sup>

The story narrated by Eileen with her family was a broad one, overlapping with much of Singapore's national history. Early in the interview, she pinpointed the beginning of her culinary narrative at the start of the Japanese attack on Singapore in 1941, when she was 13. The Japanese attack and subsequent occupation of the island is a formative moment for Singapore's nationhood – a time of socio-economic hardship and deprivation that made people understand the need for defence and self-reliance.<sup>33</sup> For Eileen, the Japanese interregnum was also transformative but from a cooking perspective: the family's Cantonese cook was no longer available, so she had to shoulder the responsibility.

Eileen's oral history account also moved through the family's different homes, from shophouses in the town area initially to public housing apartments built farther away from the city. This paralleled Singapore's urban development to which oral history provided further insight. Likewise, other milestones in her narrative derived from her personal and family history and followed demographic and social trends. Most notably, her marriage found her living with her mother-in-law, as was customary in Singapore, a good cook who taught her several dishes. The main difference from the national experience was that, unlike many Singaporean women, Eileen did not join the workforce but remained a homemaker. She belonged to the pre-war generation

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32 Eileen Kiong, Doris Teo and Lilian Teo, interviewed by author, 5 July 2019, tape held by author.

33 Loh, 'Within the Singapore Story'; Hong and Huang, *The Scripting of a National History*.

and had been a full-time housewife for a considerable time before the industrialisation programme of the 1960s.

On her cooking, Eileen and her family talked animatedly about the wide variety of Peranakan and Teochew dishes she made, particularly Teochew fish dishes like the spicy *kuah lada*, *siew-i bah* (a pork dish) and the more uncommon chicken dish called *ayam buah keluak*. Although they had lived in an area known for good hawker and restaurant food (in Geylang), the family rarely ate out. All of them expressed a critical view of the food served in Peranakan restaurants. Eileen surmised that ‘home-cooked food tastes better’ while ‘outside food is nothing’, being both a ‘waste [of] money’ and unsavoury (*bo hor jiak*).

Eileen’s attitude towards cooking was interesting: she enjoyed it if she was able to do it without having to rush. This was although, as she professed, she had ‘no choice’ but to cook the dishes her family liked, rather than what she wanted (she seemed to enjoy baking cakes and puffs). Like the ‘Iron Lady’ who turned down my request, Eileen did not want people coming into the kitchen to tell her what to do. Eileen’s identity and role were tied to the home, the family and the kitchen. This can be read as evidence of the hegemony of the gendered politics of domesticity. However, within this gender culture Eileen exercised autonomy within the household in her control of the kitchen and her ability to produce delectable dishes for her family. There was also an autonomy over memory and recollection: the ‘Iron Lady’ declined the interview while Eileen consented, but both women exercised their agency to decide if they wanted to share their memories of a private life.

Like many experienced home cooks, Eileen prepared and made her own condiments such as spices and curry powder. Her culinary learning and methods were informal and collaborative, rather than technical or formal. She cooked using her taste, instead of formal recipes, and she possessed durable memories of the dishes she ate. She obtained other recipes from neighbours, continuing a tradition of informal learning in which her first teachers were an aunt and the Cantonese cook. Eileen kept a recipe book but this she would not show me – a sign of the private nature of home-cooked food. Home cooking is by nature historical, but access to its archives,

namely, personal memories and recipe books, is no less difficult than in the case of documentary state archives in Singapore.<sup>34</sup>

Although many culinary histories have emphasised the role of modern tools in defining home cooking in the twentieth century, Eileen was largely dismissive of refrigerators, even though they were present in her home at an early age.<sup>35</sup> In Singapore, refrigerators and many other modern gadgets became commonplace in the 1970s as the standard of living rose, even in working-class homes.<sup>36</sup> The local media lauded a range of electronic gadgets, from refrigerators to electric cookers, food blenders, microwaves and ovens, as heralding ‘a new life style’ in modern public housing. These tools, it was dubiously suggested, would encourage appliance-oriented men to help out with housework.<sup>37</sup> To these discourses, Eileen felt that perishables kept in the refrigerator would not be fresh, so she preferred to purchase fresh groceries daily, either from vendors who used to ply their goods at the doorstep of her home or, in more recent times from a nearby wet market. Even in old age, she took the walk to the market as a form of exercise.

Eileen’s oral history professed a distinct narrative and agency about what constituted healthy food. In recent decades, the Singaporean government has emphasised the importance of healthy eating in response to the high incidence of chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes. But Eileen only laughed when I asked if she had reduced salt or sugar in her cooking, saying, ‘Sugar not reduced, but salt yes. I like sugar. I ate so much sugar [but] I still haven’t died’.<sup>38</sup> Peranakan food and Teochew desserts are, she told me, by nature quite sweet. But she has used corn oil in place

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34 Kah Seng Loh, ‘Encounters at the Gates’, in Kah Seng Loh and Kai Khiun Liew (eds), *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History* (Singapore: Ethos Books and Singapore Heritage Society, 2010), 1–27. In Singapore, access to state archives frequently requires the approval of the creating or depositing government agency.

35 See Cowan, *More Work for Mother*; June Freeman, *The Making of the Modern Kitchen: A Cultural History* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2004).

36 Kwok Yoke Tay, ‘The Internal Use of Space: Implications for Family Interaction’, unpublished academic exercise, Department of Sociology, University of Singapore, 1975.

37 ‘Gadgets: A New Life Style’, *New Nation*, 18 May 1973, 13; Sian Ann Tan, ‘New Waves in Household Aids’, *New Nation*, 24 April 1981, 40–41.

38 Eileen Kiong, Doris Teo and Lilian Teo interview, 5 July 2019.

of lard and peanut oil for health reasons. Eileen thus made a considered response to the question of healthy food, striking a balance between maintaining standards of quality cooking and taking care of her family's well-being.

While Eileen's oral account overlaps with well-trodden themes in Singapore history, it was illuminating to see how home cooking connected and underpinned the inter-generational family. At the heart of it was an independent-minded matriarch, who had her own notions of what was considered good and healthy food and how it should be made.

### **SYAMALA SENAN: MAKING DO IN SINGAPORE**

My interview with Syamala Senan had many similarities with Eileen's, but also significant differences. Syamala was a younger person – she was in her mid-sixties – who had migrated to Singapore from the Indian province of Kerala. She is a Malayalee, a minority group among Indians in Singapore. Unlike Eileen, she participated in the interview mostly by herself. I knew her daughter, Anusha, who had arranged the interview, and was in the house when the interview took place.

Our conversation with Syamala was interesting from the start. She asked my co-interviewer and me politely but firmly about the purpose of the interview. We explained our research and assured her that she could stop the interview at any time. Privacy, it turned out, was her main concern, as she related an unhappy experience with another interviewer (possibly a census-taker) who had asked her questions about her family she found intrusive. In my mind, though she seemed assured by our replies, I was initially worried that Syamala might feel the same way about our questions on cooking! But the interview went well; I believe that she understood how our queries on her family were connected to her cooking, and vice versa. In fact, she warmed up to the conversation as it proceeded, which was further enlivened when Anusha joined us and asked about salient aspects of her mother's cooking.<sup>39</sup> At the end of the session, Syamala invited us to return for a meal.

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39 Syamala Senan, interviewed by author and Geoff Pakiam, 25 September 2019, tape held by author.

Like Eileen, we found Syamala to be an expert cook with firm ideas about her craft and about life in general. Despite having spent four decades in the kitchen, she confessed that she was ‘not a cooking person’. She cooked out of necessity for the family, there being ‘no other way to eat when you’re hungry’. As a child in Kerala, she had been on the ‘sidelines’ of the work that transpired in the family kitchen, with her mother, sisters and sisters-in-law making the meals.<sup>40</sup> She was unable to cook when she first arrived in Singapore.

The reason for her attitude towards cooking became clear, and was linked to Singapore’s economic history. An important part of the interview centred on the ambivalence between cooking and wage work in Syamala’s life. Her identity, unlike Eileen’s, was not tied to the kitchen; she surmised that ‘education and cooking don’t go together’, noting how uneducated young girls learned cooking alongside their mother in the kitchen, while educated women like her were ‘thrust upon’ it.<sup>41</sup> Syamala was an economics graduate and would have preferred a wage job to home-making. Indeed, we spoke to her in a home office area of the house where she continued to do part-time accounting.

For close to ten of her early years in Singapore, Syamala strove to be both a housewife and breadwinner, working accounting and audit jobs in companies near her home and cooking for the family either before or after her working hours. Cooking could never be something she enjoyed because ‘there were so many things to do’.<sup>42</sup> She probably felt frustrated that she would have achieved more in her career without having to devote time and energy to preparing family meals. Syamala’s testimony offers a critique of Singapore’s development, highlighting the personal cost of the nation’s economic growth for working wives and mothers.

Syamala learned to cook through trial and error, gaining confidence and self-reflexivity in addition to competence. With a simple, Kerala-flavoured repertoire of a curry (usually with fish) and a vegetable dish, she felt that her cooking lacked variety. Her

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<sup>40</sup> Syamala Senan interview, 25 September 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Syamala Senan interview, 25 September 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Syamala Senan interview, 25 September 2019.

husband was often critical about her cooking, but her children, including Anusha, and friends were expressly enthusiastic. Syamala spoke to us authoritatively about her preferred fish choices such as *ikan kurau* and *ikan tenggiri*, explaining to us the ways to identify fresh specimens at the market (the gills must be red and the eyes bright), and how to clean and cook fish well. Anusha had told me prior to the interview that her mother was ‘fanatical about where she gets her fish’.<sup>43</sup>

Fish was a family staple, which Syamala attributed to the availability of fish in coastal Kerala. Much of her cooking narrative was in fact linked to the place of her birth, crossing between and connecting Kerala and Singapore. Her meals took us beyond the geographical bounds of Singaporean history. Later in the interview, she took out an old pot from the kitchen for cooking fish curry, which she had brought from Kerala to Singapore. The pot was not only a practical tool, but one filled with meaning for her as a migrant. This was a case of how, as David Sutton and Michael

Hernandez noted, cooking tools can be imbued with the rich memories and even the identities of their users.<sup>44</sup> The old pot symbolised both Syamala’s connections with Kerala (her family is still there) and her transition to a new life in Singapore.

Interestingly, we found that Syamala used her meals as a way to socialise her children. Though she repeatedly stressed the practical need to feed the family, there was also an important disciplinary aspect to it. When we asked what the family’s favourite dishes were and how often she cooked



Syamala with her old pot from Kerala, 2019. Photograph by Kah Seng Loh.

43 Anusha Senan, Facebook correspondence with author, 17 September 2019.

44 David Sutton and Michael Hernandez, ‘Voices in the Kitchen: Cooking Tools as Inalienable Possessions’, *Oral History* 35, no. 2 (Autumn 2007): 67–76.

them, she said that the children (and even her husband) had to wait their turns. They could not all have their favourites on the same day but had to abide by her roster. The system of turns was a way to teach the children their roles in the family – to consider others and not be selfish – and instil discipline. She felt she had accomplished this seeing how her children have become responsible adults.

Overall, Syamala's oral history conveyed a sense of 'making do', showing how a migrant woman and initial non-cook reconciled with the circumstances she was dealt in Singapore.<sup>45</sup> Having to feed and support a family in a time of rapid socio-economic change in the country led her to assume a dual position in the family. She had to cook and work – only one of which she wanted to do but which she had to accept. Just like her ordered meals to foster discipline among the children, who had to know their place in the family, she had to accommodate her position to the nation's development prerogative. Preferring compromise to conflict, she has come to accept her husband's criticism of her cooking. Conflict would be bad for karma, since 'our thoughts influence the things that I cook' and thus 'my heart must be good' so she could cook well.<sup>46</sup>

Conversing about karma, compromise and discipline showed how far our culinary chat with Syamala had taken us into the private world of a home cook from Kerala. Despite her initial misgivings, she was willing to tell us much about how she made do as an educated migrant woman working and cooking in Singapore. This was akin to how Sukhmani Khorana views her cooking as a way to both trace her roots in India and chart new routes in Australia.<sup>47</sup> Syamala's interview extends Singapore history by encompassing the experiences of women who had arrived in the nation-state after independence. Like Abarca's 'grassroots theorists', Syamala gave shape to an extraordinary interview filled with candid detail and philosophical depth about women and family in the Singapore context.

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45 Sharon R. Roseman, "'How We Built the Road': The Politics of Memory in Rural Galicia", *American Ethnologist* 23, no. 4 (1996): 836–60.

46 Syamala Senan interview, 25 September 2019.

47 Sukhmani Khorana, 'Finding My Culinary Home: Migration, Memory and *Masterchef*', *Kill Your Darlings* 7 (2011): 73–79.

### ZAITON BINTE ABDUL RAHMAN AND TAMBAH TAMBAH

I met Zaiton binte Abdul Rahman in her house with her daughter (my friend), Hasnita. Zaiton is 79 and of Malay ethnicity, a minority ethnic group in Singapore. Like Eileen but unlike Syamala, Zaiton took a relaxed approach to the interview, speaking briefly and softly, allowing Hasnita to translate and elaborate her replies (often in Malay). Hasnita's familiarity with her mother's story showed how much food connected the two women. Like Eileen, Zaiton enjoyed cooking and eating her own food. She had prepared a big spread of Malay dishes that morning, which we ate after the interview.

Zaiton did not appear to have faced the same tension between work and home as Syamala and many Singaporean women did, although she had an early opportunity for formal employment. Upon graduating from school at the age of 17, she worked briefly as a relief teacher. The following year, when she married, her husband did not want her to work. It is unclear if she had been unhappy at her husband's decision, which I did not find appropriate to ask at the time. But although she was an educated woman like Syamala, Zaiton did not apply to be a permanent teacher and instead became a full-time housewife.<sup>48</sup>

Her cooking, Zaiton told me, ranged from popular Malay homemade dishes such as *asam pedas* (spicy and sour fish), curry (with fish or chicken), and *daging masak kicap* (soy sauce beef). What was especially interesting about her culinary repertoire was her inclusion of popular commercial dishes, such as *satay*, *laksa*, *mee siam*, and *nasi padang*, which are well-known hawker fare. Hasnita's



The meal Zaiton made on the day of our interview, 2019. Photograph by Kah Seng Loh.

<sup>48</sup> Zaiton Binte Abdul Rahman, interviewed by author, 26 October 2019, tape held by author.

husband, a good friend of mine, had told me that he had been astounded when he first tasted Zaiton's cooking: it was far superior to that sold in restaurants and hawker stalls. This was also the view of numerous colleagues and friends of Zaiton's husband (who was a journalist) whom he invited to his home for meals. This does suggest that hawker cuisine, presently elevated as the nation's cultural heritage, should embrace its lesser-known domestic cousin. It is oral history that uncovers the social connection between commercial and homemade food.

By devoting herself to the kitchen, Zaiton mastered numerous recipes over the years. Sometimes, as she explained, this was simply out of necessity: there were not many restaurants in Singapore in the past and outside food was not as tasty or nutritious. Her meals were value for money and contained large servings of vegetables; in fact, it was mandatory for her to have *sayur* (vegetables) such as cabbage, *pak choy* (white cabbage) and ladyfingers. She was focused and organised in her work in the kitchen, able to finish cooking for a large family of seven children by two in the afternoon. Even *nasi padang* – 'her speciality', which had a minimum of five or six component dishes – was not difficult to prepare.

What was most interesting, beyond mere pragmatism, was how Zaiton creatively improvised to improve her cooking. She fried her *sambal* longer to make it more savoury. It was perhaps for this reason that Hasnita's favourite dish was *mee siam* (spicy rice vermicelli), where 'the sambal is the kick'; it was sweet and not sour or too spicy. Zaiton had exacting standards of what was good *mee siam*. Similarly, when she made *satay* (grilled meat on skewers), she fried, rather than grilled, the meat as was often the case with commercial *satay*. Like Eileen, in her *laksa*, she used *ikan tenggiri* (mackerel) rather than cockles. From a neighbour, Zaiton learned that adding lime leaves to *asam pedas* made it more fragrant. Shyly, she called the improvements that she found to her liking '*tambah tambah*' (to add on).<sup>49</sup> She improvised on many dishes she had learned from others.

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<sup>49</sup> Zaiton Binte Abdul Rahman interview, 26 October 2019.

I was thus listening to an elderly woman who had innovated and pursued excellence in her craft while reconciled to her role within the family, as Syamala and many Singaporean women had done. Zaiton's agency was expressed not in waged employment, but in informal ways of learning and adapting home-cooked meals over the years. Like Eileen, she had done so as a child by observing her mother's cooking, by taste and by trial and error – 'try, try', she said modestly, downplaying the innovation in her cooking.<sup>50</sup> The unique *mee siam* recipe came from her grandmother. In the main, her cooking did not derive from recipes offered in television programmes or magazines, which she found to be disappointing. Unlike Eileen, Zaiton agreed to show me recipes that she had written down in a notebook. They were for her children to learn, she explained and, tellingly, were accompanied by precise quantities of ingredients. She has taught Hasnita a few recipes, although her daughter, a working mother, has yet to master them.

Zaiton's understated recollections underline a remarkable and little-studied culture of improvisation within domesticity in Singapore. She did more than to feed the family. As she strove to refine her dishes to a point of excellence, the food she cooked touched a wide and varied social circle: close family members, related kin, her husband's colleagues and friends, neighbours, and other visitors to her home.

## CONCLUSION

These little Singapore stories of homemade meals are multi-layered and compelling. The three oral histories illustrate key themes in Singaporean history and the socio-cultural history of home cooking. Eileen Kiong, Syamala Senan and Zaiton bin Abdul Rahman shared similar experiences while differing in others – Syamala stood out in her avowed dislike for home cooking, though she would cultivate a personal philosophy and family culture around it. But they all participated in a singular set of historical circumstances: the socio-economic and urban development of Singapore in the last six decades.

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50 Zaiton Binte Abdul Rahman interview, 26 October 2019.

The oral histories are insightful in three ways. One, they reveal home cooking to be an under-appreciated form of work in the recent history of Singapore. All three women eschewed commercial food and technological gadgets, working hard at making delicious, wholesome family meals, mostly by hand. Home cooking was not a form of play: Eileen and Zaiton were full-time homemakers, while Syamala juggled cooking and employment. Home cooking was thus hard work but also skilled work. It was something bettered by motivation and experience, whether it was to distinguish fresh fish or improve upon a homemade *laksa*.

The culinary machinery lauded in the mass media as ‘a boon to housewives’ played a secondary role in the kitchen.<sup>51</sup> Most of the technology, except perhaps for the rice cooker, was basic and non-electrical like Syamala’s old pot from Kerala, utilising manual labour and culinary expertise. These home cooks expressed nonchalant and critical views of hawker and restaurant food, as exemplified by Eileen’s dismissal of commercial Peranakan cuisine as *bo hor jia*k. There were various reasons why eating out was uncommon or undesired – cost, availability, nutrition – but perhaps the single most important factor was the perceived quality. If hawker food represents Singapore’s intangible cultural heritage, it should include the homemade versions that exist alongside and in conversation with it.

Home cooked meals did not just nourish the family but also helped maintain it as a social unit. Eileen’s daughter Doris (as well as her siblings and young daughter), Syamala’s daughter Anusha and Zaiton’s daughter Hasnita all praised and supported their mothers’ cooking. None of them have mastered their mothers’ recipes, or presently have the inclination to do so, thus the decline of culinary skill in Singaporean homes is likely real. But there have been partial transfers of culinary knowledge, memories and values. The children’s love for maternal cooking and their enthusiasm for me to hear their mothers’ stories reflect strong, enduring familial ties in the past and present. In an important way, home cooking nurtured and made possible the socio-economic development of post-colonial Singapore.

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51 ‘Modern Cookers Save Time and Fuel A Boon to Housewives’, *Straits Times*, 4 March 1979, 27.

