

# Studies in Oral History

The Journal of  
Oral History Australia

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*Issue 43, 2021*





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Oral History, Place  
and the Environment

Issue 43, 2021



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The editors of the journal welcome offers of material for possible publication in the 2022 issue, No. 44. Our call for peer-reviewed papers for inclusion in the 2022 issue closed on 1 November 2021. 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

In our call for papers for this year's edition of *Studies in Oral History*, we noted that humans are profoundly emplaced beings. Humans become attached to places – be they homes, cities or natural environments – and when we are separated from them, we become homesick. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan referred to this love of place or sense of place as 'topophilia', and it can also be connected to cultural belonging or family identity. Hence our place memories can be deeply felt and intensely personal. We noted that place memories retain a special resonance in the mind over time, associated as they are with sensory experiences, emotional associations and social inflections, and referred to the positive interactions between the fields of oral history and environmental history. While oral history offers attention to the ways humans remember and narrate their relationships to environments, environmental history insists upon close attention to the more-than-human world, and the relationships between nature and culture, people and place. As environmental catastrophes with anthropogenic causes become more common in the twenty-first century, understanding human inter-relationships with specific places and the environment is arguably more critical – and more urgent – than ever before.

Our call for papers was well received, and we are delighted to include in our 2021 edition articles and reports engaging with the themes of Oral History, Place and the Environment authored by scholars from as far afield as Bhutan, Mexico, the UK, the USA and Vanuatu. While all are firmly based in oral history, many articles are also interdisciplinary, considering oral history and fiction; oral history and education; and oral history and anthropology/ethnography. Overall, the authors are a

mixture of emerging and established oral historians. They come from academia, cultural institutions and private consulting. All offer fascinating and thought-provoking engagements with the special issue themes.

Making skilled use of oral histories collected for the National Library of Australia's ACT bushfire oral history project (2004–05), Scott McKinnon provides valuable insights into the complex and lengthy afterlife of disasters, and shows that recovery is essentially a process of transformation rather than restoration. Memories of place are particularly powerful in the aftermath of a disaster – and such memories play an important role in the process of recovery. McKinnon powerfully shows the deep connections people have with their environments – a connection that is often not verbalised or appreciated until threatened or disrupted. He skilfully demonstrates the value of oral history evidence as a means for understanding how individuals come to terms with dramatic events such as the loss of known and loved natural and built environments.

Considering a different form of environmental loss and challenges, Marilena Crosato, a community social theatre and performance practitioner, and Maya Haviland, a cultural anthropologist and community development practitioner, analyse an innovative storytelling and performance project they initiated in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Pam which hit Vanuatu in 2015. Crosato and Haviland vividly bring to life the processes through which they engaged with 13 Port Vila market women. They describe how the women melded their individual stories into a script which captured their shared experiences of resilience and violence in a post-disaster context. The women come from many different islands, and in demonstrating the significance of place to their identity, the authors show how the women typically connect with three different places – namely their home island, their town settlement and Vanuatu itself. As Crosato and Haviland state, 'Place was both character and setting, used to invoke deeper empathetic understandings of the lived experiences of women and their agency'. Through workshopping and performing their collective experiences, the project was successful in ameliorating some of the despair and challenges these market women faced in the wake of Tropical Cyclone Pam.

Carolyn Collins and Paul Sendziuk analyse a different kind of place attachment in their article on General Motors-Holden's Woodville Factory in South Australia. Analysing oral history interviews with former workers at the automobile manufacturing plant, Collins and Sendziuk reveal the deep engagements with place and community experienced by these workers. Working for Holden was the basis of individual and collective identities that often spanned decades. These connections were made material in the factory site, so much so that the closure of the site was painful for many former employees.

From workplaces to domestic spaces, historian Rachel Goldlust draws on interviews conducted with post-1970s 'back-to-the-landers' women – namely women who turned away from conventional conservation practices and adopted simple, low-carbon lifestyles – to examine women's changing relationships to home and the environment. Expanding perceptions of environmental activism, Goldlust examines how domestic activism can facilitate a connection to home and property, and how this demonstrates a unique form of protest. This specific form of place attachment reveals how women's connections to their homes can indeed be a means of empowerment and social engagement.

If oral history can illuminate historical activism, it can also enhance contemporary education. Bhutanese scholars Dorji S, Alexander Sivitskis, Sonam Gyeltshen and Ngawang Dem analyse the achievements of an oral history project that was introduced for tertiary education students at the Samtse College of Education at the Royal University of Bhutan. How refreshing – and inspiring – to learn that the oral history project aligned with the Bhutanese Ministry of Education's Educating for Gross National Happiness program, which aims to prepare students 'to develop values, ethics, skills and practices to build harmonious wellbeing of all in the early twenty-first century'. The authors draw on responses received from a student survey to argue that, through conducting place-based oral history interviews in local communities, students developed their sense of place, increased feelings of attachment to place and their local community, and facilitated the development of empathy for people and place. This article provides a much-needed empirical study to test the long-standing contention of the educational value of oral history.

Just as oral history can enhance education, it can also work in partnership with fiction to capture the ways in which humans form connections to place – and how such bonds are increasingly threatened in an era of climate crisis. Scott Hicks writes of a town in the US Appalachian Mountains, where repeated flooding became so devastating that the decision was made to move the entire town to higher ground. But while the physical infrastructure of Grundy could be relocated, the place attachment of town residents could not be so easily uprooted. Hicks explores the ways in which residents' place memories were captured through oral history interviews, comparing them to fictionalised accounts of place evocation. He concludes that the relocation of Grundy 'raises questions of the sufficiency of relocation or recreation to quell the solastalgia – or distress caused by environmental change – that is set to increase as our planet continues to suffer the effects of anthropogenic climate change'.

The peer-reviewed articles section closes with a lyrical piece filled with vivid photographs by Lilian Pearce, who reflects on the relationships between oral history interviews and photography in illuminating environmental histories. Pearce describes her experience of interviewing a farming family in regional New South Wales, and the ways in which their personal family photographic collection spoke as evocatively of changing practices of land conservation and management as did their words. Pearce's article will be of enormous value to other oral historians considering how they might incorporate the analysis of visual images in their interviewing practices and subsequent interpretations.

In this year's reports section, filmmaker Malcolm McKinnon writes poetically of his long relationship with Arabana Elder Reg Dodd and Dodd's home, the pastoral station Finnis Springs. McKinnon describes his and Dodd's differing perceptions of Finnis Springs, and Reg's intimate, embodied knowledge of place that comes from a lifetime of being on place and close observation. McKinnon shows how, for Aboriginal people who have grown up on and lived their lives on Country, Country is an active agent, central to any narrative, and how history – both ancient and recent – is embedded and tangibly present in Country.

Ligia Arguilez reports on her doctoral research at the University of Texas, in which she demonstrates how the common desert shrub known in English as the creosote bush can act as a site of memory, highlighting the long history of movement and cultural hybridity of the *fronterizo* or ‘borderlands people’ who inhabit both sides of the US–Mexico border.

From the Newcastle University Oral History Unit and Collective in the UK, Siobhan Warrington explains her involvement in the Living Deltas Hub (2019–2024), which is a collaboration with colleagues in delta regions of Vietnam, India and Bangladesh. Coordinated by Newcastle University, the project involves over 100 researchers working with participatory oral history methodologies to chart environmental change and work towards more sustainable futures.

Bianka Balanzategui’s report on the Window in Time oral history project takes the reader to Ingham in North Queensland. This project captured the experiences of older migrants, most of whom came to Australia from Italy and Sicily and all of whom worked in the sugarcane industry. Balanzategui reflects on the value of collecting these oral histories, and storage and access problems that arise from changes in recording technology and regional communities lack of a suitable official repository for such recordings.

Noting that one of the most pressing concerns of our time is global warming and climate change, Anni Turnbull and Johanna Kijas reflect on the creation and use of oral interviews with environmental activists in the galleries, libraries, archives and museums (GLAM) sector. Pointing out that oral histories can be used to engage audiences on an emotional level, they refer to interviews regarding activism against a coal seam gas project commissioned by the State Library of New South Wales.

Finally, the reviews section offers a series of illuminating analyses of a diverse range of new outputs utilising oral history. These include a book on LGBTI service in the Australian military; a podcast on the death of an Aboriginal man in police custody; an exhibition on the 2011 floods in South East Queensland; an edited collection on oral history, education and justice; and a book on memories and ostracisation of a Christian minority in Nagasaki, Japan.



We continue to be grateful for the support of Oral History Australia's national committee and thank them for financing both a copy editor (Katie Connolly) and designer (Karen Wallis). We officially welcome our Editorial Chair, Alex Dellios, and thank Alex for her work this year, and our Reviews Editor, Gemmia Burden, for her efficiency and professionalism.

We hope you, the readers, enjoy this edition of the journal and we welcome your feedback and engagement.