Second, my narrators came across as independent-minded Singaporean women, workers, wives, and mothers. They did not rehash common themes in Singapore history, but described, assessed and compared recipes, ingredients, dishes, and innovations in the past with much personal verve. They were devoted to their families and had firm ideas about what was good or bad cooking. Eileen discerned that it was necessary to reduce the amount of salt in her cooking but not sugar. The women learned to cook informally and by trial and error. As a migrant woman and wife from Kerala, Syamala succeeded in her work in both the kitchen and home-based office. Zaiton's humility belied her *tambah tambah*, a will to improvise, recreate and excel, as well as her domestic organisation and time management in making complex dishes such as *nasi padang*.

Finally, oral histories of home cooking – of informal work taking place daily within private spaces – are not only a viable form of research but also a vital one. It appears that the difficulty I had in finding agreeable participants for oral history interviews was the same reason why the testimonies I eventually obtained were so insightful: home cooking is an intensely private form of practice. Food is the theme, but its preparation and consumption connect it to histories of the individual, family and society. Oral histories with home cooks show people acting and reacting to dynamics at the personal, familial and national levels. Home cooking is well-remembered: people were not only able to recall the dishes, but also retrace the connections. Such oral history uncovers perspectives, practices, rituals and relations that are usually not documented (save for the odd recipe book), and which may differ substantially from history based on written documentation. Studies of food, women, work, the family, and the nation may not be complete without efforts to speak to the people who cooked meals at home.

# Reports

# Scaling Up: Working on Large-scale Oral History Projects

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LUCY BRACEY AND KATHERINE SHEEDY

*Lucy Bracey and Katherine Sheedy are both part of Way Back When Consulting Historians, a team of professional historians who have been researching, writing and producing history for over 15 years.*

Over the last five years we've noticed and experienced a rise in large, stand-alone oral history projects commissioned by clients to record and document lived experience. These clients seek to create oral history archives without specific plans in mind for using the stories that are gathered, but with the potential for many different uses in the future. In recent years we have been contacted again by some of these clients and asked to work on specific projects using these archives, such as creating web content, including digital media.

This is positive news for historians, but these projects can be challenging. What are the implications and responsibilities for us as oral history practitioners? Drawing on examples from our work with clients such as City of Boroondara, Royal Melbourne Hospital, St Mary's College, Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens and the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria, this paper explores issues around the creation and use of large-scale oral history archives, including ethical considerations and questions of responsibility and accessibility.

## BACKGROUND

Way Back When is a team of four professional historians, based in Melbourne and Ballarat in regional Victoria. We've been operating for 15 years and, naturally, in that time we've noticed some changes in the work we do. About a year ago we were updating our website, specifically the section that includes our past and current projects. It became clear almost immediately that one area of work – oral history – was by far the most prevalent, running through the majority of our projects. This got us thinking and led us to look more closely into what had changed. It also prompted



Katherine Sheedy presenting at the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference.

us to consider what this means for us as oral historians and the implications for our practice. What we noticed was really quite surprising.

Since the start of Way Back When in 2004, we've seen a significant jump in the number of commissions we've received for stand-alone oral history projects – meaning projects where the primary outcome is an archive of oral history interviews. From 2004 to 2010 we had just four stand-alone oral history projects, but between 2011 and 2019, we saw this increase to a significant 17 projects. These included collections for the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria, Royal Melbourne Hospital, Burnet Institute, Trinity College, City of Boroondara, Friends of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Royal Children's Hospital, St Mary's College, Jesuit Social Services, Mornington Peninsula Shire, and the Australian Garden History Society (among others).

Of the projects we were working on at the time we presented this paper at the OHA conference in October 2019, over half of our current work was oral history projects.<sup>1</sup>When we started doing commissioned histories – large-scale projects, usually in the form of a book – we undertook oral history interviews for research. These interviews were transcribed and the written transcript became the key source for our research. We used the transcripts for quotes, but we did not make any use of the audio. In the first six years that Way Back When was operating, we completed seven

commissioned histories. We undertook oral history interviews for all of them, but as an avenue of primary research only. One history that covered a 30-year period involved a staggering 50 oral history interviews. None of the interviews for any of these projects were used for anything other than research. And, it's actually possible that the oral history material for some of these projects was never handed over to the clients, since at the time neither we nor the clients saw the interviews as anything other than necessary to obtain the transcripts.

In the last decade, however, we've seen a steady increase in the number of commissioned history clients that have wanted us to do something else with our oral history interviews. Of the commissioned history projects we've done in the last eight years, just over 40 per cent had a secondary outcome – like an audio documentary or digital story – created with the oral history interviews. We have also seen a significant and steady rise in the number of oral history projects over the years. As technology has become more accessible and oral history has become more popular, organisations are becoming increasingly interested in creating an archive of interviews for future projects, capturing history while people are still alive to tell it.

We have completed 13 projects that were solely commissioned for the creation of an oral history archive for future preservation and use. We have undertaken 10 projects that were focused on oral history and included outcomes such as audio documentaries, websites, digital histories, short films and, in one instance, an exhibition of interviewee profiles paired with hand-drawn portraits. We were able to revisit one project we did for the Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria that started life as an oral history archive, and is now part of a virtual museum with photos, written profiles and audio clips from 55 of the original oral history interviewees.

#### **CASE STUDY: THE ROYAL AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY OF VICTORIA**

The Royal Agricultural Society of Victoria (RASV) oral history project is particularly interesting and worthy of further investigation. We began this project in 2011 with the aim of creating an oral history collection. We were to interview and collect the stories and experiences of different people connected with the organisation to add to the already rich RASV archive.

Over the following eight years we undertook 55 long-form interviews, which were recorded and filmed. In 2019, RASV decided to create a virtual museum to better showcase its impressive archive, including the oral history collection. We were engaged to revisit the interviews and create a written profile of each interviewee, as well as an audio clip from their interview and a still image taken from the filmed interview. It was really exciting to be able to revisit this project but it also presented a number of challenges, including the fact that some of the interviewees had died during the intervening years. The original interviews had been recorded at broadcast quality, which meant that creating audio excerpts was no problem, but producing still images from the film footage was not as ideal.

## REFLECTIONS

There is no denying the appetite for oral history today. Not only is there a growing awareness of the importance of gathering testimony, but with the ever-increasing availability of technology, we are seeing a rise in digital content being produced using oral histories including podcasts and digital stories.

So what does this all mean for us as oral historians? There are a number of interesting challenges that this presents us with. First and foremost is the quality of our recording. We are all now aware of the importance of recording in extremely high format. This includes equipment, file format, sound environment and being careful to eliminate ourselves from the recording. To revisit projects or enable the audio to be used in a meaningful way, we need to be recording at the best quality that we can. For us today, this sometimes means working with sound engineers and other creative professionals.

Another major challenge for us at Way Back When today is the administrative burden. We now need to allow significantly more time for simply administering these large-scale oral history projects. As well as using a professional transcriptionist, we engage the help of an administrative assistant for the number of transcripts to be sent for review. Logistically too, the audio files we work with are extremely large, and when they're multiplied many, many times over, this requires adequate file storage. Handing over material to clients has also become a much more considerable task, and as much as possible, we now allow time at the conclusion of a project to prepare files for handover.



Katherine Sheedy recording audio for a podcast.

Another really important consideration is ethics. How can we acquire consent from our interviewees for future projects when we don't necessarily know what these will be?

What happens if interviewees die or become uncontactable in that time? It is important to ensure adequate and flexible consent (as much as possible). While we can't know what these projects might look like in the future, ensuring that permission is secured for possible future use of oral history material is something we need to be active in. However, future access is reliant on the collection policies of where these collections are stored. This is why it's important that we select repositories that have the ability to safeguard these collections into the future.

So where are we now? The skills that we have as oral historians can translate and enable us to create new forms of history that are consumed aurally (podcasts, audio tours and soundscapes for instance). Sometimes, when budgets allow, this can mean working with other creative professionals. We need to be more flexible in our work, not only ensuring that our interviews are recorded in the best quality and form (following best professional practice), and that we fulfil the primary aim of the project, but also that the interview content has the ability to be used in the future. It's an exciting time to be an oral historian.<sup>2</sup>

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2 Well it was, and will be again, post COVID-19.

# Cowra Voices

MAYU KANAMORI

*Mayu Kanamori is a photographer, performance maker and arts producer based in Sydney.*

Cowra Voices is an oral history app with a geo-locative feature, much like a heritage trail app, with voices of local people sharing their personal tales about places in Cowra. Cowra Voices has recently won the 2020 Oral History NSW Community History Award.

Cowra means ‘rock’ in Wiradjuri, the language of its traditional custodians. It is a town with a population of just under 13,000 on the banks of the Lachlan River, with many ancient rocks. It was the site of the famous Cowra Breakout, when more than 1,000 Japanese prisoners of war attempted an escape from the Cowra Prisoner of War (POW) Camp, making the Cowra Breakout of 5 August 1944 the largest prison escape and effectively the only Australian land based conflict during World War Two.

Four Australian guards and 234 Japanese prisoners died as a result of the Breakout. The Japanese prisoners were buried locally near the Australian War Cemetery, and their graves looked after by some members of the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL)’s local sub-branch. In 1955 the Japanese Embassy in Canberra initiated a survey of Japanese graves around the country, with the possibility of repatriation of the remains. Eventually it was decided to bring together all known Japanese remains at Cowra, and in 1964, the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery (Japanese Cemetery) officially opened. This is now the resting place of Japanese POWs, airmen involved in air raids over Darwin, and civilians interned in Australia as ‘enemy aliens’ during the Pacific War.

As a result, Cowra has become a place of symbolic significance in Australia-Japan relations. Today Cowra is home of the World Peace Bell, and their Peace Precinct includes the former POW Campsite, the Cowra Italy Friendship Monument, the Japanese



Cowra Peace Precinct. Image courtesy of Mayu Kanamori.

Garden and Cultural Centre, Sakura (cherry blossom) Avenue, the Saburo Nagakura Park and Bellevue (or Billy Goat) Hill. With annual Breakout commemoration ceremonies at both the Japanese and Australian War Cemeteries, and festivals such as the Cowra Festival of International Understanding and the Sakura Matsuri (festival) at the Japanese Gardens, Cowra's civic leaders have promoted the community's contribution to grassroots peace building, providing an ethical foundation for its identity.

While the Peace Precinct and War Cemeteries are considered symbolic centrepieces in this post-war peace and civic reconciliation story, the personal stories of individuals in the Cowra community central to these grassroots endeavours, as well as the personal stories of the people buried in the Japanese Cemetery, remained virtually unknown. Cowra Voices, and its sister project, The Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database, both facilitated and produced by members of Nikkei Australia, addressed this dearth of knowledge. Nikkei Australia is a loose group of individuals interested in the research, study, arts and cultural practices of the Japanese diaspora (Nikkei) in Australia.

In May 2019, the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database was launched. Funded by the Japanese government, and created by members of Nikkei Australia,

this online portal documents data about all POWs, airmen and civilians buried at the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery. Cowra Voices built on this resource by giving it a 'human face', providing context and interpretation utilising actors' narration to tell stories of individuals buried at the Japanese Cemetery.

Individual stories of those buried at the Japanese Cemetery were chosen to demonstrate their diversity, such as stories of Jiro Muramats, a businessman who had become a British subject before the war; Masu Kusano, a woman who worked as a prostitute on Thursday Island; Liong Tjwan Kang, a Taiwanese merchant who was forced into internment by Dutch authorities, because at the time Taiwan was a Japanese colony; a POW who died during the Breakout after blowing his bugle that signalled its start; and a POW who died of illness in a camp other than Cowra, but whose remains were later moved to Cowra then, more recently, partially repatriated to Japan. Unlike some heritage trail apps, the recorded texts were written from a third person viewpoint to maintain a degree of authenticity, so that the actors became storytellers of oral histories, rather than playing the dead.



Japanese Cemetery. Image courtesy of Australian War Memorial 073487.



Entrance to Japanese War Cemetery, Cowra. Image courtesy of Mayu Kanamori.

The oral histories of the local community were recorded and edited by an award-winning feature and documentary radio producer Masako Fukui. Her skills in storytelling allowed 19 storytellers' voices to be arranged and compiled to create 13 different stories connected to 11 different locations in Cowra. The app begins with Welcome to Country by a local Wiradjuri educator, Albert Murray, followed by an overview narration by a local historian Lawrance Ryan.

Fukui created sound designs by recording nature sounds in Cowra, then collaborating with local musicians Graham Apthorpe and Peter Reeves, as well as Chor-Farmer (a Japanese choir that has visited Cowra 21 times in the last 42 years to commemorate both the Japanese and Australian dead with their singing). The app also includes other music, sound effects as well as contemporary photographs of storytellers, landscapes and historically significant people and events, either taken or curated by Mayu Kanamori, the author of this report. Full transcripts of the stories are provided.

Because of Fukui's prior work with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), the project was able to enlist the support of ABC Central West and use



Masako Fukui in Cowra Japanese Cemetery. Image courtesy of Mayu Kanamori.

their high-quality recording equipment as well as their recording studio in Orange. ABC's support came to full force during the lead up to the launch, when they ran many of the stories on air throughout NSW. Editing and compiling oral history interviews into stories with sound design allowed the ABC to air high quality stories, and in turn, allowed the app to be given wider recognition.

The local stories on Cowra Voices focuses on first-hand accounts and memories of the residents, which were not part of the available literature on Cowra. These oral histories were collected through interviewing and recording the voices of a range of members from the Cowra community.

Some of the stories and places featured include: Wiradjuri stories of scar trees and childhood memories at Billy Goat (Bellevue) Hill, told by a Wiradjuri Elder and a younger Custodian; a coming of age story told by a high school student including her experience as an exchange student in Japan; reflective thoughts of the current caretaker of the Japanese and Australian War Cemeteries; a powerful story of a camp guard who fired the first alerting shots just before the Japanese POWs broke out, told by his son; a moving account by a resident, who remembers his childhood, accompanying his father, one of the local RSL members, to tend the graves of Japanese escapees when anti-Japanese sentiments were still the norm; and much more.

Identifying the locations to include in the app was not difficult as they were mostly already promoted in Cowra areas of interest for tourists. However, identifying and selecting those to interview proved more difficult. Although local recommendations

were followed, some who were interviewed about a specific place actually had more knowledge of other places. Not all locations had strong stories, whilst others had too many. Many people had stories to tell, but not all could tell them well, however once they were interviewed, it was difficult not to include them in the final app because of a sense of ethical obligation considering that the interviewees, by agreeing to be interviewed, had trusted us to value their stories.

The process of creating audio stories from oral histories often requires transforming interviewees into good storytellers. We often intuit a fine line between appropriating personal histories to meet the aims of a project and helping to bring out the best in their stories. Like all successful community projects, relationship-building and honouring trust became paramount, especially when the project team members were from Sydney, not Cowra.

Cowra Voices was managed by Jacqueline Schultze, the former Director of the Cowra Regional Art Gallery, who had lived in Cowra for five years. For Cowra Voices, she worked with Irene Ridgeway, a local Indigenous artist, who liaised with the Wiradjuri community. Chie Muraoka, our designer and web developer, had been working with Cowra Council for our sister project, the Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database. I too had worked with the Cowra community on a number of site-specific arts projects, and as a result, had a history of working with local people who had relayed to me their personal stories of friendships and reconciliation with Japanese people prior to working on Cowra Voices. These relationships, prior to the commencement of the project, contributed to mutual trust – the key element to ensuring a successful outcome for everyone concerned.

To build on this trust we clarified from the very outset that the copyright of the original oral history recordings, its edited stories, and the codes for the Cowra Voices app's update, belong to Cowra Council, ensuring local stories stay in Cowra. We clarified community ownership of their heritage, and sought collaborative processes, taking into account peoples' connection to community and place, and through validation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous community Elders. Consensus-building, through time-consuming and detailed step-by-step consultations, was one of the

**Western Electric HEARING AIDS**

It was thought at first that hearing aids were only for the aged. Now they are being used by many young men in the armed forces. The hearing aid is a small device which is worn in the ear. It amplifies the sound of the voice and makes it easier to hear. It is especially useful in noisy places. It is also useful for people who have a slight hearing loss. It is a small, simple device which can be worn in the ear. It is made of metal and plastic. It is very light and comfortable to wear. It is available in many styles and colors. It is a very useful device for many people. It is a must for anyone who has a hearing problem. It is a small, simple device which can be worn in the ear. It is made of metal and plastic. It is very light and comfortable to wear. It is available in many styles and colors. It is a very useful device for many people. It is a must for anyone who has a hearing problem.

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# Sunday Telegraph

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**Special TIME Supplement**

Vol. V. No. 39 Telephone: M2406 SYDNEY, SUNDAY, AUGUST 6, 1944

# WAR PRISONERS ESCAPE FROM CAMP

## Wide search by troops, police

From Our Special Representative

Armed soldiers and civilian police are scouring the Cowra district for prisoners of war who escaped yesterday morning.

The men broke away from the prisoner-of-war camp near Cowra at 2 a.m.

Residents in homesteads and isolated districts have been warned to keep their children and womenfolk indoors at night.

Some prisoners have been recaptured by police and soldiers.

By nightfall others were reported to have reached points 10 to 15 miles from Cowra.

They were moving in different directions.

People living in and near Cowra were warned yesterday in a special broadcast that the escapees might attempt to secure assistance.

They were told to inform military or police authorities if they were approached by escapees and to keep a sharp watch for strangers.

The number of prisoners who escaped from the camp or their nationality has not been announced.

They carefully planned their escape by first setting out to their tents and turning out into the open countryside.

They carried blankets and clothing and used their hands and feet to break their way down steep hillsides.

The alarm was given, and the Australian guards rushed to stop the escapees.

Guards were able to stop some of the prisoners from getting away.

Roads, bridges, and rail crossings were placed under armed guard and soldiers and civilians are stopping cars and vehicles and questioning drivers.

Police are searching the countryside for the men and their families.

Motor cyclists are searching by roads and backtracks.

As the prisoners are probably without food, they may attempt to steal by night.

Last night scores of military trucks loaded with reinforcements of army units moved out to search country to secure enemy soldiers who had been searching all day.

These trucks were reloaded in a rush for the road yesterday afternoon.

They were loaded by First-Captain Colonel A. W. McClelland of Melbourne, and Colonel Cooper of Wyalong.

Colonel McClelland said last night: "They were not taken when we approached the spot."

"But one of them turned, and then we saw the others."

"We approached cautiously, but found the prisoners quite quiet."

"After we had advanced about 200 yards they were armed with knives."

Colonel McClelland and Cooper also captured another escapee during the day.

Colonel Cooper said: "Three of the escaped prisoners are missing now."

Mrs. Wain said she had seen a prisoner about six miles out of Cowra.

Mrs. Wain said that three prisoners had been seen in the woods during the night and emerged about 10 p.m.

"They came up to the house about 10 p.m.," she said.

"They were first seen by my little girl, Margaret, aged 12. She was very frightened."

"My husband was down in the car at the time."

"The prisoners were well behaved, friendly and sat down on the side of the road."

"I got them some tea and bread, which they ate heartily."

"In the meantime, we had got to work with the escapee-of-war camp and about 100 men to hurry out to the homestead."

"Mr. Wain and his boy help had returned in the meantime."

"Thinking that they might be more escapees in the woods, they were sent to investigate."

"At the same time, the three men who had followed their morning tea."

They returned to the woods and were taken to the prisoner-of-war camp.

Some afterwards, military police arrived and took the prisoners in charge."

Prime Minister Churchill, who is in Melbourne, and Army Minister Forde, who is in Queensland, were immediately informed of the escape.

Before full particulars of escapees of prisoners of war can be published, an official Government report must be made to the House of Commons.

The report, under international agreement, is made through the official representative of the prisoner-of-war.

**New Zealand Escape**

A number of war prisoners have escaped by sea and were taken from Australian prison camps during the war.

At Featherston, New Zealand, in February 1943, 45 Japanese prisoners of war were killed or died of wounds during a riot in a prison camp.

In an official statement New Zealand Prime Minister Forde said the riot broke out when the camp was being visited by a party of 100 British soldiers.

After a warning shot was fired by the British, the Japanese prisoners refused to obey orders and attacked the guard with knives and tools.

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## Allies move swiftly on French ports

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH SERVICE AND AAF

LONDON, Sat.—American forces thrusting south in France are expected to reach St. Nazaire and cut off the whole Brittany Peninsula by tomorrow.

U.S. spearheads today advanced 18 miles in five hours to Pipriac and Derval.

They are now only 30 miles from the coast.

Their advance threatens to cut off thousands of German troops in the tip of the peninsula.

Capture of the peninsula will give the Allies the great ports at Brest, Lorient, and St. Malo, as well as those at St. Nazaire and Nantes.

At least 100,000 German troops are trapped in the tip of the peninsula.

The Germans are hurrying to their tanks in an attempt to prevent the Americans reaching the port.

Another American force is pushing up the peninsula towards Brest.

But the most important U.S. drive continues to be from the great road and rail terminus of Rennes towards the coast towards the Loire River.

Allied forces from Rennes are within artillery range of 80,000 German troops at the ports of the Loire and Nantes, the river coast.

**Nazis Pack Roads**

R.A.F. planes report all roads in the coastal pocket with retreating Germans on foot, on horseback, in trucks and cars, and on other vehicles they can pull from the French.

Only a few German troops remain in the coastal pocket with retreating Germans on foot, on horseback, in trucks and cars, and on other vehicles they can pull from the French.

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## STARVING PARISIANS LIVE ON CARROTS

From DAVID McNICOLL

LONDON, Sat.—Tens of thousands of people in Paris are living on carrots because there is practically no other food, refugees from the capital state.

Many people who have fled from the city have reached Allied lines in Normandy and Brittany.

They had because they expect only war will bring food to Paris.

The refugees say that many thousands of French civilians have been starved and are awaiting the signal to leave the capital.

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The "bomb-blast" in the safety zone between the sea and the city.

The army told the Air Force to "just bomb where you can see German tanks."

"So our planes are proceeding down the coast to the sea."

"Fortunately during the night a weak wind is blowing from the sea towards the German lines for nice fat British tanks."

E. W. Macpherson, Sunday Telegraph London Editor, says:

The Americans are pushing through Brittany Peninsula almost at will.

The only determined and organized force of the German front seems to be the British. Opposite the Americans there is no indication of any organized, coordinated resistance of any kind on which the Germans might stand.

"They may attempt to regroup in country south of the main front from the coast to the sea."

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Newspaper article describing the POW breakout. Australian War Memorial 044570.

most important processes of the project development. Team members constantly asked, then listened to key local persons, storytellers, partner organisations, funding bodies and each other.

The model for our community consultations was based on the team members' past experiences of working with Indigenous Australians on arts projects. Although the majority of the story tellers were non-Indigenous Australians, and the majority of Cowra Voices' team members were from the Japanese migrant community, the guiding principles for a non-community member to create with a specific community heritage is similar to those guidelines for working with Indigenous stories.

I have often found cultural productions that involve the Japanese experience in Australia disappointing because of the lack of, or only perfunctory, consultations between the producers and the Japanese community. Although it is difficult to know how to consult adequately in any project, cross-cultural or otherwise, an effort was made from the beginning and throughout the project to ensure authenticity and integrity.

Process is important. After all, Cowra Voices is a free app with no commercial advantage for increased usage, and thus the desire and the power to disseminate these oral histories is left to those who remember the process and believe in the validity of the stories in Cowra Voices.

Cowra Voices was funded nationally by the Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017-2018 and 2018-2019 Australia-Japan Foundation Grants; internationally by the Japan Foundation, Sydney; locally by the Cowra Council and the Cowra Breakout Association; and privately by Quakers Australia through the Nancy Shelley Bequest Fund, and The Bruce and Margaret Weir Trust. Bruce and Margaret Weir's mother May Weir performed Cowra's first reconciliation act by refusing to hand over two Japanese escapees from the Breakout who wandered into her property to the military guards until she had fed them tea and scones. Both Bruce and Margaret Weir have spent much of their lives telling their mother's story to visitors and school children in Cowra. Cowra Voices is dedicated to the Weir Family.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

Many people have contributed to the making of **Cowra Voices**. They are:

<http://www.cowravoices.org/acknowledgements/>

Cowra Japanese War Cemetery Online Database:

<https://www.cowrajapanesecemetery.org/>

Nikkei Australia: <https://www.nikkeiaustralia.com/>

**Cowra Voices** can be downloaded via:

<https://www.cowravoices.org/> or directly from Apple Store and Google Play

More information on **Cowra Voices**: <https://cowravoices.wordpress.com/>

# Tangled Memories: Reflections on the Challenge of Dementia in Oral History Interviews

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CHRISTEEN SCHOEPF

*Christeen Schoepf is an independent historical archaeologist and community historian. Her recent interviews have given a cohort of men diagnosed with dementia a vehicle through which to tell their own life experiences to their families and descendants.*

Working as an historical archaeologist and community historian, my previous papers have focused on how oral history has assisted me to add new layers and fresh perspectives to the biographies of objects. I have interviewed past mayors for my research into the life course of the Mayoral Chair of Port Pirie; revisited Beth Robertson's interviews examining the lives of South Australian women during World War One that have given a voice to some of the objects and operations of the Cheer Up Society; and currently, I am involved in a film project recording the memories of past racing identities who drove on some of South Australia's earliest raceways. During the past three years, however, I have also been recording the life stories and memories of men who have been diagnosed with one of the many forms of dementia. Each has challenged my understanding of the theoretical and ethical considerations that underpin best practice oral history interviews. In contrast to most oral histories, the final products are not for public consumption, but are intimate family items to be treasured by the immediate family and future generations.

This overview of my paper presented at the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference reveals just some of my experiences compiling these life stories, and the ethical and methodological issues that can be faced by the oral historian interviewing people living with dementia. All interviewees and partners/carers asked to remain anonymous, and only one permitted his voice to be heard, so instead of presenting the reflections of individual interviews, I melded them into one narrative featuring the metaphorical personas of Bob, my interviewee, and his wife and carer, Judy.

Except that each life story and the completed project differed in content and style, the issues were almost identical: the building of a comfortable relationship and trust; providing a safe and quiet place in which to undertake the recording; keeping the sessions short because of tiredness and confusion; issues of memory; consent; and, of course, the interviewee's declining health and well-being.

At first, the interviews were of personal concern because I am the carer of a man who was diagnosed with dementia over five years ago and every day is a struggle. At my initial meeting with Bob and Judy, I declined because I thought I would be too close to the subject matter, but after intense discussion and reflection, was persuaded to record the interviews. Judy determined that I was a good choice for their project, firstly because I knew of the tiredness, irritability and behavioural changes that would be exhibited by Bob, but also his obvious trust in me because he had not been so chatty with anyone for a very long time! Bob also proudly presented me with several pages of his written memories noting 'I have prepared what I want you to know for your project' like I was writing an essay for university and he was my subject. I courteously took the paperwork and perused the contents that would indeed form the foundation of my further research. Permission forms were designed not to be too complex but still cover the ethical needs of each party. These were signed by Judy as Bob's guardian and we agreed that she be present and contribute to the interview when Bob became tired.

It was soon obvious that many practices that formed part of my quite flexible oral historian's methodological toolbox did not apply. For example, it is not my usual practice to record preliminary interviews as I have always seen them as a way of getting to know the interviewee and build trust and confidence. But this was one of the best discussions we had together. Bob's voice was strong, his mind was active, and he told me things that he never did again. So, while I had written what he had told me, we did not have him saying it on the recordings. At every preliminary interview since, I have sought permission to record the time spent with the interviewee and the practice has paid off. Some parts of the recorded interviews were structured while others more closely resembled a two and sometimes three-way discussion because Bob's mind wandered easily and frequently drifted back to previous conversations. Morning interviews were

more productive, when Bob was fresh and keen to converse, but this was not always possible, especially when he began clinical trials of a new dementia treatment and our time together could only be late afternoons. By then he was tired, irritable, and sometimes just downright cranky! On several occasions he was ‘sundowning’ and could only manage a few words.<sup>1</sup> This made for a difficult flow of interview where his replies came as ‘Well, I hope we have answered your questions and made it worthwhile for you?’ or ‘Anyway, that is enough for now or you will get bored’. I soon determined that this was his cue for ‘I have had enough and I bid my farewell until our next meeting’.

Several afternoons were spent with Bob and Judy going through old photograph albums and were also recorded. The purpose of the sessions was to identify and scan those photographs and documents that might be used in a later publication or DVD for the family and to provoke Bob’s memory and reveal more details about his childhood. The sessions were conversational and informal but also fruitful. As I was scanning each photograph, I was asking Bob questions about them. The photograph of his first car took his fancy, and he became extremely excited and spoke rapidly:

Christeen: Bob, can you tell me about this car so I can ...

Bob: [excited] Purchased second-hand and think I paid about twelve dollars for it or thereabouts.

Christeen: Twelve pound?

Bob: Yes, twelve pounds, twelve pounds and it was owned by an old fellow who did not want to keep it, too hard to drive he thought, so I bought it, my first car.

We had discussed his cars on several occasions, however, on the day we were scanning the photographs, Bob was very keen to talk for long periods about all of them.

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1 Sundowning can occur in late afternoons or early evenings. Behaviours include but are not limited to confusion, restlessness, insecurity. See: <https://www.dementia.org.au/about-dementia/carers/behaviour-changes/sundowning> accessed 19 September 2019. For further information regarding dementia see: <https://www.dementia.org.au/>.

Without the session, the finer details about the cars would have been lost. Judy had also contributed to each session and gave Bob a gentle nudge when he was struggling to remember things. It was also obvious that she had heard the stories many times as she was able to correct him and get him back on track on more than one occasion. Examples include several from his time at boarding school:

Christeen: How old were you when you went to boarding school?

Bob: Early teens.

Judy: [corrected Bob] Eight.

Bob: Yes, eight!

Judy: Oh, he has lots of stories about food. Big tomatoes, the cabbage boiled for three hours!

Christeen: Can you tell me a story about the food Bob?

Bob: Cabbage boiled up all day in tap water ... the chlorine ... not very good.

Christeen: You always hear stories about bread and jam or bread...

Bob: [cuts in] White bread ... and it was stale ... stale white bread.

Judy: [to Bob] Say why they always gave you stale bread.

Bob: To economise...the school was cutting down on expenditure.

Other methods and approaches have significantly informed these interviews including the 'Life Story Method' that is popular in care facilities such as Calvary Hospital and Mary Potter Hospice in South Australia.<sup>2</sup> The 'Life Story' concept is a useful interview tool that assists people diagnosed with dementia or terminal illness to successfully communicate their life stories and events as they remember them. The completed projects can take the form

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<sup>2</sup> Calvary Biography Service, <https://www.calvarycare.org.au/blog/2016/10/04/the-story-of-your-life/> accessed 30 July 2017.

of a published book, a printed folder, a DVD, or even a memory box. The context and life events are those chosen by the interviewee and not by an interviewer seeking the answers to a set of predetermined questions. These life stories make clear to the audience that the narrator existed in a separate context before being confined in their house, hospital or care facility and had previously led productive lives within the broader community. Academic scholarship is hard to find; however, the four volume online publication *Life Story Research*, edited by Barbara Harrison, contains over ninety articles written by academics across a large spectrum of disciplines, including oral history.<sup>3</sup> International projects include the memory and reminiscence work of the European Reminiscence Network with the elderly and those living with dementia, and the pay for use MemoryWell digital storytelling platform popular in United States aged care facilities to record life stories.<sup>4</sup>

This report presents just snippets of my experiences with the real couples that are the Bob and Judy discussed here. It would take volumes to truly give you an appreciation of the joys, the sorrows and the roller coaster ride that has been recording these interviews and creating the final products for the families. From the family's perspective, they have a tangible item through which to remember Bob as he was, and to connect his descendants to his story, their history and perhaps to hear him for the first time. From Bob's perspective, he has had the opportunity to tell his story the way he wanted to, whether this was the one that he had carefully planned, consisting of only the parts he wanted to tell, or, his whole life course. Regardless, his story is now told. His interview may not be part of a public archive, but it is in the family's archive for future generations to hear. Perhaps one day it will be lodged as part of a family collection in a state library or repository. From my point of view, while difficult and confronting at times, doing these interviews has made me very aware of how I need to apply all of what I have learned to my own situation, and to my oral history toolbox. With thousands of people being diagnosed with dementia each year, if you ever get the opportunity to record just one of them, please do so. You will be richly rewarded.

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3 Barbara Harrison (ed.), *Life Story Research* (Sage, London, 2008).

4 See: European Reminiscence Network, <http://www.europeanremiscencenetwork.org/>; MemoryWell, <https://www.memorywell.com/> accessed 15 February 2017.

# Invisible Footsteps

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TONI PALOMBI

*Toni Palombi is a writer whose work has appeared in the Guardian, Roads and Kingdoms, and Emrys Journal among others. She is currently pursuing a Masters by Research (focussing on life writing) and has worked in not-for-profit organisations in Asia and the Middle East.*

I first met Echlas whilst working in Bethlehem, in the West Bank. She was my Arabic teacher. During our weekly Arabic lessons, I became fascinated by her life story (she is a wonderful storyteller) and this led to undertaking research for this essay. Oral history interviews were used to capture her life story; I interviewed her over three years with most of the recordings taking place at the refugee camp.

In a crowded refugee camp in Bethlehem, Echlas chain-smokes her way through a pack of cigarettes recently purchased by her nine-year-old neighbour. Small for his age, and always smiling, he drops by often to ask whether she needs anything from one of the small shops in the camp. As she talks, smoke fills the small room. Outside, the imam's faithful call to prayer competes with the shouts of the children playing soccer.

Echlas' parents became refugees during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, when they were forced to leave their home in Beit Jibrin. Like everyone else in the village, her parents only took a few things with them, thinking they would return in a few days when the fighting subsided. Days, weeks, and then months passed. No one ever returned.

The keys to her parents' homes in Beit Jibrin sit in her living room, serving as a constant reminder of their displacement. Echlas often wonders who lives there now.

'Do you think they know someone else has the keys to their home?' she asks, rhetorically.

Her father fought for Palestinian freedom with words. An active member of the communist movement, he was a regular writer for a political newspaper. While it no longer exists, it was controversial at the time. When Jordan took control of the West

Bank in 1948, following the British Mandate period, her father wrote about issues affecting Palestinians.

Echlas' mother was around 13 when she became a refugee although her exact age was difficult to determine, as at that time there were no official IDs. Her mother never had the chance to complete school.

Her parents married in the early 1960s when the West Bank was still under Jordanian control. After the birth of their fourth child, her father was arrested for writing articles that criticised the Jordanian authorities. He spent seven years in prison. He never saw his family during this time but he communicated with his wife through letters. Traversing isolated desert areas, they would arrive infrequently. Her mother would read the letters, tears spilling down her cheeks. She would write back, describing how the children had grown: how they could talk, take their first steps, started school. Her mother's scribbled words were her father's only link to his family.

While her father was in prison, Echlas' mother and her four children lived in a single room in a refugee camp in Bethlehem. She had to guard them vigilantly as there was a gigantic hole just outside their room which the small children might fall into if she were not careful. Each time one of them needed to use the bathroom, she had to take them to the only public toilet, situated on the other side of the cramped camp. Over the years, Echlas' mother built additional rooms, as she could afford to do so. She also created a garden. She planted a lemon tree which to this day is brimming with lemons. Strong and stoic, self-pity was a foreign concept for her mother during these long years of being a single parent.

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One day, very close to Ramadan, her father was released from prison. He entered the West Bank for the first time in seven years, escorted by Jordanian soldiers. Twenty minutes was all he was given to kiss his children, whom he could barely recognise, and hug his wife. After what seemed like only seconds, the authorities escorted him to Hebron, an hour away from Bethlehem, where he was required to report to the authorities on a weekly basis for a year.

From the moment he was released, her father returned to writing. He began working night shifts at a French hospital and used any moment he could to write. One year after her father's release, one of Echlas' brothers, whom she never had the chance to meet, died of polio at the age of 10. Her parents had seven more children, the last of which was Echlas.

Echlas was born with muscular dystrophy, a disease that causes progressive weakness and loss of muscle mass. While she was never able to walk, the use of a wheelchair gave her independence. With the absence of schools catering for students with disabilities, Echlas spent her childhood being schooled by her family, namely her siblings and cousins, at her father's insistence. She has never seen the inside of a classroom. Regular visits to hospitals were a feature of her childhood.

When Echlas was 10 years old, her father died of cancer. His death devastated the entire family. Without a breadwinner, the family struggled to make ends meet.

Echlas pauses. I offer to light her another cigarette, something which she can no longer do on her own. She smiles at me mischievously, all too pleased I can understand her desire.

'Would you like some coffee?' she asks.

I happily agree to prepare a pot of Arabic coffee. Walking to the kitchen, the sounds of Arabic spill through the open window. Once the coffee has boiled over three times, I remove it from the stove and place it on a tray with two small coffee cups. When I return to Echlas, she is staring ahead, lost in her memories.

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During the late 1980s, the first Palestinian uprising (intifada) against the Israeli occupation exploded in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Echlas and her family lived amid the chaos of war. Israeli soldiers stormed their home on a regular basis, turning their house upside down and, on one occasion, physically assaulted her mother – her sole protector against the mounting violence.

One day, while her mother was briefly visiting one of their neighbours, a group of soldiers pushed the front door open. Echlas was alone watching TV. The soldiers searched the entire house. Kitchen utensils were thrown from the cupboards, furniture was overturned, shelves were emptied of their goods. Feeling utterly powerless, Echlas turned up the volume of the TV, hoping the sound would act as a barrier between her and the soldiers.

During the years the intifada raged, her education with family members stopped. She rarely left her house as it was too dangerous. Her time was spent drawing and writing in her diary.

In 1995, as the chaos of the first intifada was becoming a memory, Echlas was run over by an Israeli settler in Bethlehem while out with her family. Without stopping, the woman fled the scene, speeding to the nearest Israeli checkpoint, heading towards Jerusalem. Echlas was left lying on the road as passers-by, shocked by the event, ran to help her. Her sister-in-law, neighbour and baby nephew – whom only moments before the accident was sitting on her lap – looked on in horror. Two young men who witnessed the accident followed the driver to the checkpoint, alerting the soldiers about the accident.

As Echlas lay on the ground, all she could see were shoes and legs. She could feel the roughness of the road against her skin.

Inhaling her cigarette, Echlas said, 'I could hear people screaming *she is dying*'.

Israeli soldiers appeared on the scene. One young soldier quickly offered his assistance, helping the ambulance attendants as they treated Echlas. Another soldier fired shots into the air in an attempt to control the horror-struck crowd.

She was rushed to a hospital in Bethlehem before being transferred to a hospital in Jerusalem for surgery. While in the hospital, she could hear doctors talk about the potential need to amputate her leg. It was the last thing she heard before going into surgery.

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After surgery, she woke up to the strong aroma of medicine. Tubes were protruding from all parts of her body. She could not move. Doctors told her that the accident was so severe that she may never have the chance to sit in her wheelchair again. They expected her to be bedridden for the rest of her life.

The darkness descended when she realised the full impact of the accident. She had to come to terms with how heavily dependent she would be on others, given she could only move two fingers in her left hand. She could no longer brush her own teeth, wash her own face, or go to the bathroom without using a bedpan.

Refusing to be discouraged by the doctors, she spent almost a year in hospital determined to regain the ability to sit in her wheelchair. A physiotherapist worked with her daily. Echlas hid the amount of pain she experienced, especially when she tried to sit in her wheelchair, as she was afraid the physiotherapist would not allow her to continue with the treatment. The first time she sat in her wheelchair, she only managed to sit for two minutes. By the time she left the hospital, she could sit in her wheelchair for 15 minutes. Eventually, after much time and hard work, she could sit in her wheelchair for an entire day.

Describing her time in the hospital she says, 'The days were long and dark. I learned how to paint using my mouth and this saved me'.

Once released from the hospital, she enlisted the help of a foreign live-in volunteer to assist her with daily life. This eased the pressure on her aging mother. What began as an experiment – enlisting the assistance of foreign volunteers – would become an essential part of her strategy to live an independent life.