Skye Krichauff and Carla Pascoe Leahy

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## **Peer-reviewed articles**



# The Afterlife of Disasters: Remembering Home in a Suburban Landscape Transformed by Bushfire

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SCOTT MCKINNON

*Scott McKinnon is a research fellow at the University of Wollongong. He is the author of Gay Men at the Movies: Cinema, Memory and the History of a Gay Male Community (Intellect 2016) and co-editor of Disasters in Australia and New Zealand: Historical Approaches to Understanding Catastrophe (Palgrave MacMillan 2021).*

A devastating firestorm destroyed hundreds of homes in the Canberra suburbs in 2003. This paper explores links between recovery, memory and place in the first 12 to 18 months after the fires. In particular, the paper examines how changes to suburban and natural landscapes were understood and experienced by survivors who had either lost their home or were continuing to live within transformed neighbourhoods. The memories of survivors reveal that recovery processes have both a geography and a history. Understanding the long-term impacts of material and spatial change on the lives of survivors is important both to understanding how people recover from bushfire, as well as how to include recovery processes as an element of the written history of disaster.

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2003, devastating bushfires burnt across farms, forestry areas and regional communities in the Australian Capital Territory and nearby areas of New South Wales, culminating in a firestorm that entered the suburbs of Canberra and destroyed hundreds of homes. The firestorm ripped through bushland, pine plantations and adjacent suburban streets with terrifying speed. Tree-filled neighbourhoods, which had afforded residents a sense of living within nature while just minutes from the city, were devastated by the flames. In the days and weeks after the

firestorm, many survivors expressed determination to rebuild and restore their lost homes. Yet, rebuilding and regrowth did not restore the pre-fire appearance of lost spaces. Instead, recovering neighbourhoods were transformed into something new. The ways in which survivors remembered lost homes and understood their altered suburbs suggest both the blurry spatial boundaries of home and the long afterlife of disaster. Memories of loss were etched into the landscape in lasting ways, leaving survivors to rebuild a sense of home in a space that was permanently changed by fire.

In 2004 and 2005, the National Library of Australia commissioned a series of oral history interviews with survivors of the ACT firestorm.<sup>1</sup> Undertaken by oral historian Mary Hutchison, these interviews explore memories of life in Canberra and the ACT before the fires, the events of the firestorm itself, and the longer-term impacts of the disaster in the 12 to 18 months leading up to the interview. These longer-term impacts suggest the uncertain temporalities of disaster history and the value in tracing a disaster's lingering material, affective and emotional meanings. Although the media often positions disasters as temporally discrete events and moves on quickly to other stories once the immediate catastrophe has begun to fade, oral history interviews allow exploration of a disaster's long afterlife, including interactions between the personal memories of survivors and the material memories found within the landscape.<sup>2</sup>

Oral history interviews with bushfire survivors thus encourage attentiveness to the links between recovery, memory and place.<sup>3</sup> As David Lowenthal argues, 'The past is everywhere ... Most past traces ultimately perish, and all that remain are altered.'

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1 Dr Mary Hutchison recorded 19 interviews with people impacted by the 2003 fires in Canberra, in rural and regional ACT and in nearby areas of NSW. Ten of the interviewees granted permission for me to access and quote from their interviews. I am immensely grateful both to Dr Hutchison and to the interviewees for the extremely informative, moving, evocative and thoughtful recordings they created together.

2 See for example Brian Miles and Stephanie Morse, 'The Role of News Media in Natural Disaster Risk and Recovery', *Ecological Economics* 63, no. 2–3 (2007): 365–73; Penelope Ploughman, 'The American Print News Media "Construction" of Five Natural Disasters', *Disasters* 19, no. 4 (1995): 308–26; Stephen Sloan also notes the important role of oral histories in including voices often missing from media reporting of disasters. See Stephen M. Sloan, 'The Fabric of Crisis: Approaching the Heart of Oral History', in Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan (eds), *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 262–74.

3 For discussion of oral histories of bushfire in Australia, see Peg Fraser, *Black Saturday: Not the End of the Story* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2019).

But they are collectively enduring. Noticed or ignored, cherished or spurned, the past is omnipresent'.<sup>4</sup> For survivors of the ACT firestorm, their recovery process took place (or continues to take place) in spaces filled with material reminders, not only of a highly traumatic event, but also of the often fondly remembered homes, neighbourhoods and landscapes lost to the flames. Ideally, recovery might be seen as aligned with a process of rebuilding, in which evidence of the fire's most brutal impacts is gradually replaced with unscarred structures, offering a sense of revival. Equally, fire might be understood less as destructive of the environment, so much as it is regenerative. Across large areas of Australia, fire is an element of natural cycles and is necessary for the reproduction of many plant species.<sup>5</sup> Human recovery is often symbolised with images of this more-than-human renewal, with images of green shoots on burnt trunks suggesting the possibility of return.

Yet, new or renewed residential structures and suburban landscapes also act as reminders of that which they have replaced, symbolising not so much a happy return, but a regrettable substitute. New houses quite simply do not look like the homes they replaced and act as material evidence that post-fire renewal is a process of transformation not restoration. Cultural geographer Alison Blunt describes home as 'an affective space, shaped by everyday practices, lived experiences, social relations, memories and emotions'.<sup>6</sup> It is a space in which memories are stored (both literally and figuratively) and at which identities are attached. The sudden destruction of home is therefore deeply destabilising, producing fears that the memories and identities the space once held have also been destroyed. New houses are evidence both of human capacity to survive tragedy and re-create home, as well as of the fragility of material structures and the history of their destruction in fire.

Compounding this distress for survivors of the ACT firestorm was the deep entwining of landscape, bushland, garden and home in the Canberra suburbs.

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4 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

5 Tom Griffiths, "An Unnatural Disaster"? Remembering and Forgetting Bushfire', *History Australia* 6, no. 2 (2009): 35.1–35.7.

6 Alison Blunt, 'Cultural Geography: Cultural Geographies of Home', *Progress in Human Geography* 29, no. 4 (2005): 506.

Landscape historian Andrew MacKenzie argues that many Canberra residents ‘don’t distinguish between the suburban streetscapes and the urban bush when referring to the character of the city’.<sup>7</sup> In this context, the fire’s impacts on the surrounding ‘natural’ environment were as devastating as the impacts on houses and other dwellings. In many survivor narratives, the borders of their lost home were not defined by the four walls of a house or by garden fences marking a physical boundary, but instead encompassed the surrounding bushland and heavily treed neighbourhood. For those fortunate enough to have saved their house from the flames, feelings of relief and pleasure were tainted with distress for anguished neighbours, ravaged natural surroundings and scarred suburbs. Equally, those rebuilding were conscious that they could reconstruct a house, but not a neighbourhood or a landscape. Would their new house feel like home without the surrounding natural and suburban landscapes within which a sense of home had been created?

The blurry borders of home in the Canberra suburbs equally reveal how nature and society are interwoven and mutually constituted within and by disaster.<sup>8</sup> Disaster researchers in the social sciences have largely rejected the term ‘natural disaster’, arguing that to describe a disaster as ‘natural’ is to ignore the pivotal social factors that determine a disaster’s impacts and the uneven vulnerability and resilience of social groups.<sup>9</sup> Instead, disasters triggered by natural hazards, such as bushfires, cyclones or floods, can be better understood as occurring at the nexus of the natural and the social. Oral history is well placed as a method through which to explore the complex and shifting interactions within this nexus.<sup>10</sup> Oral history interviews with survivors of the ACT firestorm make clear how changes to the natural environment

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7 Andrew MacKenzie, ‘The City in a Fragile Landscape: An Exploration of the Duplicious Role Landscape Plays in the Form and Function of Canberra in the Twenty First Century’, in Andrea Gaynor (ed.), *Urban Transformations: Booms, Busts and other Catastrophes: Proceedings of the 11th Australasian Urban History/ Planning History Conference* (Perth: University of Western Australia, 2012), 165.

8 Eleonora Rohland, Maike Böcker, Gitte Cullmann, Ingo Haltermann, and Franz Mauelshagen, ‘Woven Together: Attachment to Place in the Aftermath of Disaster, Perspectives from Four Continents’, in Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan (eds), *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*, 183–206.

9 Benjamin Wisner, Piers M. Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People’s Vulnerability and Disasters* (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2004).

10 Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall, ‘Introduction: Telling Environmental Histories’, in Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall (eds), *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1–27.



and the suburban landscape were among the more significant longer-term impacts of the disaster, while equally suggesting that distinctions between the two are often uncertain at best.

### THE CREATION OF 'THE BUSH CAPITAL'

The ACT is located on unceded Ngunnawal, Ngarigu and Ngambri country and Indigenous people's ongoing relationships to this place span across tens of thousands of years. These relationships incorporate very different understandings of the place of fire in the environment, including the role of 'good fire' as a nurturing element of country.<sup>11</sup> Describing Maori relationships to watery landscapes in Aotearoa/New Zealand, geographers Meg Parsons and Karen Fisher argue that for Indigenous people, colonisation was the disaster, not floods, and this description is equally applicable in relation to fire in the Australian context.<sup>12</sup> For Indigenous Australians, the disaster of colonisation is ongoing and relationships to place continue to be entwined with enduring cultural relationships, as well as mourning and memory.

Canberra was established in the early 1900s as the purpose-built capital for a then newly federated nation.<sup>13</sup> In the 120 or so years between the beginnings of white colonisation and the site's selection as the location of the capital, the area had been largely stripped of trees and heavily used for sheep grazing. In 1900, much of south-eastern Australia was in the midst of an extended drought that had, at the Canberra site, contributed to the production of an eroded, dusty and bare expanse infested with rabbits.

Changes were thus necessary if this uninviting landscape was to house the capital of an ambitious, modern nation. The city's architects, Walter and Marion Griffin, saw the natural environment of the site as central to their design plans. Indeed,

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11 Victor Steffensen, *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Publishing, 2020).

12 Meg Parsons and Karen Fisher, 'Decolonising Settler Hazardscapes of the Waipā: Māori and Pākehā. Remembering of Flooding in the Waikato 1900–1950', in Scott McKinnon and Margaret Cook (eds), *Disasters in Australia and New Zealand: Historical Approaches to Understanding Catastrophe* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020): 159–78.

13 Nicholas Brown, *A History of Canberra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

as asserted by Christopher Vernon, 'the Griffins envisaged Canberra as a designed alternative to urban indifference to the natural'.<sup>14</sup> Walter Griffin was appointed as the federal director of Design and Construction in 1913 and an ambitious program of tree-plantings, developed by the Griffins in collaboration with horticulturalist Charles Weston, was undertaken prior to the construction of the city's major buildings. Weston oversaw the planting of more than two million trees in Canberra and its surrounding hills between 1913 and 1926.

The program included the planting of pine trees on Mt Stromlo in 1915, both for their aesthetic value and with an eye to establishing a future forestry industry.<sup>15</sup> The industry was further developed with the expansion of the Mt Stromlo pine plantation in 1926 and with the planting of pines at Uriarra, Kowen and Pierces Creek later that decade.

In 1920, Walter Griffin lost his official position overseeing the implementation of the Griffins' original design. He was replaced by an advisory board, the Federal Capital Advisory Committee (FCAC), which quickly began to deviate from the Griffins' plans. Grand ambitions began to wane amid budget fears brought on, at least in part, by the costs of World War I. Although the Federal Parliament would open in 1927, a lack of any substantial development saw the nascent city derided as simply a collection of homes for public servants scattered among the trees, leading to the label 'the bush capital'. This would not significantly change until the 1950s, when prime minister Robert Menzies began to advocate for renewed progress. In 1958, he established the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), which instituted a new plan for a series of suburban centres linked by motorways through bushland, as well as another program of mass tree-plantings. Canberra's western suburbs, including Duffy and Holder, were established adjacent to the Mt Stromlo plantation in the 1970s.

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14 Christopher Vernon, 'Canberra: Where Landscape is Pre-eminent', in David Gordon (ed.), *Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 135.

15 Brendan O'Keefe, *Forest Capital: Canberra's Foresters and Forestry Workers Tell Their Stories* (Canberra: ACT Parks and Conservation Service, 2017).

By 2002, the urban forest within the Canberra city boundaries comprised more than 400,000 trees in a city of around 300,000 residents. In the intervening years, the once derogatory ‘bush capital’ label had been embraced by locals as an affectionate description for the sprawling city of tree-covered suburbs in which the lines between the city and the bush were successfully blurred.<sup>16</sup>

### THE 2003 FIRESTORM

In January 2003, the ACT and large areas of eastern Australia were once again in the midst of an extended drought, resulting in extremely dry conditions ideal for fire. Record level temperatures and low humidity only increased the fire risk. On 8 January, lightning strikes in bushland to the west and south-west of the city ignited two separate fires, which burned across large areas of bush, plantations and rural areas before combining eight days later.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 1** Photo of Woden Town Centre during the height of the 2003 Canberra Firestorm. Photograph by Angelo Tsirekas, CC BY-SA 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons.

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<sup>16</sup> Vernon, ‘Canberra’, 147.

<sup>17</sup> Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT* (Canberra: ACT Government, 2003), 15.

January 18 was another extremely hot day in Canberra. Residents were aware of the fires burning in the hills over preceding days – the smoke could not be ignored. Very few, however, had any sense of their homes being under direct threat. In her interview for the National Library of Australia, Barbara recalled that, although she had been to bushfire preparation classes and was well trained in how to respond to the threat of a fire, a false alarm the previous year had left her cautious about overreacting.<sup>18</sup> She and her husband began to prepare their house, but did not realise the urgency of the situation. Another interviewee, Stanley, was similarly unaware of the degree of risk. Although, as the day progressed, he remembered that the ‘physical situation was dark and foreboding’ and he was listening to the radio for any warnings, none came.<sup>19</sup> He stated, ‘I guess overall I had no obvious indication I needed to get out, so I didn’t’. The first official warning was not issued until 1.45pm and was not received by ABC Radio until 2.31pm.<sup>20</sup> By 3pm, several suburbs were on fire.

Although still afternoon, smoke blocked out the sun. Interviewees described a world transformed by heat, wind and roaring noise. Allan and his wife fled their home at the last minute amid terrifying conditions. Remembering the events of that day remained distressing for him, ‘Even now, I get very, um, shaky. I weep, I weep a lot’.<sup>21</sup> Sophie was just 13 years old and at home with her mother and younger brother when the fire hit. They prepared the house as best they could and quickly packed, but their garden was already alight. She remembered, ‘I was watching things burn. That was pretty nasty. And when we were packing, I was watching things burn’.<sup>22</sup> Barbara was stunned by the speed with which the fire approached, stating, ‘Cinders started to rain down and my

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18 Barbara Pamphilon, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 9 June 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/6.

19 Stanley Sismey, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 21 August 2008, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/21.

20 McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response*, 44.

21 Allan Latta, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 29 June 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/9.

22 Sophie Penkethman, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 12 August 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/11.



god they rained down'.<sup>23</sup> Jane fought the fires alongside her husband in an unsuccessful attempt to save their home. She recalled:

Suddenly there was this huge roar, just a mighty roar, and a line of conifers along our neighbour's driveway just went. I can still remember the sound, a sort of VWOOMP sound, and I looked and there was this absolute wall of fire going into the sky and then it seemed to move forward and turned into fireworks that just seemed to move forward and land all in a sheet all over our front garden.<sup>24</sup>

Changed weather conditions brought an end to the fires late on 18 January. By that time, four people had died and three more were severely injured. Almost five hundred homes had been destroyed. Around 70 per cent of the ACT had been impacted to some degree, leaving large areas of bushland and pine plantations reduced to blackened trunks and charred ash. Many thousands of animals were killed. Several suburbs in Canberra's west, including Duffy, Chapman and Weston Creek, had been particularly badly hit. In one street in Chapman, 19 of 23 homes were lost. The suburb and its surrounding landscape had been permanently changed.

## MEMORY, HOME AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A cherished element of life in the hardest-hit suburbs had been their close proximity to pine plantations and bushland. The neighbourhoods were largely comprised of family homes on large blocks, surrounded by tree-filled gardens. Asked to reflect on their homes before the fires, several interviewees described close – and in some cases lifelong – relationships to the surrounding natural environment. Jane and her husband had built a home in the suburb of Chapman just as the area was being established in the 1970s, and they had raised a family there. She recalled,

We just thought we were so incredibly lucky. We lived on this acre block, on the edge of the Canberra suburbs backing onto a reserve, and you'd walk up

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<sup>23</sup> Barbara Pamphilon, 9 June 2004.