Over the next two decades, a stream of women from all over the world descended into Bethlehem. These women, most of whom are university students, are thrust into the world of a refugee camp with little preparation for how their life will unfold as they care for someone whose physical independence does not extend beyond holding a cigarette. Spending all their time together, bonds form quickly; Echlas remains in close contact with volunteers who are scattered across Europe and North America.

In 2000, bullets began to rain down on Echlas' house, signalling the start of the second intifada. Unable to run, Echlas was at the mercy of those around her. Curfews, daily shootings, soldiers raiding homes, and arrests were a daily occurrence. One of her volunteers, who arrived just weeks before the war broke out, refused to leave; instead, with youthful energy, she endured the battle of war, side by side with Echlas and her family. The volunteer remained undeterred even when soldiers forced them



Street art by Banksy in West Bank, Palestine. Photographed by Dan Meyers.

to leave the house at gunpoint or when tear gas pervaded every room in the house, and they were coughing uncontrollably and barely able to see through their tear eyes.

However, eventually the volunteer left to return to her studies. Given the intifada, it was impossible to recruit another volunteer. Once again, Echlas had to manage without the assistance of volunteers. This meant a loss of independence and greater dependency on her family. During intense moments of fighting, the family would hide in the one room considered to be the safest. Sometimes there were up to 24 people in this small room, waiting until the shooting subsided, each absorbed in their own activities: children, oblivious to the situation, played games; women prayed; fathers worried about their children in silence.

During the mid-2000s, Echlas travelled abroad for the first time to visit former volunteers in Europe. Far from her family and the brutality of war, Echlas met freedom and security in Europe. There were no checkpoints, tear gas, or soldiers.

While in Sweden she sought asylum, a process that was long and arduous, and ultimately unsuccessful. She spent almost a year in Sweden, learning how to manage alone and becoming acquainted with male nurses helping her with the most intimate and personal tasks (showering, going to the bathroom), something uncommon in her culture. She

allowed herself to become excited at the opportunity of doing all the things she had been denied: the chance to study and to live alone, free from the shackles of war. When government officials, who spent almost a year dealing with her case, broke the news, they cried in sadness and frustration. She returned to Bethlehem shortly after.

Back behind the wall that divides Israelis and Palestinians, Echlas continued to struggle against oppression, conflict, tension, and a lack of services for people living with disabilities. She speaks about disability issues at public events and each year publishes a calendar, filled with art depicting contemporary social and political issues.

When her mother passed away some years ago, she was devastated and retreated into herself. Her family is a constant source of strength and nourishment. Taking a sip of coffee, Echlas explains that she is fortunate to have such a supportive family, as many Palestinians living with a disability do not receive this support. She speaks with frustration about how some families are ashamed of their children who have a disability.

‘Some people with disabilities spend all their lives in one corner of the house never being in touch with anyone except their families who only see them as disabled’.

She has met many people with disabilities, especially women, who spend their lives rarely leaving their house. They never have the chance to make friends or get married.

A look of sadness marks her face. I light her another cigarette, noticing that the packet is nearly empty.

Her new volunteer from Germany, a sociology student, enters the room announcing Echlas has a visitor; it is one of her Arabic language students. Determined to be independent, Echlas makes a living teaching Arabic to foreigners in Bethlehem. Echlas smiles at the young woman, revealing that in a short time, the two have adjusted to the rhythms of living together – 24 hours a day – in a refugee camp.

As I leave, Echlas’ phone rings. She hangs up quickly and says, ‘Make sure you don’t go near the other refugee camp on your way home. That was my nephew. People are protesting and soldiers are firing tear gas into the camp’.

# Reflections on *Intimate Stories, Challenging Histories*: Looking back on the 2019 OHA Conference

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CHRISTOPHER CHEVALIER AND MADELEINE REGAN

*A former nurse and health manager, Christopher Chevalier is a PhD student in the School of Sociology at the Australian National University. His thesis explores oral history and social history in Solomon Islands using life histories, small group biography, and collective biography.*

*Madeleine Regan has coordinated oral history projects with community groups and a range of organisations. Her PhD research builds on these projects and analyses the Veneto migrants through oral histories and archival research in relation to Australian migration history.*

*Audio of this conference report can be accessed through:  
<https://soundcloud.com/oralhistoryaustralia/regan-chevalier-16122019>*

## INTRODUCTION

This article looks back at some highlights of the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference for two PhD students who escaped the daily grind of thesis writing to enjoy the diversity and complexity of oral history in the warmth of springtime Brisbane. The conference, organised by Oral History Queensland and held at the State Library of Queensland on 10-13 October 2019, was a wonderful opportunity to listen to many fascinating subjects by community, professional, and academic oral historians. The conference was organised into three streams – Aboriginal/Indigenous Oral History, Australian Oral History, and Methodological Issues in Oral History – with specialist sessions on themes such as women, trauma, community and local history. Like any conference, it was difficult to choose between simultaneous sessions and in this small selection, we have chosen presentations of most interest or relevance to our own research. We hope that our reflections will give *Studies in Oral History* readers the chance to remember sessions that they may have missed or provide perspectives for those who could not attend the conference. Readers who would like to listen to more detail can click on the audio links embedded in the text. This issue of *Studies in Oral History* also contains several articles that resulted from presentations at the conference.



State Library of Queensland where the 2019 Oral History Australia Biennial Conference was held. Photographed by Judy Hughes.

### SOME CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

Alistair Thomson's pre-conference workshop *Interpreting Memories* (audio segment 4.15–7.50) was a highlight and useful for our own research. The three-hour interactive session with a master of the craft combined a presentation on interpretation with examples (audio accompanied by text) and discussion of issues, including:

- 1) factors that shape interviews between narrator and reviewer
- 2) micro-analysis of narrative – language, voice, use of pronouns, how people recount their stories (genres)
- 3) macro-analysis of themes – finding patterns within and between histories, new meanings, and interpretations
- 4) ethical issues – responsibilities at every stage of oral history (preparation, recording, transcribing, and archiving) and to narrator, family and colleagues, researchers, and research.

The workshop reinforced how an oral history interview is an artefact of the present and a resource for the future. The accompanying notes also provided a very useful summary of the complexities of memory and interpretation in oral history interviews.

The opening session of the conference by Canadian oral historian Katrina Srigley, *Gaa Bi Kidwaad Maa Nbisiing /The Stories of Nbisiing: Relational Story Listening and Storytelling on Nbisiing Nishnaabeg Territory* [audio segment 7.55–12.15], explored the significance of First Nations language and knowledge. Katrina emphasised the recuperative work of oral history and the processes of decolonisation in recovering voices silenced in history. Key aspects of her presentation included the long process of acceptance of outsiders, the influence of feminism in oral history practice, the importance of emotion in oral history, and the ethic of love and listening with love. Katrina also spoke about the need to unlearn to learn – and learning to listen and keep quiet – especially with Indigenous narrators.

Anisa Puri's presentation based on her PhD research, *Youth Migration in Modern Australia* [audio segment 12.20–15.00] resonated with Madeleine's thesis, which also examines migration, including migrants who came to Australia as children and adolescents. Anisa's study of five life stories of migrants who arrived between 1946 to 1973 reveals the importance of age, gender, and ethnicity in migration trajectories. Migrants' oral histories have great value in capturing memories, initial impressions, and how they imagined their futures from when they first arrived, and how those views changed.

Annabel Baldwin's presentation, *Putting the Visual Back into the Audio-Visual in Trauma* [audio segment 17.25–18.45] examined the meaning of gesture and non-verbal communication in Holocaust oral histories. The importance of the visual is more obvious in video recorded interviews, particularly in how much of interviewees' body language, gestures and expressions can be seen in the camera frame. With audio recordings, visual clues still add important interpretive detail at the time of telling but are lost at the time of listening unless noted in the transcript. Visual information from photographs and memorabilia surrounding narrators can also be valuable, particularly when interviewing people at home.

*Tangled Memories – Challenges of Dementia in Oral History Interviews* by Christeen Schoepf [audio segment 18.50–20.35] looked at the often difficult but important task of interviewing people with dementia who are still able to recall longer-term memories and communicate effectively. Cognitive decline may affect emotional expression as well as anxiety about interview topics and interactions. There are both pros and cons to interviewing a person with dementia with their partner or someone who knows them well to reassure and help them remember. Practically, it helps to choose optimal times of day for the person with dementia and use photographs to prompt questions and recall. The session reinforced the urgency of recording oral histories while people's health and cognitive function still allow.

In *Oral History, Ethnography and Digital Story Telling* [audio segment 20.40–22.10] Janice Hanley and Joan Kelly examined similarities and differences between three overlapping methodologies. Oral history is a discipline (or at least a sub-discipline) that can become confused with other interview-based methods in many other fields and disciplines. Each methodology involves interviews and subjective perspectives but have different processes, products, and confidentiality issues, particularly in ethnography.

*'Larna Me' and 'Dem Tru', Oral history in Norfolk Island* by Maree Evans [audio segment 22.15–23.20] was notable for her enjoyment of working as a curator on Norfolk Island and its distinctive pidgin, a mixture of historical influences on the island since the nineteenth century. There are additional complexities in the processes of interviewing in and translating from other languages but oral history recordings can be replayed repeatedly until the transcription is accurate and translations can also be independently confirmed by others.

Geraldine Fela's *Memory, Place and Australia's HIV/AIDS Crisis* [audio segment 23.30–25.05], examined the different experiences and care of people with HIV and AIDS, which varied by location and over time. Homosexual men and indeed anyone with HIV and AIDS were highly stigmatised in regional towns compared to those in capital cities, especially Sydney and Melbourne which had been at the centre of gay liberation in the 1970s. Gay men living in these cities with better facilities were

strong advocates who were predominantly affected by the epidemic in Australia. Until the mid-1990s, nearly every patient with HIV/AIDS died, but multi drug therapy has since transformed survival and reduced stigma surrounding people with HIV and AIDS in Australia.

Cate Pattinson, *Local Maternity Hospital Care in Perth's Western Suburbs* [audio segment 25.10–26.05], demonstrated how effectively local history can be preserved through oral history, accompanied by documents, newspaper articles, photographs, and artefacts. 'Laying-in Hospitals' were pre-war and post-war private maternity hospitals and her study recovers not only local history but also many institutional and systemic changes in medical care in the post-war era.

In *The Oral History of Test-tube Testimonies* [audio segment 26.00–27.50], Fiona Littlejohn and Susan Bewley challenged the triumphant narrative of In-Vitro Fertilisation from the 1960s using oral testimonies from successfully born 'test-tube' children and the many parents who were not successful and whose voices were not included in official histories. This pre-recorded presentation worked smoothly without the technical glitches and nervousness that can hinder live presentations. More use of pre-recordings would reduce the conference's environmental footprint, an important consideration for the 2021 OHA conference to be held in Tasmania.

Alistair Thomson selected oral histories from the Australian Generations Oral History Project to examine changing patterns of fatherhood in *New Wave Dads and Fatherhood in the 1970s to 1990s* [audio segment 27.55–31.00]. He made use of oral history quotes to add voice, text, and context to social history. He demonstrated how to weave together collective and individual oral history which was useful for anyone grappling with the challenge of representing and summarising a collection of oral histories.

Two presentations in the same session namely Skye Krichauff, *Analysing Settler Descendants' Historical Consciousness* and Cameo Dalley, Ashley Barnwell and Sana Nakata's *Frontier Violence and Memorialisation* [audio segment 31.20–35.15] dealt with settler and First Nation histories. Indigenous oral history is often silent and silenced in local history, memorials and museums. Skye looked at the selective remembering and forgetting of invasion history by settler families and their descendants. The



Alistair Thomson leads a workshop at the 2019 OHA Biennial Conference. Photographed by Judy Hughes.

*Frontier Violence* presentation combined the disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and political science to compare Aboriginal and settler oral histories and how the accounts, artefacts, and memorabilia of white settlers are privileged at Wyndham local museum in the Northern Territory.

Oral history in Australia has a vital role in recording and recovering the history of colonial and settler interactions, violence, and dispossession. New technologies now allow these histories to be produced and accessed in creative ways, not just through museums and archives. Digital technologies create exciting new versions of oral history, such as walkabout tours and soundscapes; some examples were showcased in other presentations and the pre-conference workshop *Digital Futures in Oral History*.

## CONCLUSIONS

This selection of highlights represents a small slice of the total conference sessions [audio segment 35.20–44.10]. For both of us, the *Interpreting Memories* workshop helped us better understand interpretation, how best to provide relevant history, and how people interact with events in different historical periods. The conference also confirmed the value of working closely with community and our privileged position as oral historians. The opening and closing sessions reinforced the importance of listening with love, of putting aside our own views and listening deeply to interviewees' viewpoints. It is important to know who we are as insiders and outsiders,



Closing conference plenary at the 2019 OHA Biennial Conference. Photographed by Judy Hughes.

and how this role can change in the process of recording and analysing oral histories. Academic theorising risks moving too far away from interviewees' perspectives and we need to be cautious about over analysing recordings and texts.

The conference confirmed for us how nuanced and complex oral history is. The theme, *Intimate Stories – Challenging Histories*, was very appropriate. The intimacy of recording interviews and personal stories are special qualities of oral history that both inform and challenge other versions of histories. Overall, the conference was a welcome opportunity to put academic writing aside and enjoy so many different types of oral histories and oral historians – not just academics but also family, local and community, institutional and social historians. Oral history is indeed a diverse discipline.

The authors would like to thank Oral History Queensland, Oral History Australia and the State Library of Queensland for organising and hosting the 2019 Conference. Madeleine also thanks Oral History Australia SA/NT for the student bursary that assisted her to attend the conference.

# Tribute to Karen George

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ALISON MCDOUGALL

*Until retirement in 2019, Alison McDougall worked as a freelance researcher and oral historian with private and public institutions. She was a committee member of OHA SA/NT from 2001 to 2019, edited their newsletter for 17 years and was made a Life Member in 2019.*

Dr Karen George became a Member of the Order of Australia in the Queen's Birthday Honours on 7 June 2020 for significant service to history preservation and research, and to professional associations. This well-deserved and prestigious recognition builds on her other recent awards: Oral History Australia's Hazel de Berg Award for Excellence (2017) and OHA Life Membership (2018).

Karen is a consultant historian based in South Australia who has spent much of her working life bringing the lives, issues and concerns of the disadvantaged, the forgotten and the overlooked to public attention. Karen indeed describes herself as an historian of social justice. There are over 200 oral history entries in the State Library of South Australia's catalogue, in addition to those within the National Library of Australia, which document her extensive and varied work.

After receiving her PhD in History from the University of Adelaide in 1994, Karen worked as the Oral Historian for the Corporation of the City of Adelaide from 1993 to 2001, making extensive use of their archives, interviewing an ever-widening range of people connected to the City and producing a guide and index to the collection, *City Memory* (1999). Concurrently, she undertook the Loxton War Service Land Settlement Project (1995–1999) which resulted in her acclaimed book published by Wakefield Press, *A Place of Their Own: The Men and Women of War Service Land Settlement at Loxton after World War II* (1999), and contributed to the *Wakefield Companion to South Australian History* (2001).



Karen George. Image courtesy of Karen George.

Through working in a culturally sensitive manner, Karen has established strong links with Indigenous Australians. She has undertaken archival research and oral history for native title claims and worked with the National Library of Australia on the 'Bringing Them Home' Oral History Project (1999–2002), which focused on the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families. This forcefully brought to her attention the disconnection between these people and their extant government records. A joint project with the

State Records of South Australia and Link-up SA (Nunkuwarrin Yunti of SA Inc) led to Karen's development and writing of *Finding Your Own Way: A Guide to Records of Children's Homes in South Australia* (2005), which in turn became the basis for the South Australian section of the Find & Connect web resource. Since then she has undertaken 30 oral history interviews with Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal staff of Nunkuwarrin Yunti of SA with a view to writing the history of this Aboriginal Community Centre.

In 2005, Karen was appointed as Research Historian and writer for the Government of South Australia's Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry. For three years she worked in this sensitive area providing archival research, writing and advice. She gained deep insights into working with vulnerable people and was a much-valued interviewer and contributor to the National Library of Australia's 'Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants' Oral History Project (2009–2012). Karen has continued as a researcher and historian in this field, exploring the role of genealogical research and family tracing in the process of healing for Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants (University of Melbourne: Routes to the Past – ARC

Seeding Grant) and working with clients and staff of Relationships Australia South Australia's Elm Place and as Historian Researcher at Link-Up SA.

In addition to being a member of the Professional Historians Association (SA), Karen was a long-term committee member of Oral History Australia SA/NT (1999-2017), undertaking the role of president and editor of *Word of Mouth* from 2000 to 2002. For many years she taught oral history and research practice and ethics for OHA SA/NT through the Association's workshops. Her contribution has ensured a high standard of oral history practice throughout communities and organisations in South Australia.

We congratulate Karen on this significant recognition of her passion and commitment to giving voice to those who are otherwise silent or unheard.

# COVID Reports

# Introduction:

## Oral History During the Pandemic

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ALISTAIR THOMSON

*Alistair Thomson is President of Oral History Australia and Professor of History at Monash University.*

Like many oral historians, I stopped interviewing when the pandemic hit. I had been interviewing elderly Victorian men and women who worked for General Motors Holden, and even before lockdown it was clear that it was not safe to interview in person. Our Holden interviews were conducted with the National Library of Australia, which decided that remote recording was not an appropriate alternative. In the circumstances, I agreed.

Several of the authors in this provocative collection about oral history during the pandemic make a persuasive case for not conducting their interviews via remote recording. Katherine Sheedy from the professional history enterprise Way Back When explains that most of their interviews are used for audio-visual productions of one kind or another, and that the quality of a remote recording is usually not good enough for such outputs. The pandemic is having a serious impact on the livelihoods of our professional history colleagues.

Others highlight the importance of rapport in oral history and worry about the loss of the communicative clues of an embodied relationship in a shared place chosen by the interviewee. As Ruth Melville explains, ‘talking with someone, listening, is more than the sum of its visual and auditory parts. Oral history, at its best with bodies in the same space, allows each pause, moment of silence, inhalation and exhalation of breath’.

For some types of projects, and some groups of interviewees, the limitations of remote recording are especially acute. Skye Krichauff explains that her interviews were abandoned when remote Aboriginal communities were locked down as a safety measure. Skye decided that remote interviews were inappropriate: members of those communities often had limited computing equipment or internet access, and in interviews

with Aboriginal Australians the careful development of rapport, and communication through body language and gesture, was especially important.

Some of our authors highlight the effect of the loss of face to face interviews upon their own well-being. We miss the face to face human interaction; the adrenaline rush of standing on a doorstep not knowing how the next few hours will evolve; the thrill of watching and helping someone articulate a story buried deep inside. Margaret Leask describes her own pandemic experience as ‘an unravelling’ of her life and identity as an interviewer, until she turned to the backlog of less favoured oral history work, such as track logs and documentation, and began to find her working self again. Community historians in Queensland miss the collective engagement nourished by local history events and note that members of the pre-internet generation are among those worst affected by this loss.

And yet... Jessica Stroja reminds us that some oral historians have always conducted interviews using remote recording, perhaps because disability, illness, cost or care commitments have prevented long distance travel; perhaps because an interviewee was only accessible online or by phone. Her commonplace is our new normal and, as she explains, it is perfectly possible to conduct wonderful interviews at a distance.

Newcomers to remote recording explain how they adapted to this new normal, and the challenges they faced. One obvious adaptation is interviewing close to home, with family members or friends sharing a home in lockdown. Students on Phillip O’Brien’s year nine school history elective learnt about oral history through Google Meet and then interviewed family members with their smart phones and discovered extraordinary histories within their own homes. University student Janice Barr had to conduct an interview for her oral history unit and got around social distance rules by interviewing her husband. She made the unexpected discovery that family life in remote, snowbound northern Sweden during the winter was not so very different to coronavirus lockdown in Tasmania. In Newfoundland, Sarah Faulkner adapted her interview research for the new conditions. She invited participants to choose whatever form of remote recording worked best for them; she used photos to elicit storytelling and to break down the awkwardness of the remote relationship and she

joined community virtual spaces such as conversation circles to help develop relationships – though the face-to-face encounters she had enjoyed before lockdown made it much easier to network online.