<sup>24</sup> Jane Smyth, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 24 September 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/12.

the back and look down into the Murrumbidgee Valley and the blue Brindabellas and we used to think it was the promised land. And sometimes I'd think I can't believe I'm a twelve-minute drive from the centre of the national capital. It just seemed so amazing that we had city facilities in this beautiful, beautiful place.<sup>25</sup>

Barbara and her husband had first moved to nearby Duffy in the 1970s and she similarly recalled the great pleasures of raising a young family in the area:

[My husband and I] both really enjoyed sort of the less urban side of the world and here in Duffy we were right on the edge. Our children would very often, from a very young age, just go across the park here into the pine forest with their bikes – for little adventures.<sup>26</sup>

Over the years, the nearby pine plantation had become part of Barbara's everyday routine and memories of morning walks with a neighbour contained a life narrative:

We had a route that we took through the pine forest for many, many years and then – and we used to jog when we were younger, we would walk and jog, walk and jog. When we got a little bit older and more sensible and stopped jogging, we actually changed the path to go up hills a bit more.<sup>27</sup>

Emma, a university student in her early twenties at the time of the firestorm, had grown up in a home directly opposite a pine plantation and described her cherished connections to the space:

Just straight opposite from where we were there was sort of a little gate, so we used to just go in [to the forest]. We were discouraged to adventure too far away ... there were big trees closest to where we are. So we used to run

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<sup>25</sup> Jane Smyth, 24 September 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Barbara Pamphilon, 9 June 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Pamphilon, 9 June 2004.

around in there, and, you know, pine cone battles and all sort of mischief we used to get up to ... Hide and seek was probably the biggest game.<sup>28</sup>

Emma also described her changing relationship to the space as a means of constructing a life narrative, charting her progression through the life course via her differing engagements with the forest. She stated:

As you get older you perceive things a bit differently so the forest, instead of becoming a play area became an area to walk the dog, to do activities such as running, sort of more a time to be alone, rather than sort of being silly and running around.<sup>29</sup>

The memories of Barbara and Emma reveal the ways in which the borders of their homes were extended into the surrounding landscape through everyday practices.<sup>30</sup> In their memories of walking through the forest, recollections of home and environment were interwoven with memories of passing years and growing maturity. The tree-filled space was not just an attractive backdrop to their life, but was a comforting and essential element of home.

Emma was away from Canberra when the fires struck and returned the next day to find the house she shared with her father destroyed and the surrounding landscape in ashes. She recalled, 'Obviously, looking at the forest was just heartbreaking. It was like looking at another world. To be honest, I didn't even recognise it, just you know, the charred sort of trunks'. The fire had made the forest unfamiliar, leaving the childhood memories attached to the place more precarious.

Barbara's house survived the firestorm, although her sister lost her home in a nearby suburb. Aware of her relative good fortune compared to the losses of others, Barbara struggled with her ability or right to grieve for the pine forest. In the days after the

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28 Emma Walter, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 15 June 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/7.

29 Emma Walter, 15 June 2004.

30 Blunt, 'Cultural Geography', 506.

fires, she drove to work and found herself in tears on her journey through Duffy and neighbouring Weston Creek. Barbara remembered thinking:

Oh, poor Weston Creek ... It was just like seeing someone hurting ... And no pine forest. That's what triggered it. Just looking and thinking 'There's no pine forest!' ... And then thinking, four people died, your sister lost her house. It's really not that bad.<sup>31</sup>

Yet, the pine forest had comprised an element of home and the great distress caused by its loss had real and ongoing impacts.



**Figure 2** Aftermath of Canberra bushfires in the suburb of Duffy ACT 2003. Photograph by Gregory Heath, CSIRO, CC BY 3.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>, via Wikimedia Commons.

In the days and weeks after the fires, damage to the environment had tangible qualities felt through the body. The once valued sensory impacts of the forest – its smell and sounds, the feel of a breeze blowing through leafy branches – were rapidly transformed. With no trees, there was no birdsong. The wind blew more strongly through

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<sup>31</sup> Barbara Pamphilon, 9 June 2004.

streets no longer sheltered by surrounding bush. The smell of ash combined with the charred remnants of metal and plastic from burnt cars, houses and other buildings. Jane's distress at the loss of her home was interwoven with her embodied experience of the transformed area. She stated, 'I went through a period of really mourning the environment because it was so awful. I mean it smelt toxic. It was disgusting. It was the most hideous wasteland'. Jane's use of the word 'mourning' again reveals how the landscape was understood, not as simply an attractive view or pleasant surroundings, but as a living entity, damage to which was deeply felt as an emotional and embodied response in the immediate aftermath of fire.

As these mourned spaces were gradually transformed over time, their meanings and uses shifted and yet they maintained important mnemonic resonances. Barbara described how her regular morning walks changed because of a changing landscape that carried memories of fire and a pre-fire world:

The first couple of weeks, we went to the Duffy School oval and walked around there. It was horrible ... I mean you had to walk past all the burnt stuff and then you walked around an oval. Well you see I'd been walking in a pine forest. And it was always cool in summer ... So we walked around that oval for only a couple of weeks and we both said, 'This is horrible'. And so we started walking around the edge of the burnt out pine forest ... and that was pretty good.<sup>32</sup>

Barbara and her neighbour changed the direction of their walk to include a beautiful view of the city made visible by the fire's removal of trees. Her relationship to that view was uncertain. Some mornings it was lovely, but its relationship to the fire meant that, 'at other times it pisses us off'. The lost forest remained part of Barbara's daily routine. She stated that she still refers to 'walking in the pine forest' each morning, despite the fact that the forest is gone.

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32 Barbara Pamphilon, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 23 June 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/6.

As asserted by Butler et al., ‘The loss of a familiar landscape is much harder to quantify than more tangible aspects such as economic loss and thus its acceptance as legitimate loss is harder to discuss’.<sup>33</sup> Survivors’ memories reveal how damage to a landscape understood as ‘natural’, however much it had been constructed in the design of the city, had ongoing emotional impacts that played out both through the body and through longer-term relationships to place. Even as adaptations were made to routines and as the most obvious evidence of fire damage began to disappear, the pre-fire landscape remained present through memory.

### MEMORY, HOME AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

In survivor accounts, the beloved natural environment is often difficult to distinguish from the suburban neighbourhoods within which it was interwoven. Nonetheless, there is value in exploring impacts on the neighbourhood itself, defined here as the streetscape, the types of homes and other structures, and the demography of the suburb. Each of these components of home were highly valued by residents and all were permanently altered by the fire.

Allan had moved with his wife and young daughter to Canberra only 12 months before the fires. They were renting a home, which they had decided to purchase, but it was destroyed in the firestorm. Allan described driving back into the neighbourhood the next day, stating:

The devastation. We didn’t realise it was this bad. We knew it was bad when it was burning but when you come back in the morning and [the fire is] out and daylight and you see what’s left, it looked like somewhere over in Iraq or somewhere that’s just been bombed out, you know?<sup>34</sup>

The changed neighbourhood in the immediate aftermath prompted constant, and at times surprising, reminders of the fires. Barbara went to bed in her still standing home the night after the disaster, but found that she could not sleep. Streetlights

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33 Andrew Butler, Ingrid Sarlov-Herlin, Igor Knez, Elin Angman, Asa Ode Sang and Ann Akerskog, ‘Landscape Identity, Before and After a Forest Fire’, *Landscape Research* 43, no. 6 (2018): 86.

34 Allan Latta, 29 June 2004.

shone into her bedroom, all of which had been blocked by houses and trees just a couple of nights before. Most of the fences between neighbouring homes were now gone, as were the plants that once provided privacy. While the missing fences at first provided welcome opportunities to connect with neighbours, Barbara recalled:

Fairly quickly, I wanted the fences back. Every time you made a cup of tea in the kitchen, you felt – I felt – like there were three or four people watching ... In our area were the missing houses and missing back gardens ... I wanted the fences back. ... It was that sense of that community pulling together but also needing some privacy within it.<sup>35</sup>

Barbara longed for a healing of the suburban landscape in which she lived. She planted quick-growing plants to re-establish her garden and to bring some beauty back into her surrounds. She was continuing to live, however, in a distressing space while attempting to recover from a traumatic experience.

As noted above, Barbara expressed uncertainty about mourning her losses in the fire when her house still stood. Often labelled ‘survivor guilt’, these feelings are commonly identified post-disaster, and include fears that expressing distress at some forms of loss is unwarranted when the losses of others seem somehow more significant.<sup>36</sup> Jane, whose home was destroyed, offered strong words of support to those struggling to deal with neighbourhood and environmental, rather than domestic losses. She argued that such damage should be understood as a devastating impact with long-term consequences for those whose houses remained, stating:

They had a terrible time too – the people whose houses survived. And they had to go on living there in this awful wasteland. I mean it was horrible. And we’d go out there and we’d have a little cry at our house that no longer existed ... But we’d come away thinking, ‘Well who are the winners and the

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35 Barbara Pamphilon, 23 June 2004.

36 Christine Eriksen and Carrie Wilkinson, ‘Examining Perceptions of Luck in Post-bushfire Sense-making in Australia’, *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 24 (2017): 242–50.



losers?’ Are you a winner if your neighbourhood goes? And you live on this burnt place?<sup>37</sup>

Jane here reveals the often highly difficult geographies of disaster recovery. Survivors were mourning multiple forms of loss while also attempting to recover from traumatic experiences in the midst of a traumatised neighbourhood. Driving to visit the ruins of a destroyed home was not only confronting in terms of facing the ruin itself, but also the embodied process of witnessing damage to multiple homes along the journey through suburban streets.