None of the authors in this collection are conducting interviews about life during the pandemic. There are projects all over the world doing just that, and there are arguments about the pros and cons of collecting personal accounts during this tumultuous period or waiting until it is over and we can reflect on the consequences. But Nikki Henningham has been recording the *sounds* of the pandemic in metropolitan Melbourne, and the transformation of an urban soundscape when there are so few people in the streets. Most memorably, she describes the sound of school drop off time during remote schooling, when only a handful of children still attended her local primary school. ‘I sat and listened to the noise that was all around me. Who knew there were so many birds playing in that playground?’ Maybe birds had filled the empty spaces left by absent children; maybe they had always been there but not been heard. As Nikki concludes, she was reassured that ‘even in the depths of a very dark time for many, there is light and song and hope that things will be OK, when the kids come back’.

As I write in July 2020, with Melbourne now in its second week of its second lockdown, we have no idea how long we will be living with this pandemic, or if and when the old normal of oral history interviews in people’s home will be possible. Each of us will have to decide when we can do that again, depending on our own circumstances and projects. Some of us will decide that we may as well get on with it via remote recording. We will learn from remote recording pioneers like those featured in these writings, and we will learn how to relish stories told in strange times and new ways.

#### REMOTE INTERVIEWING RESOURCES:

<https://www.oralhistory.org/remote-interviewing-resources/>

[https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/covid-19/?fbclid=IwAR3OFG\\_4XK8RyZs0uBII-aETpq-3XUwmVdtHywmluyrPHzCn9p3S5ok6Susk](https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/covid-19/?fbclid=IwAR3OFG_4XK8RyZs0uBII-aETpq-3XUwmVdtHywmluyrPHzCn9p3S5ok6Susk)

# The Impact of COVID-19 on Consulting Historians

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FIONA POULTON

*Fiona Poulton is an experienced heritage practitioner and oral historian with Way Back When Consulting Historians.*

As consulting historians running a small business, COVID-19 is having a significant impact on us and on the clients and communities we work with. Before the virus hit Australia, we were conducting several oral history projects with hospitals, university colleges and medical and sporting organisations. We were also working on a podcast for a major hospital using oral history interviews with past and current staff. All of these projects have now been put on hold.

While we would love to make use of video conferencing technology to continue to record interviews during this time, in our case we have to carefully consider the purpose and potential outcomes of our oral history projects. As wonderful as it is to be able to connect with people remotely, there is no getting around the fact that recording an interview online without proper audio equipment results in much lower quality audio. These interviews therefore won't be as versatile. Many of the oral history projects we work on are stand-alone, with the intention of creating an archive of interviews that can be used in many different ways in the future. While the interviews conducted remotely during the current pandemic may be great for quoting in written material, or using as an historical source, they won't be so useful for creating digital histories, such as audio documentaries, podcasts and digital stories.

In the case of the podcast project we were working on, we have been partly able to continue using the oral history interviews that had already been conducted, and by recording narration in a careful, socially-distanced manner. However, the ongoing collection of new interviews is now on hold. If the podcast was focused on the experience of the global pandemic itself, it would likely be a different story, as the lower



Way Back When team : Lucy Bracey, Fiona Poulton, Sarah Rood and Katherine Sheedy. Photography by Catherine Forge Photography.

quality audio would in that case be appropriately reflective of this time and the world we are living in.

For us and for our clients, postponing our oral history projects is the best option right now, until we can safely record in-person again. Unfortunately, this means living and working with a lot of uncertainty, and has ongoing financial implications for our business.

Depending on how long the pandemic lasts and how the restrictions change, we may have to adapt these projects and think about different ways of capturing oral histories. For some communities with ageing interviewees, time is of the essence, and in some cases it may be more important to capture these memories in a lower quality format than risk losing them all together.

# Lockdown Revelations

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JANICE BARR

*Janice Barr is currently studying Family History at the University of Tasmania and is a published author of short stories and poems.*

I needed to conduct an interview, write a transcript and complete a 1000-word essay for an oral history unit at the University of Tasmania. I planned to interview a relative with a rich life story and I was looking forward to delving into Australian life in the 1930s. Then along came the COVID-19 lockdown and all those ideas evaporated. I couldn't visit my elderly relative and telephone conversations were not an option because her hearing was compromised.

What to do? Delaying the course was an option that I seriously considered but, after discussions with my family, I decided that interviewing my husband and writing on the topic of Swedish migration might be an option. There were challenges with this concept. His first language is not English, his knowledge of his grandparents and great grandparents is limited and my awareness of Sweden in the 1950s is mediocre.

I conducted a preliminary short interview and soon realised that writing about Swedish migration was not workable. Not only was there scant information available on Swedish migration to Australia in the 1970s, but my husband's journey to Australia was more of a travel adventure than a conscious decision to migrate in search of a better life. I moved on and recorded the details of his childhood years and unlocked some vivid images and a strong sense of place. During the transcription process I realised that life in northern Sweden in winter had many challenges and similarities to the COVID-19 lockdown.

The Olofsson family were often confined to their house in Kristineberg when temperatures were minus 30 or minus 40 degrees Celsius. Family in distant towns could visit but they usually did not because heavy snowfalls made roads dangerous to navigate. The five children stayed indoors and entertained themselves playing games like Monopoly and chess, building model ships and jigsaws and watching



Hans Olofsson photographed by Janice Barr.

television (no internet then). There was some impromptu singing around the piano but apparently no dance performances that would be worthy to post online on today's TikTok.

The underground cellar in the family house was stocked with jams, dried reindeer meat, ham, pickled herring, cranberries and potatoes. Lily Olofsson (his mother) created family favourites like *palt* (meat dumplings), *kanel bullar* (cinnamon buns), macaroni with cream and meatballs (my husband's favourite comfort food), and pancakes with lingonberries and whipped cream.



Northern Sweden in winter. Photographed by Hans Olofsson.

During lockdown I've expanded my repertoire of Swedish dishes, but my cinnamon buns need more time to perfect. More importantly, I completed an oral history

project and gained a deeper understanding of my husband's early life in Sweden and recorded his story for future generations. It has showed me the benefits of pausing for a moment and contemplating my own backyard, instead of always rushing around searching for external inspiration for stories. And, despite all the initial hiccups, I did eventually receive positive feedback from the university on my oral history project.

# Conducting Overseas Fieldwork during a Global Pandemic: Challenges, Changes and Lessons from the Field.

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SARAH FAULKNER

*Sarah Faulkner is a PhD candidate within the Law and Society Division at the University of South Australia. Originally from Newfoundland and Labrador, she lives a transnational sense of home across Australia and Canada.*

By examining the role of place-belonging within the context of regional settlement, my research draws attention to settled refugees' evolving relationship to notions of *home* and *place(s)*. Having already begun the eight months of my ethnographic fieldwork on the island of Newfoundland in January 2020, however, a change in sociological imagination had to be acknowledged in order to accommodate 'the new normal' of a COVID-19 world. While the world came to grips with its collective 'anticipatory grief',<sup>1</sup> I had to reflect on whether it was possible to continue my data collection. Examining the settlement experience of Syrian refugees as it relates to their sense of belonging and home relies on the personal narratives of the Syrian people themselves, in which opportunities to share their story must still be realised. Navigating the potential ethical, methodological, and communicative challenges to adapting traditional face-to-face methods into virtual techniques, I had to consider how such adaptations would affect the sharing of personal narratives and people's stories of *home*. Within this report, I reflect on just some of the lessons learned in adapting overseas ethnographic research to accommodate a diversity of virtual methods in the wake of a global pandemic.

During the time of COVID-19, academics from across the globe came together to share in their experience of conducting research through a variety of distance methods; an area of scholarship relatively under-utilised by oral-historians and

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1 Scott Berinato, 'That Discomfort You're Feeling Is Grief', *Harvard Business Review*, 23 March 2020, <https://hbr.org/2020/03/that-discomfort-youre-feeling-is-grief>.

sociologists in the past.<sup>2</sup> Having the benefits of joint Canadian-Australian citizenship – in a time when borders became increasingly re-drawn – also permitted me to stay in the field, affording the benefits of mutual time-zones and physical proximity needed to ‘read the room’. Noting the affective atmosphere of the people and place was not only key to protect my wellbeing and that of my research participants, but also to determine if such methods were appropriate for the research question being explored. Engaging in a consultation process with key members of the community was therefore integral to determine the viability of adapting my research to include more virtual methods. Other considerations included updating ethics applications and noting some of the potential issues to using online methods. Perhaps the most notable challenge, however, was adapting my original methods of face-to-face ethnographic fieldwork and participatory mapping to the virtual space.

Key to my research focus was receiving participants’ own narratives to notions of place, home and belonging.<sup>3</sup> Despite the challenges of adapting my research process to include more virtual methods, this experience became a valuable moment in reflective research. The application of video-technology, such as Skype, has been used to conduct qualitative interviews in the past and can notably meet challenges of spatiality, participant values, and financial limitations.<sup>4</sup> Phone interviews can support the use of narratives as a discourse analysis,<sup>5</sup> while the additional visual element of ‘webchat’ software can provide for some level of ‘face-to-face experience while preserving the flexibility and “private space” elements’.<sup>6</sup> For my interviews, participants were given the

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2 Charlie Morgan, Rob Perks, Mary Stewart and Camille Johnston, ‘Advice on Remote Oral History Interviewing During the COVID-19 Pandemic’, *Oral History Society*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/covid-19/>.

3 Erene Kaptan and Nira Yuval-Davis, ‘Participatory Theatre as a Research Methodology: Identity, Performance and Social Action among Refugees’, *Sociological Research Online* 13, no. 5 (2008): 1–12; Oscar Curry, Charlotte Smedley and Caroline Lenette, ‘What Is “Successful” Resettlement? Refugee Narratives From Regional New South Wales in Australia’, *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies* 16, no. 4 (2018):430–448.

4 Paul Hanna, ‘Using Internet Technologies (such as Skype) as a Research Medium: A Research Note’, *Qualitative Research* 12, no. 2 (2012): 240; Valeria Lo Iacono, Paul Symonds and David H.K Brown, ‘Skype as a Tool for Qualitative Research Interviews’, *Sociological Research Online* 21, no. 2 (May 2016): 103; Janet Salmons, *Cases in Online Interview Research* (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, 2012).

5 Amanda Holt, ‘Using the Telephone for Narrative Interviewing: A Research Note’, *Qualitative Research* 10, no. 1 (2010): 114.

6 Hanna, ‘Using Internet Technologies as a Research Medium’, 241.

choice to use whatever virtual method they felt most comfortable with, which ranged across Skype, Google Meetup, Zoom, Facebook Messenger and Facetime. To address the loss of spatial mapping as a visual element in storytelling,<sup>7</sup> other visual techniques were considered to enhance the participatory element of the research process.<sup>8</sup> The use of photo elicitation was therefore used to support participant narratives and circumvent some of the challenges presented by a physically distanced world.

In the initial months of my ethnographic fieldwork, I noted how frequently members of the migrant community would use smartphones to share photos as a method to help bridge barriers in communication and support informal conversations about people and place. Despite its benefits, qualitative interviewing has limitations in its reliance on the talk and text that is generated through the refined context of an interview.<sup>9</sup> The use of photos to support the narrative process has been noted in a variety of disciplines, in which its methodological strengths have been acknowledged.<sup>10</sup> Photos of the participants' choice were therefore sent to me prior to the interview, which the participant and I simultaneously went through on our own devices. The use of photos was intended to not just act as a source of data, but rather as 'tools' to help facilitate the narrative discourse.<sup>11</sup> Similar to what was intended with mapping, the process of virtual

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- 7 Jack Jen Gieseck, 'Where We Go From Here: The Mental Sketch Mapping Method and Its Analytic Components', *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, no. 9 (2013); Tobias Weidinger, S. Kordel and J. Kieslinger, 'Unravelling the Meaning of Place and Spatial Mobility: Analysing the Everyday Life-worlds of Refugees in Host Societies by Means of Mobility Mapping', *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2019).
- 8 Somesh Kumar, *Methods for Community Participation: A Complete Guide for Practitioners* (United Kingdom: Practical Action Publishing Ltd, 2002); Julia Kieslinger, Stefan Kordel, Tobias Weidinger, 'Capturing Meanings of Place, Time and Social Interaction when Analyzing Human (Im)mobilities: Strengths and Challenges of the Application of (Im)mobility Biography', *Forum, Qualitative Social Research* 21, no. 2 (2020).
- 9 Jennifer Mason, *Qualitative Researching*, 2nd ed. (London: Sage, 2002).
- 10 Douglas Harper, 'Talking About Pictures: A Case for Photo Elicitation', *Visual Studies* 17, no. 1. (2002); John L. Oliffe and Joan L. Bottorff, 'Further Than the Eye Can See? Photo Elicitation and Research with Men', *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 6 (2007); Marisol Clark-Ibanez, 'Framing the Social World with Photo-Elicitation Interviews', *American Behavioral Scientist* 47, no. 12 (2004); Robyn Sampson and Sandra Gifford, 'Place-making, Settlement and Well-being: The Therapeutic Landscapes of Recently Arrived Youth with Refugee Backgrounds', *Health and Place* 16, no. 1 (2010).
- 11 Elizabeth A. Bates, Joseph J. McCann, Linda K. Kaye and Julie C. Taylor, "'Beyond Words": A Researcher's Guide to Using Photo Elicitation in Psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 14, no. 4 (2017): 461; Steven Gold, 'Using Photography in Studies of Immigrant Communities: Reflecting Across Projects and Populations' in Gregory Stanczak (ed.) *Visual Research Methods: Image, Society, and Representation* (Thousand Oaks, California; London: SAGE Publications, 2007): 142.



St John's, Newfoundland. Courtesy of creativecommonsstockphotos.

photo elicitation provided a focal activity that the participant and I could share in together as a way to build a shared story 'of mutual exploration' across the virtual space.<sup>12</sup> Engaging in an activity that drew people's attention in a spatial way provided opportunities to engage physically in the research process.<sup>13</sup> On initial reflection, talking through photos notably provided an opportunity for people to expand on their own stories, drew attention away from some of the discomfort that the virtual conversations could present, as well as created a greater medium for self-expression. During an interview, one participant noted that 'pictures, pictures let you talk much'.

While moving to the online space had its challenges, the ability to include a diversity of virtual methods to enhance people's storytelling was a notably unexpected benefit. Some other challenges to conducting qualitative research, however, included the risks of online saturation. After a number of months of virtual calls people can lose the capacity and will to attend any more online meetings. Another notable challenge existed in the domain of relationship building, in which being able to take the time necessary to cultivate relationships was confronted when the ability to be in the same

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12 Giesecking, 'Where We Go from Here', 716.

13 Kumar, *Methods for Community Participation*, 333.



Remote cove in Newfoundland. Courtesy of needpix.com.

physical space was not available. One tactic used to mitigate this challenge was to take the time to participate in many virtual spaces, such as online conversation circles, community meetings, and ESL (English as a Second Language) classes. Taking the time to conduct preliminary phone, text, and Skype conversations prior to conducting the formal interview was also done for some participants, in order for a deeper level of trust to form. One advantage to having the first few months of physical presence in Newfoundland was that I had already engaged in some face-to-face encounters, which made it easier to network at a later date. Closely following the advice of community members towards people's capacity to participate was also critical to engaging with participants virtually during this time.

Largely, this process taught a key lesson in what it means to develop and refine a research process while in the field. William C. Van den Hoonard argues that fieldwork researchers must enter a research situation with an open mind, in which 'you should not end the research where you start'.<sup>14</sup> By reflecting on what could and could not be compromised within the research process, I attempted to navigate and adapt to meet the challenges of my present circumstance. Definitely not without its

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14 William C. van den Hoonard, 'Ethics on the Ground: A Moral Compass', in Deborah Hoonard (ed.) *Qualitative Research in Action: A Canadian Primer* (Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2019), 62.

'messy-bits', this process was filled with a number of key moments of reflection that were no doubt experienced by other researchers in the field. Through the support of both my academic community and the community of my participants, however, my fieldwork was able to soldier on; albeit in a different space than where it started.

# Abandoning oral history interviews during COVID-19 restrictions

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SKYE KRICHAUFF

*Skye Krichauff is an ARC Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide, President of the History Council of South Australia and Joint Editor of Studies in Oral History.*

Between December 2019 and February 2020, I conducted twenty oral history interviews with elderly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who live in the Adelaide and southern Fleurieu regions of South Australia. These interviews were commissioned by the University of Adelaide's Indigenous Oral Health Unit (IOHU), who recognise the value in learning about people's experiences as a means of improving the provision of dental care.

In late February I travelled overseas for two weeks, arriving home on 4 March. While I was travelling, the spread of COVID-19 intensified, as did awareness of the disease's contagiousness and deadly effects. Although I arrived back in Adelaide prior to the Australian government's requirement to self-isolate, I postponed pre-arranged interviews for two weeks.

I was booked to fly to Ceduna on 30 March for a week of interviewing West Coast Aboriginal people. I was to have three days in Ceduna and two in the community of Yalata (approximately 100 kilometres north west of Adelaide). On 17 March, when I had nearly finished two weeks of self-isolation, my contact at Yalata warned me that access would likely be denied in the coming days. On 20 March, the Project Manager at the IOHU cancelled my flights, car and accommodation. She had received official notice that Aboriginal communities across the state were in lockdown for an indefinite period.

I never considered conducting remote interviews for this project – either through Zoom, Skype, Messenger or telephone. There are a number of reasons why. First, on a practical level, few of the elderly Aboriginal people I have interviewed for this and

previous projects had laptops or computers. And while most have mobile phones, they are not necessarily smartphones. Most of my interviewees are on prepaid mobile plans and tend to communicate by text – particularly with people they have not previously met or don't know well. In addition, in regional and remote areas such as Ceduna and Yalata, telephone and internet reception is often patchy or non-existent.

Second, when conducting semi-structured, qualitative interviews using a life history approach, for deeper and more meaningful responses to be given, it is crucial that a rapport develop between interviewee and interviewer. I have found face-to-face meetings essential in building a rapport with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have good reason not to trust strangers who ask them questions and record their answers. The interviewee can more readily scrutinise and get a sense of an interviewer's motives, sincerity and personality when in close physical proximity to that person. Body language, facial expressions, the nodding or shaking of heads – all are missed over a telephone.

And while physical gestures may be visible though video link, other things are missed. Long pauses and silences – often significant and readable – that may be companionable and respectful when two people are sitting together, may be perceived as uncomfortable voids needing filling over the telephone or internet. When interviews are conducted in a person's workplace or home, photographs, paintings and objects on display are part and parcel of the interview. Such items can trigger memories and conversations. Pets, unexpected telephone calls, family members who drop in, all are readily accommodated in face-to-face interviews. Rather than being a cause for ending the interview, such interruptions provide insights into aspects of an interviewee's life that may not have previously been considered by the interviewer.

Another reason I did not consider interviewing people remotely for the Dental Oral History Project is that, at the conclusion of the interview, interviewees are reimbursed for their time with a gift card, recipe book, toothbrush and toothpaste. While these items can indeed be posted, it is a simple and immediate process to provide them at the end of the session and helps develop trust.

Finally, for this project, recruitment was largely through snowball effect. My interviewees seemed to enjoy the interview experience and, at the end of the session, many of them contacted relatives and friends asking them if they would also like to be interviewed. They provided me with the contact details of interested people then and there. I am not sure this would be such a straightforward process over the telephone or internet.

PS Since writing the above, I have travelled to Ceduna and conducted 27 interviews. At the time, Yalata was (and continues to be) closed to non-essential visitors.

# **‘Why Would You Want to Do That?’ Recording Soundscapes of a Global Pandemic**

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NIKKI HENNINGHAM

*Dr. Nikki Henningham is a Research Fellow in the Faculty of Arts, where she is Executive Officer of the Australian Women’s Archives Project*

‘It looks like a cat. IT LOOKS LIKE A CAT!’ said an interested bystander as he approached me. It was the third time in five minutes I’d had to stop recording because a member of the public wanted to know what I was doing as I stood in Little Bourke Street on Mother’s Day 2020, apparently holding a cat on a stick in front of me. My response – ‘I’m recording soundscapes of a global pandemic’ – invariably gave rise to more questions of the ‘why would you want to do that?’ variety, my favourite being, ‘why would you do that with a cat?’. Why indeed!

A few days prior to this, Dave Blanken (Sound Preservation Manager at the National Library of Australia) and I discussed the idea of recording soundscapes of Melbourne during lockdown to create an aural document of a truly extraordinary time in history. What are the sounds of a city when the city goes into hibernation? As time was of the essence, given there had recently been discussion of the easing of lockdown restrictions, Dave quickly put together a specialist recording kit and immediately couriered it to me. The gear consisted of the Sound Devices 722 two-track digital recorder coupled with a Mid-Side (M-S) microphone array housed in a specialist M-S outdoor field recording mount, which was covered in a particularly ‘furry’ windsock. The cat and I went out and about for the first time on Mother’s Day.

Little Bourke Street in Melbourne’s CBD was chosen as the first stop because it is normally a bustling hub on a late Sunday morning, especially on Mother’s Day, as people come and go from the yum cha houses and Asian bakeries that line the narrow passage from Exhibition to Swanston streets. That morning it was the sound of scooters picking up takeaway orders and the clanging bells of trams in empty



Nikki Henningham recording outside the MCG. Photographed by Leigh Henningham (@leighhenningham Instagram).

streets that dominated the soundscape. The cat and I then travelled to the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG), where an AFL (Australian Football League) game would ordinarily be played, via a protest at state parliament. I'm not sure how Tracey Chapman would feel about her song *Talkin' Bout a Revolution* being used as an anthem for COVID denialists! I moved on very quickly as it seemed to me that neither social distancing nor mask wearing were practices many of these protestors felt obliged to adopt! An empty MCG awaited. Yarra Park sounded the best I'd ever heard, as birds returned to a space given over to cars full of footy fans every weekend during the winter.

Over a month between May and June 2020, I took train trips and tram rides, wandered around public spaces and recorded the sound of a council officer cleaning a parking meter! I visited the Arts Centre on a Friday night and stood outside Caulfield Racecourse listening for the thundering of horses' hooves coming down the straight with no one to cheer them on. I recorded outside the ground at the MCG when the AFL season started back, moved by the silence when players and umpires took the knee in support of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and amazed by the sound made by players that comes from the oval and goes unheard when 70,000 spectators are there. I listened to the sound of a choir locked inside St Patrick's Cathedral as the voices soared and escaped through spaces in the doors and windows. I stood outside a golf



Nikki Henningham recording in Melbourne's Chinatown district. Photographed by Leigh Henningham (@leighhenningham Instagram).

course the day after rules were relaxed recording the noise of happy golfers teeing off. When they saw me, green keepers turned on their noisy leaf blowers, jealously guarding even the sounds that come from a private golf links!

My favourite morning was when I sat down to record the sound of school drop-off time, when remote schooling was the norm, at a school where a handful of families still needed to attend. It's the primary school I went to, and my own children attended many years ago. I sat listening to the noise that was all around me. Who knew there were so many birds playing in that playground? Having spent over a decade in that space across two generations, it was a sound that truly surprised me! I asked the principal if the birds were there all the time, even when the children were; she didn't know for certain. 'I guess we'll find out when the kids come back'.

I guess we will. In the meantime, I'll treasure that morning, when I listened to the noise made by the birds in the playground, vaguely reassured that even in the depths of a very dark time for many, there is light and song and hope that things will be OK, when the kids come back.

# Optimism vs Pessimism – An Oral Historian and the COVID-19 Pandemic

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MARGARET LEASK

*Margaret Leask was for many years an arts administrator, music agent and events' organiser in Sydney and London. She has worked as an oral historian, performing arts historian and researcher since 2004.*

My last oral history interview was recorded on 9 March 2020 for a Heritage/Development Application project for Parramatta City Council prior to the demolition of the city's town hall stage. This venue had provided a platform for performances, mayoral and citizenship ceremonies, school award ceremonies, dances and many community activities for more than 80 years. Six representative people were interviewed (and a seventh interview was cancelled due to COVID-19), but there were time pressures, a lack of interest in the outcomes (getting the Development Application was the principal purpose of the project commissioners), and some goal post moving moments as the project got underway. Given that it may be some time before I record further interviews, I am pleased to have worked with fellow oral historian, Sally Zwartz (with whom I co-edited Oral History NSW's journal *Voiceprint* between 2011–2014) on this project; sharing the frustrations (as well as the good bits) was important given the need to feel positive about our process and outcomes despite the lockdown. My other interview plans were then put in abeyance and we re-located to our farm near Yass, feeling grateful for some rain after a long drought, bushfire anxiety and stress.

Watching the many creative artists I have interviewed, or hope to interview, making the best of communicating their talent and ideas via Zoom, Skype and other online facilities during COVID, it seems the hardest things to achieve are genuine eye contact and good sound quality. While I realise many oral histories may now be told and recorded using these means, I'm afraid I need to be in the same room with an interviewee – which, given the on-going and insidious nature of this virus, and my reluctance to experience it, means interviewing for me may be some time away. What happens to my confidence and energy in the meantime? Like so many others,



Margaret Leask presenting at the 2013 Oral History Australia Conference in Adelaide.

I soon realised I need a full diary and deadlines to focus. An English friend has described her similar experience as ‘an unravelling’ of her life and this is what it has felt like. I know I am not alone!

I was determined to catch up on a backlog of track logs and to sort research material as a way to stay focussed. (There’s a reason that there is a backlog – it’s my least favourite part of the work and is best done in between interviews as a useful and constant reminder of one’s interview technique, the need to listen and follow

up on comments.) And, even though I can’t ask questions of others at present, my default position is asking questions, so there have been many. This is an unprecedented experience for practically everyone, and life-changing for many. Besides, it is a time when I perceive that many older people are sorting archives and memorabilia, being reminded of better or different times. What a good time it would be to interview them!

I have a great need for live performance (particularly theatre, music and dance), and the communal experience of being in an audience, which raises and provokes questions for my interviewees about their process, way of working, social and personal relationships and situations which impact on that way of working. This need is tied into the interaction involved in preparing interviews: discussion with colleagues, curators, archivists, and ‘commissioners’ of interviews, about what research will be necessary, the reasons for interviewing a particular subject in relation to the intended collection destination, the preliminaries of talking to interviewees and the anticipation combined with nervous energy that motivate and focus me. I am, it seems, always in quest of the interviewee’s interpretations and stories – which are also our stories.



Margaret's farm near Yass, New South Wales. Photographed by Margaret Leask.

What do I love most about the oral history interview? The learning I experience as others share their perspectives: everyone has a great story, everyone has contributions to make as we face challenges, achievements and find our place in our community. How lucky we as oral historians are to have access to this immediacy – and how I miss it! I have found myself making contact with some past interviewees during this time. Having been made aware of their situation (many are older, living alone, not able to see family), I have felt compelled to say hello, that I am thinking of them and remember the time we spent together.

Since this 'lockdown' experience began, I have been considering the positives and negatives and vacillating, like many others, between optimism and pessimism. I am very lucky to have a comfortable, safe place to be, but I am not ready to stop preparing and asking questions, so I have to hope to be able to re-engage with the oral history community and interviews as soon as possible.

PS I have completed some long track logs but there is still a backlog!

# Hands on History: An Active Approach to Creating Oral Historians in the Secondary Classroom

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PHILLIP O'BRIEN

*Phillip O'Brien is a teacher from Melbourne with experience in a variety of different educational settings. He has written and presented with a number of professional bodies, including the History Teachers' Association of Victoria and the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority.*

History is not simply the story of what happened in the past. It is an active process of enquiry, and what we are able to discover depends on the questions we ask.

– Tracey Loughran<sup>1</sup>

History is a discipline like few others; one of the greatest challenges teachers face is not in generating an interest in the past, but in developing in students the mindset and skills to actively do so. Seeing learners evolve from passive students of history to active historians is immensely rewarding, but the *how* of such a goal is readily forgotten in the *why* and *what* of curriculum design. The perception that rote-learning of dates, people and places is the core requirement of history students is an ongoing hurdle to overcome with students, parents and indeed other key learning areas at a whole-school level; balancing the historical knowledge essential to understanding the modern world with the skills to 'do' history is the real goal of the classroom history teacher.<sup>2</sup> With this in mind, our school offers a Year Nine elective unit: 'Hands on History', which focuses on active historical skills and knowledge without adhering to a specific mandated chronology or period. This allows for significant course tailoring: to date, students have explored community history, local history, individual areas of interest, national history and, most recently, oral history.

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1 Tracey Loughran (ed.), *A Practical Guide to Studying History: Skills and Approaches* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

2 Glenn Whitman, 'Teaching Students How to Be Historians: An Oral History Project for the Secondary School Classroom', *The History Teacher* 33, no.4 (2000): 469–481.

By sheer kismet, our unit on oral history aligned almost parallel to the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent transition from the physical classroom to online learning. This brief essay aims to shine a light on the teaching of oral history in a secondary context via remote learning, as well as sharing some of the challenges and successes along the way.

Fundamental to the *doing* of historical investigation for the students was embedding a sense of purpose; demonstrating the value of the individual story was the anticipated first hurdle for students accustomed to empires, civilisations, wars, movements and colonisation. Correspondingly, time was dedicated to exploring the 'urgency' of oral history using simple mathematics; if one was fourteen years old (the age of most of the students) in 1914 – when World War One began – they would be 120 years old today. It quickly dawned on them that the chance of finding someone with a living memory of this period of history has now faded. This led to further discussion as they realised that the eyewitnesses of the definitive events of the last century will also disappear as time passes. 'Capturing' their unique stories, experiences and perspectives is, therefore, a matter of urgency. Through a personal lens, if students seek to learn more about the lives of their ancestors, the same sense of gravitas emerges. Further to this was the emphasis on the value of the individual story; the uniqueness of each individual among a global population in the billions; the students did indeed respond well to the concept of personal narrative.<sup>3</sup>

Having established a sense of purpose and urgency – all via the ubiquitous Google Meet (the remote conferencing platform used by teachers and students for lessons during the COVID-19 closure of schools) – students now worked on selecting a suitable interviewee and an appropriate topic for teacher approval. All students chose immediate family members for the task. Using an effective remote meeting system proved pivotal too, with clear instruction and guidance essential for overcoming

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3 Jennifer Gonzalez, 'Voice of Witness: Bring the Power of Oral History to Your Classroom', *Cult of Pedagogy*, 23 September 2018, <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/pod/episode-105/>.

miscommunications and misunderstandings.<sup>4</sup> Approved topics commonly included a focus on migration or particular life periods, such as:

- migration to Australia in the 1960s via the Turkish-Australian assisted migration scheme
- experience of military service in the Israeli Defense Force
- child migration from the United Kingdom
- growing up in rural Victoria
- working as a surveyor in the Australian Antarctic Territory in the 1960s
- schooling in colonial India
- recollections of a childhood in rural South Africa during the Great Depression
- life in post-independence Ceylon and the exodus of the Burgher community.

Narrowing their focus, students were now well-placed to develop questions that would form the backbone of their interview. Prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, a significant amount of time had been spent exploring question types (open vs closed questions) and how to ‘draw out’ detail from subjects; with this in mind, students were tasked with preparing six central questions, in addition to obtaining written consent from interviewees and testing their recording equipment. Almost all students used their phones as audio recorders and transferred the recorded files to their computers, although several chose to make video recordings of their interviews. Once everything was in place, students were given a green light to proceed. By the next scheduled Google Meet, all students had conducted their interview, giving us a wonderful base to build on; in fact, the majority of the interviews ran far longer than originally intended.

Armed with their interview, students were now directed to reflect on its content and identify areas ideal for further research and expansion, such as references to particular places, people and events. Using a variety of curated online sources, including the National Archives of Australia and Trove, students were shocked to discover

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Kennett and Hugh Richards, ‘Effective Remote History Teaching’, *One Big History Department*, Historical Association of the United Kingdom, 29 May 2020.

information that couldn't be found via a simple Google search! These sources provided key information to support, expand, verify and enrich their interview. Some students also asked their interviewee follow-up questions or sought information from other family members; conducting research as 'mini-historians' was, in many ways, a departure from the prescriptive nature of the curriculum, but both subject enthusiasm and skill development flourished.<sup>5</sup> Using their interview, research, information and a brief biography of their subject, students were now guided remotely through the process of writing up their work into an informative and detailed narrative. This was done during the online lessons with the use of writing samples and demonstrations of the passive voice and how one can remove oneself from the piece.

Teaching oral history via the remote learning format proved to be a most interesting exercise. It was certainly fascinating to see students 'run' with their topics; Kathryn Walbert compared it to students 'creating an original sketch'. Using shareable Google Docs, one was able to provide feedback and suggestions remotely, which in turn would spark further lines of inquiry for students in their work.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the most satisfying aspect of this task was to see students embrace the value of the individual story. In the secondary history classroom, this story is often lost among the core events and pivotal figures of the past; to see them come to preserve small pieces of the past was certainly rewarding for all involved.

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5 Karen Horn, 'Oral History in the Classroom: Clarifying the Context through Historical Understanding', *Yesterday and Today*, The South African Society for History Teaching, no. 11 (2014).

6 Kathryn Walbert, 'Oral History Projects', *Social Studies and the Young Learner*, National Council for Social Studies (March-April 2004): 5.

# A Different Kind of Listening

RUTH MELVILLE

*Ruth Melville is a writer based in Sydney. In 2018, she presented at the Oral History Northern Ireland Conference on the experience of narrative writers at the Australian Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse.*

Immersion and collaboration went out the window when the whole thing went online. I was going to Oral History Summer School, Hudson, New York: June 2020. Registration finalised, plane ticket booked, checking accommodation options. And then.

And then the world turns on a sixpence and people show their best and worst selves and the United States isn't the same place as it once was, nor is Australia or anywhere in the world for that matter. We all need to stay put and take a good look at ourselves on Zoom or one or other platform, but it's not the same as being with someone, especially with the time difference and trying to look friendly and interested at two in the morning.

Talking with someone, listening, is more than the sum of its visual and auditory parts. Oral history, at its best with bodies in the same space, allows each pause, moment of silence, inhalation and exhalation of breath. These days the world shifts lens, microphone and recorder, and we with it. Two degrees or ten, fourteen hours ahead or behind. Whatever the latitude and longitude, it's a different kind of listening.



Tweet cancelling summer school. Photographed by Ruth Melville.

# The Warwick Irish – A Work in Progress

PAT RYAN AND PAULINE PEEL

*Pat Ryan migrated to Australia from Ireland in 1978 and has been a member of Oral History Queensland since 2002. Formerly a community radio broadcaster with Brisbane multicultural station 4EB, Pat now focuses on oral history, especially memories of migration.*

*Pauline Peel grew up around Warwick and has an in-depth knowledge of family and local history, particularly as it pertains to Irish community history.*

On 14 March 2020, days before COVID-19 shut down public events, 98 people gathered in the old St Mary's church in Warwick, in the Southern Downs of Queensland, to hear two speakers talk about the history of the Irish in Warwick. The two speakers were Pat Ryan, oral historian and a 1970s migrant from Ireland, and Pauline Peel, family historian and a native of Warwick, whose ancestors migrated from Ireland in the 1860s.



Pat Ryan, Pauline Peel and Chris Ryan (sound technician at the event) in Warwick. Photographed by Jeremy Sollars.

Pat spoke about an oral history she recorded in 2002 with the grand-daughter of Irish migrants who had settled in the area in the 1880s. Pauline spoke about the annual St Patrick's Day parade in Warwick, once a signature local event involving a whole-of-community effort. The presentations were enlivened by historic photographs and documents.

Both talks awoke dormant memories and stimulated conversations, particularly among older residents. Following the presentations, several new and intriguing stories were shared with the presenters. Plans to meet again were made but, within days, COVID-19 restrictions were introduced. Some conversations continued online but for the pre-internet generation, some of whom are residents in care homes, the window closed – for now. Plans for written exchanges, in place of recordings, are now underway. Back to basics!

# Oral History and COVID-19: Drastic Changes or Business as Usual?

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JESSICA STROJA

*Jessica Stroja is an Adjunct Fellow at the Griffith University Centre for Social and Cultural Research.*

Life has changed dramatically for the world due to COVID-19. Social distancing requirements, travel restrictions and risks to vulnerable people rapidly became commonplace in reporting as the pandemic developed. Many researchers were quickly required to alter their plans if their projects were to be completed on schedule. Travel was severely restricted, and many found themselves wondering how their work would continue if they could not travel to meet an interviewee. A number of people have adapted their work to reflect this changing situation. Yet there is a proportion of researchers, historians and scholars for whom life has not changed. The anxieties, fears and concerns surrounding COVID-19 of course remained prominent for them, as it did for many people, but oral history in a COVID world is, for some, not too dissimilar to oral history in a pre-COVID world.

I have been fortunate to have worked with a diverse community of historians and researchers, including academics and practitioners, volunteers and staff, oral historians and those who favoured other methods. I have enjoyed the reciprocal sharing of ideas with researchers who focus on local histories, those who work on broader projects, people based in my own region and those who live across the globe. Yet one aspect of their work has often resurfaced – the requirement to travel great distance for work-related research.

As an historian and academic, I have faced barriers that have prevented me from travelling to conduct oral history interviews face-to-face. Indeed, many researchers face such barriers for a variety of reasons including disability, illness, financial strain, and care commitments, among others. Yet through the availability of technology, willing interview participants and supportive colleagues, my work has been

conducted via telephone and video conferencing platforms. We shared photographs and documents via secure methods, and live video allowed us to feel as if we were in the same room. Those who have participated in my research projects as interviewees were quite willing to be part of an interview via this method. As many of us have experienced, the understanding and willingness of these people to participate in our research makes our projects possible. Yet I have often been met with surprise from people who had not realised my research was possible without undertaking travel.

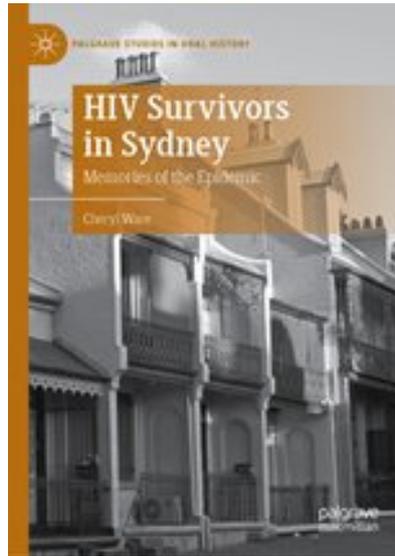
As the COVID-19 travel restrictions increased, many people found themselves turning to technology to make their work possible. This has included oral historians and other researchers. I saw many researchers rapidly sign up for information sessions on conducting interviews and focus groups online, adjusting projects for the online interview environment, and adjusting human research ethics procedures to incorporate these interview processes. Yet for those who already faced barriers to travel, this aspect of their work did not change. Video and telephone interviews continued as scheduled, project planning continued as scheduled and research continued – albeit with many more people now utilising these same online platforms due to the COVID-19 travel barrier. As a result of a pandemic, the method of work already in frequent use by those who face barriers to travel was becoming a much more widespread occurrence.

Several colleagues have expressed to me their belief that this new way of working might well continue after the pandemic. For some, such as myself, this is not a new way of working. Yet the pandemic has made this way of working more commonplace. Yes, there will still be times when researchers will need to travel – but there are many more people who have now seen their research continue and succeed despite their inability to travel during the pandemic. While I have faced barriers to travel, I have not faced barriers in my research. I have conducted successful research that has brought forth new understandings of refugee resettlement experiences in Queensland, much of which is either forthcoming or under consideration for publication. I have worked with numerous local communities to undertake research that has allowed for a greater understanding of heritage and community engagement. I have had the support of colleagues who saw beyond a barrier, and instead saw

projects with potential, and an historian who was going to see each of her projects through to completion. For many people who have faced similar barriers, this was (and will be) life as normal – before and after the restrictions caused by COVID-19.