Over time, the most apparent material evidence of the fire’s impacts on the neighbourhood began to disappear. Ruined homes were cleared, leaving empty blocks that slowly began to fill with new houses. The charred stumps of pines and other trees were cleared, leaving empty fields that were gradually repurposed. The former pine plantation at the base of Mt Stromlo, for example, became a mountain biking park and home, several years later, to a memorial site to the fires.<sup>38</sup>

Those who had lost their homes faced the difficult decision of whether to rebuild or to move elsewhere. For some, under-insurance or other factors meant they could not afford to build a new home on their now-empty block. Those who chose to rebuild faced a challenging process of approvals, negotiations with builders and decisions about the kind of home they wanted – or could afford – to build. Jane and her husband ultimately decided that they would move elsewhere, based largely on the view that, while a new house could be built, it could never return them to the neighbourhood they had loved. She recalled:

And then there was a sense later that the neighbourhood had gone; that we wouldn’t all be going back. And if we went back it wouldn’t be the same

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<sup>37</sup> Jane Smyth, 24 September 2004.

<sup>38</sup> For discussion of the memorial: Scott McKinnon, ‘Placing Memories of Unforgettable Fires: Official Commemoration and Community Recovery After the 2003 ACT Firestorm’, in Scott McKinnon and Margaret Cook (eds), *Disasters in Australia and New Zealand: Historical Approaches to Understanding Catastrophe* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 59–76; Susan Nicholls, ‘Disaster Memorials as Government Communication’, *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 21, no. 4 (2006): 36–43.

and we'd be in different houses. We weren't going back to an established neighbourhood where people mowed lawns and waved to each other. We were going back – if we did – to building sites and makings of gardens and starting all over again. So that realisation all came slowly.<sup>39</sup>

Others decided to negotiate the process of starting again in the same place. Emma's father, for example, immediately decided to rebuild their home, a process that was underway at the time of her interview. Emma expressed some concern about returning to the space, stating:

I don't know what's going to happen moving back and whether it's going to be a strange experience. I mean, basically it's the same plan as the old home but it's a totally different home, different things. I mean, same area but I really don't know what to expect. Whether or not that's going to create any problems or anything. It'll be an interesting experience but I just, I mean I hope that, you know, it can be someplace where I can be comfortable and call it home again. But that may take a while because it is different and the area's different and there are a few different neighbours now and it will take a while but I think we'll get there.<sup>40</sup>

A significant element of Emma's concern centred on the role of memory in creating home, and the ways in which that memory extended into both the natural environment and the suburban neighbourhood. She noted,

And obviously I do miss the forest and the area, um, I miss getting away from things and taking the dog for a walk and just not thinking about things. Or use that as a way to think about things. And I just miss I guess the safety and security of an area that's familiar to you.<sup>41</sup>

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39 Jane Smyth, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 1 October 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/12.

40 Emma Walter, 15 June 2004.

41 Emma Walter, 15 June 2004.

The fire disrupted the material connections that had interwoven the familiar space, the everyday practices that made the space home, and the memories that the space held. The gradual process of repair and rebuilding offered a complex mix of both assurance – that things could get better and life could go on – but also sadness – that the former places of security were gone forever.

Living in the disaster zone, Barbara witnessed gradual changes to the neighbourhood over time, some of which were reassuring, some deeply disappointing. She stated, ‘Every little improvement to the suburb is valued, but it also points out what has been lost. It’s a bitter-sweet type of thing’. Barbara’s experience of the changed neighbourhood reveals the firestorm’s long afterlife, in that the apparent impacts of fire may no longer be visible, and yet the new structures that took their place still comprised constant reminders of change. Describing her neighbourhood 18 months after the fire, she stated:

The new Duffy is a mixture of really good and really bad ... It’s wonderful that there are blocks of land now for young families ... But equally so, there are people who have bought blocks of land as speculators and built these godawful things ... There are these big, two-storey, ugly buildings that use every inch of the land and so it’s all house ... that’s what I hate.<sup>42</sup>

Barbara reflected on the desire to return to familiar spaces, which provided secure memories of life before the fires. Yet those spaces were no longer available and return to the pre-fire neighbourhood was not possible. She expressed concern for people returning to the suburb and moving into newly rebuilt houses, describing the process of rebuilding home as deeply challenging:

And that everywhere you look there’s a loss. And I guess that’s one of the harder things of living in the suburb is everywhere you look is a loss. Now, I’ve been lucky that I’ve stayed in the suburb and I’ve had a long and gradual awareness of that. But for somebody who’s had to put all of the energy into rebuilding a house and all of those decisions and then to move in – phew,

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<sup>42</sup> Barbara Pamphilon, 23 June 2004.

and relax and I'm back – then, I think, it becomes stronger and stronger to them in a bit of an impact that it's not the place. It's not – it's not what I wanted. It's not home.<sup>43</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Attending to the spatial, material and emotional afterlife of a disaster offers important lessons both for understandings of recovery processes and for incorporating those processes within the written history of disasters. In the words of geographer Stewart Williams, 'I caution against dismissing any disaster as ever fully over, gone or driven from the landscape ... and instead suggest exploring it as a possibly more enduring presence'.<sup>44</sup> In the suburbs of Canberra, even as bare blocks were repopulated and trees regrew, their new forms and altered materialities carried continued reminders of the firestorm and of the cherished neighbourhood it replaced.

For survivors, slow and often difficult recovery processes were undertaken within the context of this transformed, now precarious landscape. Reid and Beilin argue that, 'people's longing to restore a sense of safety, security and constancy – is an often overlooked aspect in post disaster policy and practice'.<sup>45</sup> What these stories of ACT fire survivors highlight is that the search for constancy and security takes place in spaces defined by change. This includes both the changes initially triggered by the flames – the destroyed buildings and blackened forests – but also the new structures and environments that replaced them. The shiny homes that gradually dotted the suburb in some senses symbolised resilience and recovery. And yet they also contained memories of the disaster. The new suburb was as much a product of the fires as were the charred ruins that it replaced.

For many survivors, the tree-filled landscape of their neighbourhoods had provided a sense of security, of familiarity, and had contained memories either of happier times

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<sup>43</sup> Barbara Pamphilon, 23 June 2004.

<sup>44</sup> Stewart Williams, 'Rendering the Untimely Event of Disaster Ever Present', *Landscape Review* 14, no. 2 (2012): 86.

<sup>45</sup> Karen Reid and Ruth Beilin, 'Making the Landscape "Home": Narratives of Bushfire and Place in Australia', *Geoforum* 58 (2015): 97.

or of comforting spaces through which difficult times had been endured. Indeed, the landscape had been an element of home. After the fires, the transformed landscape contained new, often difficult or even traumatic memories. These memories have their own history that entwines with the history of the Canberra suburbs, with the environmental history of the ACT, and with the lives of the individuals who survived the fires. Ultimately, listening to survivor accounts reveals the value in looking beyond histories of disaster as temporally discrete events and in tracing a disaster's enduring impacts on landscapes, homes and lives.

# **Aelan Gel/Island Daughters: Co-creative Storytelling of Place and Resilience with Women in Vanuatu**

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MARILENA CROSATO AND MAYA HAVILAND

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Through reflections on the *Aelan Gel* project in Vanuatu, this paper examines expressions of meaning related to the lived experiences of urban women in Port Vila, including experiences of gender-based violence, through oral history and storytelling. It explores *Aelan Gel*'s iterative cycles of creative production: the drawing out of the specifics of lived experience through the sharing of autobiographical narratives; working collectively with these stories to co-create site-specific socially engaged performance; and generating a collective text intended to take a more enduring place in the literary and cultural history of women in Vanuatu. The authors consider the role of place as both a character and topic in the autobiographical and collective stories told in this project, as well as a site for cultural action and social intervention strategically chosen to enhance the meaning and potency of women's experiences and voices.

## INTRODUCTION

The *Aelan Gel*/Island Daughters project, launched by Marilena Crosato, took place in Port Vila, Vanuatu between October and December 2015 as a grassroots artistic initiative in the aftermath of Tropical Cyclone Pam (TC Pam). It engaged a group of 13 women, aged between 16 and 60 from three local associations, in a co-creative process investigating the effect of gender-related dynamics through autobiographical storytelling, social theatre and performance in the public space.<sup>1</sup> The results of their co-creative story-based practice, *Aelan Gel*, was performed in Port Vila's central market during the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence global campaign.<sup>2</sup> From 2016 to 2018 a further production phase culminated in the publication of the book *Aelan Gel*.<sup>3</sup>

The first part of the paper considers the complex social and cultural landscape in which this work occurred. It outlines how group oral storytelling facilitates co-creation of shared meanings and social interventions, building on traditional oral transmission and approaches to oral history. Weaving individual stories in a collectively created performance brings awareness about social identity and the possibility of self-affirmation in the sociocultural context. In the second part we focus on the presence of place in oral history in action, nourished by the creative exchanges between the group members and the audience. Place, central in Ni-Vanuatu identity, is present in the narrations and stories told and retold in the making of *Aelan Gel*, evoked through memories and objects, and in the chosen setting of the performance, the Seaside Market House in Port Vila. Finally, we look at the development of a written text, drawn from the oral histories and collectively devised performance, and

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1 The *Aelan Gel* performance was co-created by Marilena Crosato with Doreka Berry, Wilma Berry, Ethline Dick, Wendy Issack, Irene Malsungai, Christina Kokona, Rento Joseph, Myriam Malao, Juliette Niram-bath, Anna Pakoa, Joanna Tamath and Eunice Walter.