Importantly, this piece does not seek to diminish the work of those who conduct interviews in person, or those who travel for work-related research. It does not seek to diminish the importance of work that relies on on-site work, such as projects involving an archaeological component. Nor does it does not seek to diminish the severity of the impact COVID-19 has had on the lives of people across the globe. Instead, it highlights the determination of those who face barriers restricting travel and physical meetings to continue in their work, and how a COVID-19 world has made their way of work become more commonplace than ever before.

# Reviews



***HIV Survivors in Sydney: Memories of the Epidemic,***  
**Cheryl Ware**

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 247 pages. \$84.99  
(hardcover). ISBN 978-3-030-05101-3.

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JACQUELYN BAKER  
*PhD Candidate, Deakin University*

Oral historians have long been attuned to the presence of emotion in oral history interviews. As Alistair Thomson pointed out in the last issue of *Oral History Australia Journal*, this phenomenon can be traced back to the beginning of the oral history movement and, more specifically, to the oral historians who were interested in the emotions linked to the events of World War Two. The challenge for contemporary oral historians boils down to how they interpret emotions, and what meaning can be made from these interpretations.

In *HIV Survivors in Sydney: Memories of an Epidemic*, Cheryl Ware has not only identified complex emotions in the oral history testimonies of her narrators, but

has interpreted these emotions with the utmost attention to detail. While this book is not explicitly a history of emotion, the emotions and perspectives that Ware has been able to elucidate from these interviews is an important contribution to the history of the HIV and AIDS epidemic in Australia. Read alongside Geraldine Fela's oral history work that explores the memories and emotions of nurses who worked in HIV wards in Australia, Ware's history can be seen as part of a burgeoning body of research that reveals the impact that the HIV and AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s had on the personal, intimate, and everyday lives of individuals. This centering of the intimate and personal experience is particularly groundbreaking as much of the literature has thus far focussed on the ways that activists had publicly responded to the epidemic.

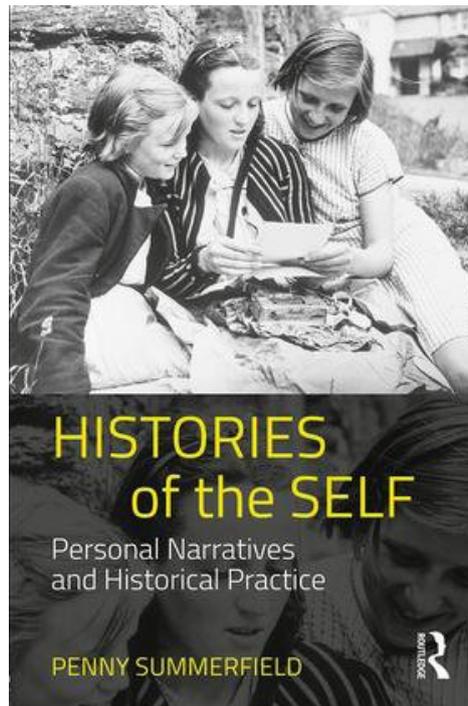
Ware examines oral history testimonies of twenty-five Sydney based gay men who were impacted by HIV and AIDS. At times their testimonies could detail contradictory experiences, but Ware has carefully crafted a history that places these complex narratives alongside each other, examining each testimony with a measured tone. The only instance when Ware's measured analysis falters is when she discusses a narrator's recollection of the film *Dallas Buyers Club*: Ware asserts that Thomas' recollection of the film had departed from the plot. While Ware had given a description of the protagonist, Ron Woodroof, I found that this description did not reflect this character's story arc, nor did it provide a succinct summary that proved that Thomas' recollection had departed from the film's plot and story. However, I want to stress that this is a minor criticism. Ware's ability to examine twenty-five testimonies by paying close attention to emotion, tone, narrative construction, volume, speech patterns and non-verbal communication is highly commendable. For example, Ware was able to pick up on the way that a narrator slapped their thigh intermittently throughout the interview, observing that this behaviour occurred when the narrator recounted an uncomfortable memory. It is this close attention to detail that is a real strength of Ware's work.

Ware has identified the importance and potential that her interviewees saw in the thriving gay community in Sydney, which then paved a clear foundation for the events and themes that are explored later in the book. The chapters of Ware's book

are divided chrono-thematically, and while there is an overlap between the 1980s and 1990s in some of the chapters, Ware has constructed a clear progression through the epidemic. After establishing a sense of place, Ware discusses the complexities around testing and disclosure, the negotiations around safe sex practices, concern over visible symptoms, and coping with death and loss in the community. The narrative ends with the introduction of HAART (highly active antiretroviral therapy), and draws to a close with reflections on the interviewees' motivations for participating in this research.

Ware has acknowledged that Aboriginal men are underrepresented in existing histories about HIV and AIDS in Australia, and has made some strides to rectify this. Testimonies of two Aboriginal men, Tony and Evan, were included, and Ware specifically addressed oral histories around safe sex campaigns that were designed specifically for Aboriginal audiences and communities. Ware does not shy away from the more discriminatory aspects of Sydney's gay community, tackling the racial discrimination that Tony had both experienced and witnessed.

This book is well written, engaging, and deeply moving. The emphasis of this history on oral testimonies has been supplemented by the inclusion of additional primary and secondary sources. It is aimed at both a general and academic audience. The testimonies and insights in this book would interest those who are both familiar with the pre-existing scholarship and those who are new to this history.



***Histories of the Self: Personal Narratives and Historical Practice, Penny Summerfield***

Routledge, London, 2018. 202 pages. \$73.99  
(paperback). ISBN 9780429487217

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Penny Summerfield's *Histories of the Self* is an excellent book, targeted at students and researchers, revealing how historians and scholars from other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology and creative writing use personal testimony in different forms. This is a book written by a formidable expert in her field. Students, scholars and writers have much to learn from this text on the practice, art, interpretation and writing of life stories.

This book is timely, published at a historical moment when so many historians, writers and creative practitioners are using life stories to think about and represent the past and present world. Life histories have burgeoned in popularity as sources

among historians, especially new social historians and microhistorians, over recent years, and it is important to have authoritative guides like this one to help us navigate their different forms. We learn much from Summerfield's own work in oral history as well as her excellent synthesis of the work of others, about how private lives can illuminate broader global processes as well as historical method, analysis and craft.

The book is carefully and precisely structured around different forms of testimony and it is directed at students and researchers of these different forms. Summerfield's many years of teaching in the field revealed gaps in knowledge this text has been designed to fill. There are several excellent books on theoretical approaches to the use of personal testimony, but Summerfield's students told her that they wanted more case studies and examples of historians working through the various issues involved in using personal testimonies so that they might learn something from their example and practice. The reader moves through chapters on different forms of personal testimony including letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies and oral histories. Summerfield discusses each of these forms carefully and introduces us to the different ways in which historians have used them over time and in varied national contexts. We are also led lucidly and sensitively through debates about authenticity, reliability and representativeness. Summerfield shows us the limits and possibilities of what historians can learn about 'real people' and 'what actually happened' in the past from these sources. These are issues oral historians and other users of personal testimony have long been preoccupied with and some are better practiced at negotiating and articulating these than others.

In the introduction, Summerfield reveals how the analysis of personal testimony has been reframed by scholarship produced by the cultural turn, the history of emotions, feminism, post-colonialism and psychoanalysis. She works through these key intellectual developments over the past forty years and shows how the field has benefitted from debates over different terms and categories of analysis. I particularly enjoyed the discussion in the introduction of the contest over terms to describe personal testimonies including life stories, life narratives, life writing, personal narratives, testimony, and histories of the self, to describe different categories of personal testimonies. Summerfield settled on the terms 'histories of the self' and 'personal

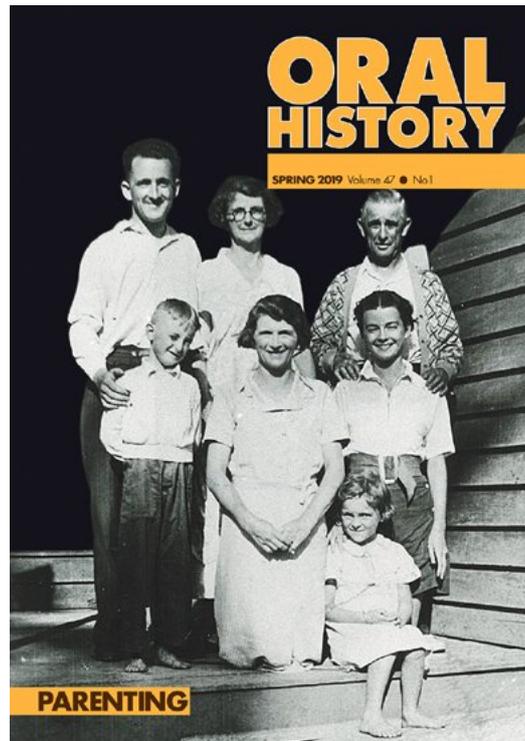
narratives' because these are current among historians and she thinks they come with less baggage than others. She shows how practitioners have become much more careful with the claims they make using their evidentiary base and how work on the oppressed and marginalised in the past by feminist and post-colonial scholars using these sources have enriched our broader historical knowledge. She also hopes to hint at the creative and interpretive processes at work in the use and construction of stories about the self.

Many historians of Britain are very familiar with Summerfield's existing work on oral history, war and women's work. In this book she includes examples from a wide variety of case studies and historians' work, ranging from the fifteenth century to the present, in various forms. Chapter two focusses on how historians have used letters to reconstruct past social lives, on issues of accuracy, and how one can generalise from singular specific sources such as these. The third chapter works through how historians have used diaries in their varied forms. Summerfield reveals how historians have grappled with issues of composition, accuracy and the sense of empowerment that diary writing can provide authors. Chapter four discusses autobiography and memoir writing and how social, economic and cultural historians have used them. Here she suggests that genre is key and claims regarding truth telling are especially problematic because autobiographies are often believed to present true and accurate accounts of an author's past. Summerfield reminds us that this genre of personal testimony writing can be more selective than other examples in its account of the past. She also reveals the impact of the present on how this source is shaped. She argues that we need to pay particular attention to the construction of autobiographies.

Oral history is the subject of chapter five, prized as a historical method from the 1970s and 80s for opening up new fields and areas of history and for revealing details of private and intimate lives that are not captured by written archives. Summerfield introduces students to the debates over memory that have preoccupied oral historians over the past few decades. She argues that in its early years oral history was understood largely as 'recovery history' but recent theoretical debates have shifted practitioners' attention to issues of narrativity and subjectivity in interview testimony. No longer do oral historians see interviews as a window onto past lives but they are understood as

a product of many social and cultural interactions that deserve analysis in the process of analysing and using a life story. She suggests that it is important for oral historians to be reflective about their practice. Chapter six concentrates on how historians have considered issues of representativeness and their response to post-positivism. It discusses how oral historians have made different claims for the validity and legitimacy of their sources and scholarship and how useful some have found the idea of the 'exceptional normal' to combat issues of typicality. She suggests that all scholars and students need to understand the mediation of memory. Most historians who use personal testimonies have become more confident in their studies of the self. As a result, many more people understand how the use of personal accounts of past lives enables us to better understand broader historical change.

There is no doubt that scholars and students of personal testimonies in diverse national contexts will find this a valuable guide for many years to come.



**Oral History 'Parenting' Special Issue,  
Carla Pascoe Leahy and Alistair Thomson (eds)**

*Vol. 47. No. 1 (2019).. 129 pages. ISSN 01430955*

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This special issue of *Oral History* provides vital conceptual and methodological insights to historians working in the fields of oral history and histories of parenthood. Key interventions include contributors' novel attention to parenthood far beyond its early years, their deft demonstrations of a range of oral history methodologies, and their signposting of the largely untapped possibilities of archived oral history collections.

Taken as a whole, the volume invites historians to examine parenthood as an experience that lasts long after children have grown into adults. It poses a challenge to archival historians who frequently study the history of parenthood through literature and organisations that have addressed the parents of young children about issues such as infant health, childcare, and education. Indeed, as the authors in this volume make clear, the effects of parenting are felt across the life course. The volume's editors Carla Pascoe Leahy and Alistair Thomson acknowledge scholarly (and public) fascination with experiences of becoming a parent for the first time, which is 'one of the few identity shifts that a person will undertake after reaching adulthood, with profound implications for self-concept, relationships and lifestyle' (p.3). However, by taking a broader perspective on parenting, the volume reveals that its influence is virtually lifelong.

At the same time that it extends the parameters of the history of parenting, the volume equips historians with a range of methods to study its intergenerational and enduring effects. Through skillful interpretation of archived and original interviews, contributors delve into individuals' personal reflections on parenthood as one of the most intimate and vulnerable aspects of their lives. In so doing, these authors fulfil the journal's aim to demonstrate the 'special aptitude of oral history to better understand the changing nature of parenting across diverse places, cultures, and times' (p.3). For instance, the issue offers thoughtful examinations of interviewees' relationships with family members and the pride, affection, and guilt that emerged across their testimonies. It also highlights the ethical issues that arise when engaging with individuals' living memories of parenthood, and emphasises historians' responsibilities to approach oral histories of family with particular care and sensitivity.

Thomson provides a model example of the secondary analysis of archived oral history (in this case from the 'Australia 1938' project) and invites the adoption of new research methods among oral historians and archival historians alike. Thomson's history of fatherhood spans Australians' memories of childhood in the 1920s–30s; 'the time of telling' their stories during oral history interviews in the 1970s–80s; and the 2010s when Thomson completed his research (p.35). Thomson outlines both the distinct challenges of using archived interviews and the value of oral history to

enrich understandings of Australian family life in the interwar years. Specifically, he highlights gendered divisions of labour within families and interviewees' frank discussions about the 'disastrous consequences' (p.40) when fathers did not or could not fulfil the role of breadwinner. Thomson's compelling secondary analysis invites oral historians to revisit their methodologies and to consider the rich potential of existing oral history collections. His work also encourages archival historians to engage with oral history material and methods in order to explore intergenerational experiences and private lives in the past.

Angela Davis further showcases the possibilities of expert, ambitious secondary analysis in her examination of 40 archived interviews taken from four collections of Holocaust survivors' testimonies. Davis acknowledges ethical concerns about reusing and interpreting survivor testimonies. However, she convincingly argues that archived interviews provide insights into survivors' subjective experiences that are rarely accessible through other sources. For example, Davis' sensitive analysis identifies shared patterns in survivors' experiences of parenthood, their efforts to navigate their place within multiple families, and tensions between what she terms 'closeness and distance' (p.71). Davis simultaneously advances understanding of large-scale events—in this case, of surrogate families and forced separations during World War Two—and their intimate effects on women, their families, and their inner lives.

Philip Kirby's secondary analysis of interviews at the UK Dyslexia Archive elevates the voices of individuals whose actions and achievements are overlooked in written records. Kirby offers essential historical context to current debates over diagnoses of dyslexia among children and dispels depictions of dyslexia as a myth concocted by 'worried' middle class mothers. While Kirby's emphasis on tracing the history of the UK dyslexia movement means there is less focus on interpretation of oral history sources in his article, he offers important insights into mothers' public and private roles as educators and advocates for their children.

Miranda Francis and Katie Holmes take a different approach to reveal the analytical contributions of lengthy original interviews, especially when paired with rich contextual research. In their article, Francis and Holmes put one woman's life narrative in

conversation with evolving ideas about child development. They show how new theories of parenting provided different perspectives on Kathleen's (a pseudonym) decision to spend ten months apart from her two-year-old son during the early 1970s. These new ideas generated fresh personal distress and a 'powerful sense of maternal loss' (p.50), which manifested in silence and discomposure during Kathleen's oral history interview. Francis and Holmes highlight how some women's memories of motherhood continue to be silenced in a world of 'confessional narratives' (p.58). The authors also address historians' ethical obligations to engage with interviewees' testimonies while respecting and protecting the privacy of their families, the latter of whom may feature in the interviews but did not volunteer to share their stories.

Richard Hall extends the volume's insights about the interplay of public and private life through interviews with eight father-son pairs, and one pair of brothers whose father had died young. Hall's interviews revealed a 'bubbling continuity of feelings' about fatherhood and childhood that stretched 'from the remembered past to the present, sometimes in opposition to present-day norms' (p.65). Hall outlines the significance of the physical space in which interviews were conducted, many of which took place in interviewees' family homes. Narrators drew on material objects—including a shelf above the fireplace as evidence of one father's carpentry skills and performance of 1960s masculinity—as prompts to negotiate and convey their emotional histories as fathers and sons. Hall's reflexivity is a strength of the article. With Francis and Holmes' contribution, the article speaks to the role of interviews as 'sites of productive reflection for interviewees and interviewer alike' (p.69).

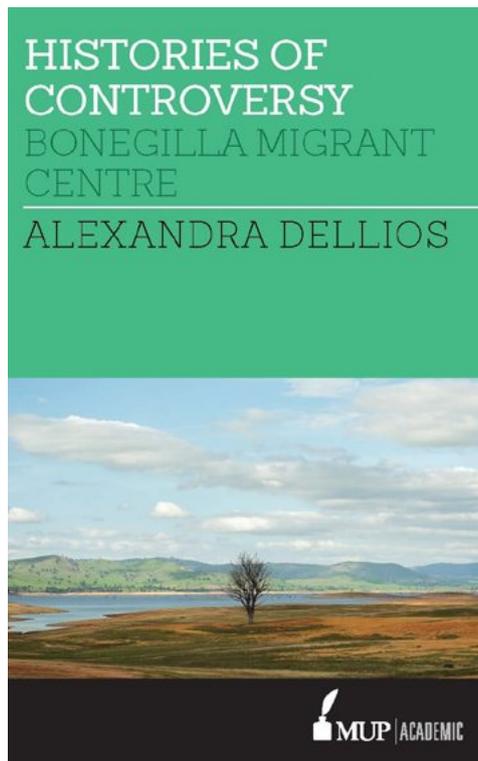
Anna Green underlines the volume's point about the lifelong experience of parenting by examining adult grandchildren's memories of their grandparents. Her essay identifies the significant connections and overlaps between histories of parenting and the analysis of family memory and genealogy, topics that are foundational to Maori history but underexplored in the Pakeha family past (p.82). By working in this gap, Green's research uncovers the vital role grandparents have played in the content, form, and longer-term impact of Pakeha family stories. Green concludes that grandparents shape how grandchildren identify with the history of their own families 'through the expression of emotional warmth, storytelling and as exemplars of moral

values' (p.90). She examines the ways that grandparenting (especially of young children) has produced strong 'sense memories'. These included the taste and smell of grandmother's baking, whose cookbook and other possessions offered a 'tangible continuity of sight, touch, and emotion' between generations (p.84). Like Hall, Green explores the value of (inherited) objects or photographs within interviewees' homes as narrative prompts, and emphasises the significance of intergenerational memories by interviewing multiple members of each family. Their articles highlight how oral history provides a space for interviewees to negotiate and articulate their emotional connections to the past and to consider how their memories of parenthood and grandparenthood inform their present lives.

Carla Pascoe Leahy concludes the issue by examining the significance of participant selection in oral history research. Her article makes an important intervention in oral history scholarship that treats participant selection as a pragmatic choice that can be 'relegated to appendices, footnotes or introductory asides' (p.105). Pascoe Leahy offers a thoughtful appraisal of several UK and Australian sociological and historical projects that employ qualitative interviews to explore parenthood and family. She examines the advantages and limitations of various sampling sizes ranging from large scale population studies to tightly focused cohorts that emphasise depth rather than representation. In doing so, she demonstrates how researchers' methodological decisions inform the parameters of a project and impact every subsequent stage from potential interviewees' openness and willingness to participate in a study to its research conclusions. The article invites oral historians to reassess the magnitude of their methodological decisions and offers a valuable guide for historians of parenting to analyse original and archived interviews as historical sources. Thomson and Pascoe Leahy's articles provide satisfying bookends to the volume by highlighting the necessity of analysing archived interviews (with close attention to the context in which they were produced), before showing researchers exactly how this can be done.