2 The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (or Global 16 Days Campaign) is an annual campaign to call for the elimination of all forms of gender-based violence against women, promoted by the Center for Women's Global Leadership. It does not provide monetary support, but works as a platform to link local actions to a global network in multiple locations around the world. Every year, a suggested theme, information and toolkits in several languages are available through the online platform: <https://16dayscampaign.org/>.

3 Marilena Crosato, Ethline Dick, Irene Malsungai, Rento Joseph, Myriam Malao, Juliette Niram-bath, Ann Pakoa and Joanna Tamath, *Aelan Gel* (Port Vila: Alliance Française, 2018).



consider how oral storytelling became a catalyst for the exchange of knowledge and the foregrounding of women's experience and agency on a wider regional level.

## METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The two authors of this paper met in Vanuatu before the beginning of the *Aelan Gel* project and connected around themes of participatory creative practice and community development. Haviland, a cultural anthropologist and community development practitioner, had arrived in Vanuatu, from Australia, six weeks before TC Pam in early 2015. She was completing a book about community art and co-creativity, drawn from her work in Australia and North America.<sup>4</sup> Crosato, a community social theatre and performance practitioner had arrived in Vanuatu, post TC Pam, from Haiti and was considering how to use her skills in post cyclone recovery in Port Vila. The authors' shared interests in co-creative practice spurred a dialogue about its relevance to the cultural, political and social context of Port Vila in the aftermath of the TC Pam disaster.

As Crosato developed the *Aelan Gel* project, she and Haviland agreed to record a series of conversations in English, reflecting on methodological, relational and theoretical concerns emerging from the process. In the period from 2015 to 2018, both undertook research related to the project and its impacts, including interviews with *Aelan Gel* participants, observation during the rehearsal and presentation processes, and engagement with relevant literature. The approach used to develop the analysis for this paper is qualitative, informed by the ethnographic experiences of the two authors, one a practitioner and one an academic researcher, reflecting on the same process from different angles.

Ethnography constitutes a common ground, creating bridges between oral history, art and social studies. The theoretical horizon of both this paper and the *Aelan Gel* project itself references the interpretative anthropology of Clifford Geertz who sees the cultural encounter as a process of attribution of meaning, aiming to define

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<sup>4</sup> Maya Haviland, *Side by Side? Community Art and the Challenge of Co-Creativity* (London: Routledge, 2016).

a local point of view always influenced by the subjectivity of the researcher.<sup>5</sup> ‘It makes available answers that others have given’ wrote Geertz, ‘to enlarge the repertoire of available symbolic productions’.<sup>6</sup> The arbitrariness of this vision is grounded by the consideration of concrete social events, arising from the public sphere of community life, and by the cross-cultural dialogue between different views that are all expressions of the human need to give meaning to the world. The social and historical environment in which this research took place required us to think of all the interventions – from processes of storytelling in formal and informal contexts, acts of participant observation, to the artistic creation itself – as actions inserted in a dynamic environment. The social action that produces change is framed by Victor Turner as a form of *social drama*, an active performance in a privileged space where conventional bounds are suspended, new potentialities are expressed, and conflicts can be resolved in the creation of new relationships.<sup>7</sup> This paper, and the work which it describes, also draws on theories supporting the link between autobiographical storytelling and resilience in a post-disaster context.

The process of making *Aelan Gel* fit broadly within the field of socially engaged theatre. Our discussion draws on anthropological framings of cultural encounter and social drama as generative spaces for the co-production of cultural forms and expressions, new understandings and knowledge, and shared experiences between creative makers and audiences. We refer to socially engaged theatre as a co-creation process involving a social group, where the creative work is both devised from processes of community engagement and, following Tom Finkelpearl, where social interaction is a part of the art itself.<sup>8</sup> Mimesis becomes a vehicle for new meanings, capturing the echo of private life and amplifying it in a visible and known form, connecting the intimate individual experience with the public experience of the social world.<sup>9</sup>

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5 Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (London: Fontana, 1983).

6 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 30.

7 Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ, 1986).

8 Tom Finkelpearl (ed.), *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

9 Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration, 1946–1987* (London: Methuen, 2008).

Performance in this context is a relational artwork, a space in which possible life alternatives are created, and artists, creative work and members of the public actively dialogue and produce a shared experience and perhaps a shared meaning.<sup>10</sup> In the case of *Aelan Gel*, these interactions were related to the intervention of the work in a significant public space, the Seaside Market House in Port Vila, and to the context of post-disaster recovery, where both vulnerability and resilience can arise.<sup>11</sup>

The process of production drew on Crosato's socially engaged theatre practice, where the content and form of a creative piece originates from orality and dialogue between the participants in a specific project. The composition and repetition of stories and actions lead to a script, a public event and, eventually, to a written text. This methodology develops an oral history approach that resonates with Portelli's definition of oral history, where qualities such as subjectivity, ephemerality and relationality are leveraged as strengths.<sup>12</sup> We believe that personal narratives, embodied in the actions of people in their local contexts, can engage a symbolic, as well as a relational potential. In the case of *Aelan Gel*, co-creativity and site-specific performance are advancing the scope of possibilities of oral history approaches through the performance of these narratives in ways that tangibly shaped transformative outcomes for both the storytellers and their audiences. In this paper, we seek to explore how oral storytelling and collective narration can be a methodology to reconnect past and future. How it can both evoke and effect place and memory, generating resilience, awareness and shared meanings in response to challenging themes of the lived experiences of women.

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10 Nicolas Bourriaud, *Esthétique relationnelle* (Paris: Les Presses du réel, 2001), 47; Grant Kester, *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).

11 Jack Saul, *Collective Trauma Collective Healing: Promoting Community Resilience in the Aftermath of Disaster* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

12 Oral history, as defined by Portelli, 'might be understood as the method of "not yet", one that reflects disparate desires and memories and engages a shared imagining of future possibilities'. Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce and Jason Ruiz, 'What Makes Queer Oral History Different', *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (2016): 1–24.

## THE SETTINGS

### VANUATU AND TC PAM

Vanuatu is a Melanesian archipelago in the South Pacific Ocean, composed of 83 islands (68 of which are inhabited) where more than 100 local languages are spoken across a current population of around 250,000 people. It is a place of immense linguistic and cultural diversity, with a strong unifying national identity. Vanuatu gained its independence from joint French and British colonial rule in 1980. Like the majority of the Pacific's small island states, its economy relies heavily on foreign aid.<sup>13</sup> Vanuatu is classified as the world's most at-risk country for natural hazards, being threatened in recent years by active tectonic phenomena such as earthquakes, eruptions, tsunamis, as well as the impacts of climate change in the form of rising sea levels and extreme weather.<sup>14</sup>

Despite economic and physical challenges the country has also been called 'the happiest place on earth' thanks to its strong traditional and community support system that contributes to high levels of wellbeing, and for its relatively low ecological footprint.<sup>15</sup> Traditional systems of kinship ties, gift exchange and reciprocity, widely studied by anthropologists, have been challenged by urbanisation and the emergence of an increasingly cash-based economy.<sup>16</sup> Within Vanuatu there is often a marked contrast between rural and urban livelihoods. Rural settlements typically rely on subsistence agriculture supplemented by cash incomes derived from copra, timber, cocoa and increasingly kava production, while urban centred populations in Port Vila and Luganville, depend on a cash economy mainly driven by the tourism industry.

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13 In December 2020 Vanuatu 'graduated' from the Least Developed Country status. However, during 2019–2020, COVID-19 and the disappearance of international tourists have significantly affected the country's economy. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, *The Least Developed Countries Report 2020* (New York: UN Publications, 2020).

14 *WorldRiskReport 2020* (Berlin & Bochum: Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft and Ruhr University Bochum–IFHV, 2020).

15 The Happy Planet Index is measured by using global data on life expectancy, wellbeing and a nation's ecological footprint. Vanuatu ranks first in 2006 and fourth in 2016. Saamah Abdallah, Juliet Michaelson, Nic Marks, Sam Thompson and Nicola Steuer, *The Happy Planet Index 2.0* (London: NEF, 2009). For the 2016 survey see <http://happyplanetindex.org/countries>.

16 See for example Margaret Jolly, Helen Lee, Katherine Lepani, Anna Naupa and Michelle Rooney, *Falling Through the Net? Gender and Social Protection in the Pacific. For Progress of the World's Women 2015–2016 Discussion Paper no. 6* (New York: UNWomen, 2015), 7.

In March 2015 Category Five Tropical Cyclone Pam hit Vanuatu leaving 75,000 people homeless and harming the livelihoods of over 40,000 households. It damaged and destroyed crops and community infrastructure, disrupting daily life and the local economy in Port Vila and across other parts of Vanuatu. The damage is estimated to have resulted in losses of around 1.6 billion Vatu, or the equivalent of approximately 19.75 million Australian dollars, in personal income.<sup>17</sup> The elderly, those engaged in the informal economy, and those depending on subsistence livelihoods suffered in the post-disaster period due to reduced incomes and food sources. Women, prominent in both subsistence farming and in food, market and tourism businesses, faced significant constraints accessing finance and labour to repair their houses and businesses, reducing their capacity to generate income to provide food and other basic needs for their families.

In Vanuatu, post-disaster, there was a massive influx of aid organisations and expats in early 2015. Crosato and her then partner (who was working for an international aid organisation) were part of this temporary migration. Crosato's professional practice is based in socially engaged theatre for social and cultural resilience.<sup>18</sup> Her approach is to facilitate shared creative practice and storytelling as a form of social action, using the strategies of social theatre to provide contexts of expression and communication for specific groups, usually presenting their work in a public space. This approach to transforming site and culturally specific oral storytelling into public performance aligns with performative mechanisms that Diana Taylor has described as 'vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated, or what Richard Schechner has called *twice-behaved behavior*'.<sup>19</sup> After three years of undertaking such work as part of disaster recovery in Haiti, Crosato arrived in Vanuatu two months after TC Pam. Driven by curiosity and a desire to establish her own social networks, she undertook a personal mapping of people and

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17 According to OCHA overall, an estimated 166,600 people were affected by the category five cyclone, with 75,000 people in need of shelter and 110,000 people with no access to safe drinking water. See <http://www.unocha.org/top-stories/all-stories/flash-appeal-launched-cyclone-affected-vanuatu>.

18 Crosato's work and past collaborations can be seen at [www.marilenacrosato.com](http://www.marilenacrosato.com).

19 Diana Taylor, 'Translating Performance', *Profession* 7 (2002): 44–5; Richard Schechner, *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

places, exploring cultural spaces (libraries, cultural centres, artists' houses and collections, and so on), and meeting with local and foreign cultural personalities, civil society actors and researchers. Interested in developing a creative project to investigate women and power dynamics in the post-disaster recovery processes occurring across Vanuatu, Crosato tells the story of the establishment of the *Aelan Gel* project:

My attraction to the market manifested as an intuition. Soon after coming to Vanuatu, I began spending time in the Seaside Market House on the foreshore of downtown Port Vila, and met with the *mamas* who are cooks and managers of the small restaurant stalls on one side of the market. I introduced to them my previous work with social theatre and we decided to develop a project together.

The group shaped itself through a series of introductory meetings and shared time spent at the market. During this phase a lot of women approached our table discussing and carefully listening to the potential of the proposal and trying to figure out what that could mean for them. I started engaging individual women that were showing stronger interest, listening to their stories and everyday talk. Little by little a core group or 'inner public' as Wodiczko calls it, consolidated and we started sharing autobiographical memories.<sup>20</sup> Later I invited them to meet and play with improvisations. We began to deepen our mutual understanding and experiment with theatre techniques.<sup>21</sup>

Myriam, one of the leaders of the Local Restaurant Market House Association, had worked for several years at the Alliance Française, and then started her own business in the market. Crosato got to know her through eating at her market stall. Myriam had performed as a storyteller in the past, and was enthusiastic about the *Aelan Gel* project from the beginning. As a leader for the other *mamas*, her engagement helped to form a group identity around the project.

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20 Krzysztof Wodiczko, 'The Inner Public', *Field 1* (Spring 2015).

21 Marilena Crosato, interviewed by Maya Haviland, Port Vila, 15 October 2015, recording and transcript held by Maya Haviland.

All the women who took part in the *Aelan Gel* project spoke Bislama, several local languages, and English or French at different levels. Communications were shaped by this complexity, with Crosato often speaking in both English and French and the group in Bislama. The people who were more at ease with foreign languages acted as informal translators, retelling stories told in Bislama into English or French. As the women grew more familiar with each other, the languages of improvisation and physical expression became more articulate and the group communicated through these physical expressions as well as through spoken word.

#### PLACE, ORALITY AND NI-VANUATU IDENTITY

Ni-Vanuatu identity has historically been presented by anthropologists in a way that emphasises the connection to place as fundamental and links identity to *kastom*.<sup>22</sup> The pidgin word *kastom*, deriving from the English word custom, refers to traditional practices in everyday life. It embodies the knowledge of the people of Vanuatu, distinguishing the many different cultures of the archipelago. *Kastom* can be defined as expressions of national unity as well as regional diversity and a basis of identity.<sup>23</sup> In Port Vila migrants from other islands tend to group together in urban/peri-urban settlements, where they must pay to rent houses or, as Joanna Tamath said in the *Aelan Gel* performance, must ‘pay for everything’ as they do not have access to land for food gardens. Until recently, even young people born in Port Vila primarily identified themselves with their ancestral islands.<sup>24</sup> Those whose family lands are in the Port Vila area are positioned differently to these migrants.

Indigenous forms of social protection often involve unequal relations between women and men when caring for the young, the elderly and those with disability. While such

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22 Joël Bonnemaison, *The Tree and the Canoe: History and Ethnogeography of Tanna* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Margaret Jolly, *Women of the Place: Kastom, Colonialism and Gender in Vanuatu* (Chur & Philadelphia: Harwood Academic Press, 1994).

23 Roger Keesing and Robert Tonkinson (eds), *Reinventing Traditional Culture: The Politics of Kastom in Island Melanesia*. *Mankind* 13, no. 4 (Sydney: Anthropological Society of New South Wales, 1982); Lamont Lindstrom and Geoffrey White, *Culture, Kastom, Tradition: Developing Cultural Policy in Melanesia* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1994); Knut Rio and Edvard Hviding, ‘Pacific Made: Social Movements Between Cultural Heritage and the State’, in Edvard Hviding and Knut Rio (eds), *Made in Oceania: Social Movements, Cultural Heritage and the State in the Pacific* (Wantage, England: Sean Kingston Publishing, 2011).

24 Daniela Kraemer, ‘Planting Roots, Making Place: Urban Autochthony in Port Vila Vanuatu’, *Oceania* 90, no. 1 (2020): 40–54.



differences are transforming, they are still normalised in the everyday perception of gender roles widely prescribed by *kastom* and can be exacerbated in the urban setting. In towns, men engaged in the cash-based economy can more easily spend wages on personal consumption rather than household sustenance, care and protection, a theme that emerged in the stories of women told during the *Aelan Gel* project.<sup>25</sup>

The construction of identity and the preservation of site-specific cultural roots is largely based on orality and intergenerational transmission. Oral tradition plays a significant role in shaping identities, but also recreates the past. The narration of individual and collective memories dialogues with ongoing social transformations and their meanings in Vanuatu. Ni-Vanuatu archaeologist and director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre Richard Shing has described oral traditions as the symbolic structure that organises the practical meaning of everyday life and allows one to orient oneself in the world:

It is the means by which people communicate with their ancestors; it is the means by which both sacred and communal knowledge can be passed on. Codes of ethics, morality and correct manners of respect are all obtained through the passing of knowledge through word of mouth. Thus, oral tradition, to an indigenous Ni-Vanuatu, does not only provide instructions as to how one could live a better way of life, it is also the means by which we live and survive day by day. It is our definition of life.<sup>26</sup>

The idea of place and island-based identity are a legitimising basis for *kastom*, ensuring that islands of origin maintain their centrality along one's lifetime but also across generations of families on the move.<sup>27</sup> For urban communities in Port Vila, island-based identity continues to be a powerful source of social norms, organising

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<sup>25</sup> Jolly et al., *Falling Through the Net?*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Shing, 'Oral Tradition in Vanuatu and Its Importance from an Historical Perspective', in Paul de Deckker, Christophe Sand and Frederic Angleviel (eds), *The New Pacific Review. Proceedings of the 16th Pacific History Association Conference*, vol. 3 (Canberra: The Australian National University 2004), 199.