This special issue highlights the potential of oral histories of parenting to expand and reshape both the parameters and the methods of multiple fields of research. The volume brings together recent doctoral research and the current projects of some of the leading oral historians working in Australia, New Zealand, and the UK. The

volume's insights will benefit readers working on a wide range of topics including scholars working on histories of subjectivity and private life, and those who are keen to extend their skills in the creation of oral history interviews or the analysis of archived oral history material.



***Histories of Controversy: Bonegilla Migrant Centre,***  
**Alexandra Dellios**

Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2017. 202  
pages. \$49.99 (paperback). ISBN 9780522871616.

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Griffith University

*Histories of Controversy* provides compelling analysis of the histories and mythologies of Bonegilla Migrant Centre. Dellios' approach in revisiting Bonegilla is timely. There is a burgeoning interest in the sites and spaces of post-war migration throughout Australia, as those who experienced such centres firsthand sadly decline in number each year. These sites bear witness to the transformation of the Australian nation in the decades following World War Two, as migrants from across Europe arrived for work and the hope of a new life. As one of the most prominent of these sites, Bonegilla is often mythologised as providing a formative narrative for modern

multicultural Australia. Yet Dellios consciously seeks to disrupt this narrative of inevitable progress to contemporary cultural diversity. Instead, she uses the site to demonstrate how migrants contested the pervasive attempts to control their lives and the controversies that occurred as a result.

Dellios does not attempt to debunk post-war mythologies entirely, nor does she seek to replace them with eulogised narratives of migrants' time in Bonegilla. The book instead compellingly 'argues that Australia's migration history cannot be typified by either progress or continuity' (p.4). Dellios focusses on moments of tension and controversy, which reveal the complexity of historical moments from diverse perspectives. The strength of *Histories of Controversy* is in the author's compassion and careful empathy for those whom she is writing about. This book is a history of migrants' experiences in a place of containment and isolation, but Dellios is careful not to allow an institutionalised history of the site to overwhelm the voices of those who lived there. Her work is an important contribution to contemporary critical scholarship, and judiciously cites the key authors who research post-war migration, but the book is also a powerful example of reintroducing marginalised voices into the historical narrative.

Historians of the Bonegilla Migrant Centre are able to draw on voluminous archival materials derived from diligent post-war administrators. The site has also been the catalyst for a number of community-based projects which have generated local histories, exhibitions, and oral history projects. Dellios' work is notable in its effective synthesis of these written archival documents, extant oral histories, and new oral history material that she recorded as part of the project. While the latter are relatively few in number, they provide important insights for the reader. The book is a powerful exemplar for students seeking ways to understand how to integrate contradictory oral histories with complex written documents. The result is often confronting, such as Dellios' consideration of child deaths and residents' suicide, and forces the reader to pause and reflect on experiences too long silenced and oppressed.

*Histories of Controversies* provides compelling evidence of migrants' attempts to shape, and if necessary, oppose the control of Australian government departments. Dellios

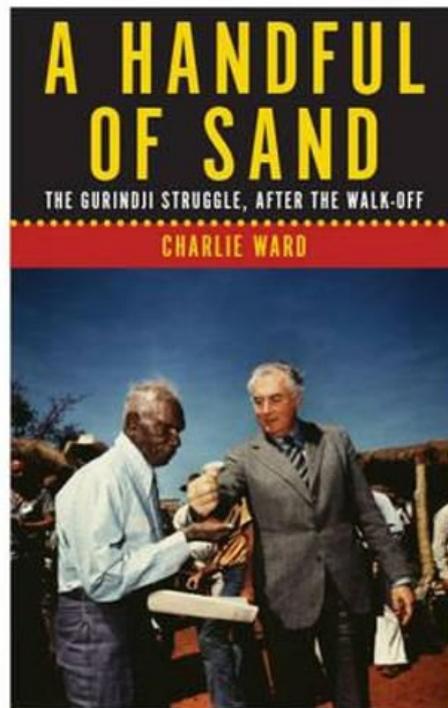
goes to considerable effort to articulate the Cold War context in which the centre operated, drawing our attention to how government fears of Nazi sympathisers in the immediate post-war moment shifted into officials' enduring concerns about the influence of communist parties. This includes important reflections on the influence of the Italian Communist Party, as well as its Australian equivalent. Yet, it is in the examples of migrants' everyday acts of situated defiance that the book is most compelling. Examples abound of migrants' anger at work opportunities and conditions at the camp. Dellios carefully guides the readers' attention not only to the cultural politics of the Cold War, but also to its gendered manifestation. One camp official's attempts to threaten a man, after his wife defiantly protested the quality of the food by casting it on the floor, remains a particularly disturbing attempt at intimidation.

The book provides an important contribution to scholarship relating to affect and post-war migration. It is in this regard that Dellios' synthesis of oral and written histories is at its strongest. Her background in History, but also in Critical Heritage Studies, is clear in her weaving of voice and place to recast migrants' affective responses to their situation. Her approach to what constituted care is a powerful example of this. There are moving histories of families' care for each other, often underpinning deeply personal stories of their determination to stay together in the aftermath of World War Two. There are also intriguing instances of more ephemeral care, as communities and relationships formed and dissipated based on shifting interests. As Dellios states, this is not a halcyon recollection of successfully overcoming misfortune, but a complex history of shifting circumstance and opportunity. There is a striking absence of any care or compassion for many of the individuals discussed, and instead a tremendous sense of loneliness as migrants went from hut to hut in search of adequate food to survive.

Dellios sets out to interrogate and destabilise the mythologies of Bonegilla through historical enquiry. Her use of oral histories conjures voice to challenge the benign attempts of officialdom to control the movement, workplaces, intimate lives, and families of new arrivals to the Australia in decades following the end of the war. At the same time, her work uses the words of government officials to reveal the human

decisions that underpinned the seemingly inexplicable conditions. Dellios uses these governmental documents to re-interpret carefully the institutionalised language of bureaucracy in a manner that demonstrates migrants' ongoing acts of agency. While administrators' attempts to correct the inadequacy of facilities are revealed, there are repeated examples of staggering official insensitivity and deliberate attempts to silence migrants' voices. The report into the death of one child, Marie, is breathtaking in its callousness.

While some have sought to raise the Bonegilla Migrant Centre to a place of national becoming that is akin to Eureka, it is clear that Dellios is troubled by such scholarship. Bonegilla is one among a myriad of places at which traumatised but determined migrants sought to sustain their lives. The extent to which they were controlled and corralled does give Bonegilla particular authority and historical insight. There is a remarkable array of archival sources associated with the centre, to which Dellios can only gesture in a work of this length. There is also a remarkable legacy of oral histories accrued over decades, to which the book is an important addition. I recall reading Glenda Sluga's oft-cited *Bonegilla: A Place of No Hope* as a migrant and international student in Australia at the turn of the millennium. The book was a revelation to me about Australia's post-war histories, and its continued legacies in the present. I hope Dellios' book provides similar moments of reflection on the intersection between past and present for emerging scholars today. Without doubt, her writing offers a powerful testament to those who passed through the camp's gates.



***A Handful of Sand: The Gurindji struggle,  
after the walk-off, Charlie Ward***

Melbourne, Monash University Publishing, 2016. 400 pages. \$29.99 (paperback). ISBN 9781925377163

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If white Australians can recall anything about the Gurindji walk-off and subsequent land rights struggle, the historic image of Prime Minister Gough Whitlam pouring sand into the outstretched hands of local leader, Vincent Lingiari, in August 1975 must be a top contender. A reproduction of this photograph graces the front cover of Charlie Ward's new history of the Gurindji struggle. However, his well-researched and insightful contribution does much more than recount well-worn hagiography.

Rather, Ward's 'insiders' account, based on extensive oral histories conducted 'on-country', of this remote Northern Territory community's long, frustrated struggle for a measure of independence tells the story behind that picture. The symbolic

'handover' itself conceals a farcical reality: what was Lingiari to do with the sand? While Lingiari held on to the initial amount, letting it 'drift out of his hand', he was later handed a further quantity for the benefit of assembled camera crews. As two onlookers reflected in an interview with Ward, 'they could have given him a little box'.

While the Gurindji struggle is far from an unknown episode in Aboriginal history, it is told here in a down to earth, sympathetic style closer to communist author Frank Hardy's *The Unlucky Australians*, than the wealth of historical scholarship in which the walk-off features as but one milestone in the long march to rights. Hardy's book helped bring the Gurindji's struggle with absentee landlord Lord Vestey to national attention in 1968. But Ward's focus is on what happened after the initial walk-off as the Gurindji attempted to build their dream – a functioning cattle station that would provide subsistence on their sacred lands and a future for their children.

Far from a conclusion, the gift of a pastoral lease in 1975 was only the beginning of Lingiari's and his 'track mob's' struggle to make meaningful the newly consecrated ideal of self-determination, and what Ward dubs its 'emancipatory packaging'. The book is divided into three sections – the first covering the strike's lead up and responses from various conservative governments up until 1972. A second section chronicles the Whitlam and early Fraser government's seemingly honest commitment to empowering Indigenous groups, while the last chronicles the disillusionment of the latter Fraser and Hawke years, as their dream slipped further from reach. However, another chronology is just as important: roughly half the book is concerned with the period before the handover, and the latter with its varied ramifications.

This is a significant chronology in many ways. The Gurindji's ambitions had always relied at least in part on outsiders. Their initial 'walk-off' had been inspired by Aboriginal rights campaigners in Darwin and southern supporters (in the form of unionists and university students) provided basic necessities while government and Vestey's wavered and argued. After the handover, *kartiya* (white; the book is careful to use Gurindji language where possible) bureaucrats and assorted chancers largely replaced these earlier 'do-gooders', who had moved on to different causes. Stan

Davey, an early supporter of Gurindji ambitions, arrived back at the settlement in the 1980s to find not a spirit of resistance but of resignation.

Another way in which 1975 stands as a linchpin year for the Gurindji is how their independence aspirations moved from much vaunted cause to heavily restrictive reality. While self-determination promised an end to assimilative agendas, the way Whitlam and later Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser's Department of Aboriginal Affairs handled the development of their property – named Muramulla – reeks of this earlier paternalism. 'Development' meant Westernisation – the running of a profitable cattle station (during a period of immense financial hardship for the industry as a whole) and the provision of services on a European basis – by bureaucrats in Canberra and Darwin who held the purse strings. The failure to develop local capability to manage these projects and finances, and their subsequent entrusting in a conga line of kleptocratic *kartiya* administrators is particularly chillingly told.

Ward's narrative is deeply personal – it is about Lingiari, the elders who sat alongside him and the new generation they looked upon with equal parts hope and scorn – told through interviews with walk off veterans and newer faces, as well as the Gurindji's outside supporters. Those hoping for a close engagement with the existing literature on Aboriginal rights, or with the Gurindji's place in the larger 'world' of Indigenous struggle, will be disappointed. The 'wider world' does appear via vignette: the 1967 Referendum, Tent Embassy, and events like Cyclone Tracey or the passage of Northern Territory self-government are not unimportant to Ward's story. And one of the most interesting aspects of his narrative is how the Gurindji's accommodation to 'white ways' in the form of rural cattle culture was challenged by the mechanisation of the industry via helicopter. But this remains a closely bracketed story, as perhaps a tale of this magnitude deserves.

The facts speak in *A Handful of Sand*, and the book is light on overt analysis of the leader's strategy, or that of their adversaries. Instead, Ward's implicit argument regarding the unfulfilled promises of self-determination are made by his cast of characters, many of whom take out their frustrations regarding the Settler-State's unwillingness to budge on real control over their lives by turning to the scourge

of alcoholism. While this book appeared a year prior to 2017's Uluru Statement from the Heart, it provides an important argument for continued focus on real Indigenous control, via constitutional amendment and a 'voice' to parliament, rather than entrusting such matters to bureaucrats 'for their own good'. As Ward concludes: 'against all the odds, Lingiari's legacy lives on', though that legacy is still very much uncertain.



***Remembering Migration: Oral Histories and Heritage in Australia*, Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds)**

Cham (Switzerland): Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 357 pages \$90.70 (hardcover). ISBN 978-3-030-17750-8

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*Remembering Migration* provides an important contribution to the study of migration history and heritage in Australia, and a rich exploration of methodological issues around memory studies. To understand how migration is remembered, represented and commemorated is an essential scholarly enterprise in a multicultural and multi-ethnic nation like Australia.

Editors Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton note that oral histories of migration have become key to Australian historiography, yet diasporic memories remain understudied when compared to other areas of Australian national history, and continue to play a secondary role in migration history itself. The editors identify limitations

that have hindered this essential development, including difficulties in accessing the material, and the focus of many oral history and public memory projects on specific cultural ethnic groups over the complex and shifting identities around class, gender, sexuality, age, intercultural connections and intimacies. While this is a crucial argument, the book's many chapters devoted to particular ethnic groups demonstrates that an ethnic-specific focus is not necessarily incompatible with innovative approaches to migration history and memory. Importantly, the introduction and many of the chapters in the book identify the transnational and cross-generational nature of migration memories.

The book is divided into two parts, with part one focussing on oral history. This section opens with an essay by Alistair Thomson on gendered memories of migration as they emerge through the complex intertwining of photographs, letters, oral histories and autobiographical writings. By focussing on post-war displaced persons, Jayne Persian addresses a crucial question: what is the value of oral histories, not just to historical knowledge, but to migrants themselves? The answer emphasises tensions between the motivations and objectives of interviewees and those of historians, and how the centrality of agency, intimacy and family life can inform broader historical reflections on nationalism, diaspora and transnationalism. Shirleene Robinson demonstrates the important role oral history can play in both challenging the assumed heterosexuality of migrants, and in exploring the complex intersections between sexuality and migration. Anisa Puri reflects, through one particular story, on the importance of age as an analytical category for historians of migration, particularly through its intersection with gender and ethnicity. Kate Darian-Smith and Kyle Harvey note how mass migration and television have become intertwined phenomena in Australian history since at least World War Two, yet have remained stubbornly separated in historical accounts. They argue that migrants' experiences and memories of watching television provide a complex historical narrative around intimacy, family life, economic success, and cultural adjustment, but also reframe the history of television in Australia as a history of audience marginality and under-representation. Madeleine Regan focusses on Veneto Market gardeners in Adelaide between the 1920s and the 1970s, reflecting on the importance of developing digital platforms for interpreting this history. While potentially interesting, Regan does

not provide a clear argument; her approach seems closer to traditional community history or family memoir than to more nuanced and innovative approaches to migration history. Karen Agutter and Catherine Kevin use the history of unsupported mothers in post-war Australia as an example of the importance of historicising migration at the intersection of different forms of marginalisation. Their argument that oral history is ‘crucial but limited’ (p.107) requiring integration with historical documents suggests a rather superficial understanding of oral history as a discipline. Nevertheless, the chapter presents important, complex and valuable research on an understudied and crucial topic. Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen considers the effects of long family separation in the context of Vietnamese refugees’ history, a topic with great relevance to the enduring separation of migrant and refugee families in contemporary Australia and elsewhere. Andrea Cleland’s essay on Greek Macedonian migration focusses on the transmission of migration stories across three generations, arguing for the importance of oral history in the study of intergenerational family memories and their impact on ethnic identities. Atem Atem’s chapter on the South Sudanese in Western Sydney reflects on how forced migrants use memories of the past to make sense of their present. Importantly, Atem emphasises the complex relationship between individual and community memories, and how those South Sudanese who have not experienced war have learnt war stories, making them their own in an attempt to acquire legitimacy within their community. This highlights the complex positioning of community members who do not experience the trauma directly, but nevertheless contribute to its memory. Denise Phillips, through her chapter on Hazara refugees’ grief, highlights the important role that oral histories focussing on emotions can play in representing refugees as individuals, rather than just ‘as voiceless victims or a threatening mass’ (p.167).

Part two shifts the focus from oral history to heritage, media and digital representation. Andrew Jakubowicz’s autobiographical reflection explores how growing up in Sydney in a family of Holocaust survivors influenced his early work, including his 30-year social documentary project *Making Multicultural Australia*, and his contributions to documentary television. This is a beautiful personal reflection by a pioneer of migration studies in Australia. Andrea Witcomb’s chapter is notable for its critical reflection on how oral history is embedded in museum exhibitions.

Witcomb identifies four pedagogies of reading, looking, listening and feeling, critically analysing how each pedagogy may impact on the production of collective memory. Alexandra Dellios reflects on the inconsistency between the dominant rhetoric about multiculturalism and the scarce attention to migrant heritage. By applying a critical heritage framework, Dellios shows how personal memories made public, and heritage practices around buildings and monuments, can challenge prevailing discourse about migration and multiculturalism. Susannah Radstone provides a deeply personal and political psychoanalytical essay on her own experience of migration in relation to the violence and transgenerational trauma produced by settler violence. Moya McFadzean reflects on exhibitions produced at the Immigration Museum in Melbourne, analysing the complex, and at times contrasting, aims that inform and constrain the work of the Museum. Alison Atkinson-Phillips' chapter critically analyses a heritage and digital project relating to Melbourne's Enterprise Migrant Hostel between 1970 and 1991, emphasising the settler-colonial celebratory narratives that problematically shape this public memory project, while noting the opportunities for unexpected meanings that can emerge from it. Klaus Neumann then considers the National Library of Australia's collection policies relating to Australians from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, emphasising the value of the Library's understanding of national memory, while reflecting on key limitations in its acquisition practice and collection accessibility. Felicity Collins' chapter discusses the cinematic and documentary representation of Child Migrant stories, suggesting that the Child Migrant is a particularly troubling figure in Australian national memory. Sukhmani Khorana then considers the role of memory in the representation of refugees in two documentaries, *Constance on the Edge* and *Villawood Mums*, comparing them to recent European productions to emphasise the importance of historicising the past by focusing on 'horizontal solidarities and mundane lives' (p.327). Sophie Couchman and Kate Bagnall's concluding chapter explores the memory practices of Chinese Australian families from Cantonese backgrounds, contrasting them to the national and familial tendencies of forgetting, and emphasising that new meanings can emerge from such practices.

This volume is to be commended for its attempt to bring together contributions from some of the most innovative Australian scholars of migration across different and often

stubbornly separated fields including heritage, museums, media, memory studies, and oral history. It is a large, dense, multilayered and rich volume, and it would be ungenerous to criticise it for some apparent gaps. Instead, we should see this volume as an opportunity to stimulate a broader debate, and to identify and pursue new avenues for research. First, only a few authors in the volume show an interest in contemporary theoretical and methodological developments beyond Australia, and almost none beyond the Anglosphere. While Australia has its historical specificity, and the focus on Australian histories and memories is perfectly legitimate, global scholarly development may suggest the applicability of innovative approaches to the Australian context. Second, while the volume is to be commended for bringing disciplines together, most of the individual chapters do not apply a transdisciplinary approach. We must acknowledge that most Australian public institutions, including granting bodies, have processes in place that penalise transdisciplinarity, ultimately shaping and influencing the work of scholars and curators. Third, the volume does not engage with the apparent institutional obstacles that have to date hindered the development of more fair and open approaches to the study of migration, including racism. The volume emphasises how complex migration narratives and memories are often subdued by assimilationist and nationalist narratives that prevail in the public arena. This is an essential point that certainly deserves further debate in Australia's history departments, libraries, archives and museums. But for that to be possible, the persisting dominance of Anglo-white scholars and curators needs to be acknowledged and urgently addressed.

*Remembering Migration* shows the potential of reframing public narratives and representations about Australia's migratory and multicultural history through a complex and multidisciplinary focus on memory. One can only hope that both scholars and institutions will embrace such potential more assertively. This seems particularly important at a time in which the re-emergence of openly populist, racist and white-supremacist ideologies calls for a renewed commitment to a critical, multilayered and fair understanding of our past, through the production of innovative cultural texts and the development of new ways of remembering together, and remembering forward.