<sup>27</sup> Ethnography of communities from Tanna island living in Port Vila provides ample evidence of island-based identity in action. See Lamont Lindstrom, 'Urbane Tannese: Local Perspectives on Settlement Life in Port Vila', *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 133 (2011): 255–66.

social life in areas such as residence, exchange networks, ritual, justice and knowledge transmission. It is, however, a plural, flexible identity, incorporating the ‘simultaneous understanding of the process and history of relationships between people, groups and places up to that point, as well as the simultaneous appearance of town and island’.<sup>28</sup>

#### THE SEASIDE MARKET HOUSE

The Port Vila Seaside Market House is one of the few public spaces in Port Vila where the cultural diversity and layered urban complexity of contemporary Vanuatu are visible to the observant cultural outsider. Open 24 hours a day, six days a week, women and children live out their days in the market.<sup>29</sup> Many who travel from rural areas around the island of Efate to sell their goods also sleep there. Trade, interactions and casual meetings happen. The murmur of some of Vanuatu’s over 100 indigenous languages mixes with Bislama, and conversations in English and French evoke the legacies of Vanuatu’s colonial past.<sup>30</sup>

The market’s businesses are mainly run by women. As emphasised by recent studies, marketplaces are a main source of income activity for women in Vanuatu and play a critical role in food security. Markets have been shown to contribute important social and economic strengths for women, associated with their physical spaces and mutual aid through their formal and informal social networks.<sup>31</sup> The Seaside Market House in Port Vila and its flourishing associations offer important venues to effect women’s social and economic change, and to support women’s leadership.

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28 Benedicta Rousseau, ‘The Achievement of Simultaneity: *Kastom* and Place in Port Vila, Vanuatu’, *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* 144–145 (2017): 41.

29 Please note this paper is drawn from work undertaken in 2015–2018 prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic which has, at least temporarily, changed the nature and function of the Market House.

30 Bislama is the official ‘creole’ language of Vanuatu, along with English and French. It is often the first language of many of the Ni-Vanuatu living in urban centres and the second language of much of the rest of the country’s population.

31 Karen E. McNamara, Rachel Clissold and Ross Westoby, ‘Marketplaces as Sites for the Development-adaptation-disaster Trifecta: Insights from Vanuatu’, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 61, no. 3 (2020): 566–76.



**Figure 1** *Aelan Gel* performers interact with a market vendor before the performance *Aelan Gel*, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Murray Lloyd.

## THE AELAN GEL'S APPROACH TO STORYTELLING

### THE AELAN GEL GROUP

The *Aelan Gel* group emerged out of some of these women's networks, linked through the public space of the Seaside Market House. The project was developed on a voluntary basis without significant financial support.<sup>32</sup> The group's 13 women came from three local associations: the Local Restaurant Market House, the Farmer's Association Market House and the Vanuatu Young Women for Change. All were interested in carving out a space in the cultural field of Port Vila around themes to do with resilience and women's roles.

As the group took shape, an emotional bond and mutual understanding grew through everyday interactions in the informality of the meetings at the market: cultural and individual differences were explicitly acknowledged and assimilated;

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<sup>32</sup> The group partnered with the Alliance Française who provided rehearsal space and a small grant to produce the video about the project. Crosato produced the show and the women didn't get reimbursement or compensation for the rehearsals. The group held a meeting at the end of the project to discuss the administrative balance and to share the donations received during the free performances.

personal experiences and views were shared and discussed in relation to the lived realities of women's lives in Vanuatu. The deeper issues women continue to live with became a stronger creative driver than the immediate challenges of disaster response. The Global 16 Days Campaign was identified as an effective way to frame women's experiences within both the global framework and within local events.<sup>33</sup>

Aged between 16 and 60, the participants established an intergenerational dynamic based on knowledge and advice transmission from the elders to the younger women. The older women, owners or managers of small businesses at the market, became role models for the younger women in the group. This intergenerational dynamic was reflected in the *Aelan Gel* performance. In the first story, Joanna teaches her most popular cooking recipe to the youngest participant, Christina, while inviting the audience to sit and listen to the women telling their stories.

**Joanna:** Good afternoon to everyone who came to the market. I invite you all to take a chair and listen to our story. Today, I'm going to show you a recipe, the *blanquette*. (...)

**Christina:** Mami, for how many hours should the *blanquette* be cooked?

**Joanna:** One hour and a half. Christina, taste, mmm! It's good! This is how to prepare a *blanquette* in a kitchen like that of the market. If you want to try it ... here you go!<sup>34</sup>

In addition to the transmission of stories from older to younger, the horizontal nature of the participatory process through which *Aelan Gel* was devised gave a rare opportunity for young women to be listened to by older women. This process of storytelling and listening allowed younger women in the group to identify with, and assume a role in, a shared narrative, underscoring issues about women's place in

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33 A description of the events that took place in Port Vila for the Global 16 Days Campaign in 2015 can be found in Angelina Penner, *Wanem ia jenda? [What is Gender?]: Translations and (Mis)Understandings between Development Discourse & Everyday Life Experiences in Port Vila, Vanuatu* (Bergen: The University of Bergen, 2017).

34 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 17.

a rapidly transforming urban setting. One of the stories told by Eunice, a story of violence against a girl, focused on the mobile phone as a tool used by men to control their partners.<sup>35</sup>

**Eunice:** That's what we saw! We felt sorry for the girl who was crying, and this problem came from a telephone issue. Nowadays the telephone can be a cause of violence!<sup>36</sup>



**Figure 2** During the performance of *Aelan Gel*, coffee and a tasting of blanquette are served to the audience, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Murray Lloyd.

#### SHARING INDIVIDUAL STORIES, SHAPING COLLECTIVE CULTURAL ACTION

In working with non-professional actors and storytellers, Crosato strives to transform the lack of professional experience, infrastructure and technical equipment into creative strengths. Her social theatre practice had previously developed in Colombia and Haiti where she concentrated on narratives of life experiences and

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<sup>35</sup> Mobile phones have been described by Taylor as objects having an agency that extends beyond their immediate capacities as devices of telecommunication. Mobile communication technology has been found to be linked to concerns around sexual liaisons among young people, extramarital affairs, and gender-based power dynamics. See John P. Taylor, 'Drinking Money and Pulling Women: Mobile Phone Talk, Gender, and Agency in Vanuatu', *Anthropological Forum* 26, no. 1 (2015), 7.

<sup>36</sup> English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 27.



oral storytelling to bring non-professionals to performance and to support groups built around communities of interest to find a collective public voice. Questions that drive her practice include ‘How to make creative works that are relevant to real-world conditions?’ and ‘How to bring real-life issues, cultural realities and real people to performance?’<sup>37</sup>

Crosato consolidated the steps in her practice in Haiti where she facilitated seven separate creative community initiatives to public performance.<sup>38</sup> Beginning with autobiographic storytelling, the group is led to identify a main theme or axis of research. Next, through processes of creative retelling and layered storytelling, the stories become progressively oriented around key themes and ideas and the group finds its collective voice. Now, an oral script begins to take shape in rehearsals, where the stories are repeated, exchanged and played with. The group begins to compose new forms, mixing fictional and autobiographical elements and arrives at a final oral script, without the need for any written support. The focus is on telling and retelling, moving from the autobiographical to the shared narrative, performing and re-performing until the narrative belongs to the group and the context in which they seek to perform.

This approach makes projects accessible to people from diverse backgrounds and educational experiences. Everyone can be part of what Crosato calls an ‘experimental community’, a group that is constituted by the encounter between artists and local communities aggregated around common identity markers – a set of values, a need for change, a message to communicate. Creative works arise in this ‘experimental community’ through the collaboration of different people and their knowledge, and take a different path each time.

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37 The tensions caused by the inclusion of non-professionals in co-creative art practices is considered by both practitioners and theorists, see for example: Haviland, *Side by Side?*, 82–110. See also Claire Bishop, ‘The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents’, *Artforum International* 44, no. 6 (2006): 178–83 and Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2008).

38 Crosato lived in Haiti from 2013 to 2015, based in Grand Goave, Leogane and Port au Prince. There, she began reflecting on the relationship with the place and the responsibility of the artist.

In Haiti, where in 2010 a 7.0 magnitude earthquake killed 200,000 people and left 1.5 million people homeless, this form of collective narration proved to be useful for individual empowerment and collective resilience in the disaster recovery phase. Participants found the process helped them to re-find and experience the sense of community that had become precarious due to the disaster. As Jack Saul has articulated, creative connections to collective action can be of significant value in building resilience in the face of personal or collective impacts from disruptive events.<sup>39</sup>

The overarching goal of Crosato's creative practice is supporting individual and collective agency in the face of social challenges. The suite of creative development activities which she applied to work in Haiti and in Vanuatu, allow for adaptation to local cultural contexts and framings of social and political realities. In Vanuatu the narrative of 'disaster recovery' was encompassed by a stronger group interest in the agency and visibility of women's experiences.

How specific techniques resonate with a particular group and cultural context varies. In the early stages of the *Aelan Gel* creative process, Crosato reflected on the differences between working with women in Haiti and with the group in Vanuatu. She noted how histories of international aid, foreign research and development in each place had differently shaped self-representation of women and perceptions of their needs, expectations of payment and collaboration in aspects of the creative process.

As an artist I was curious. *Aelan Gel* was to be my first intervention in Vanuatu. How would my methodology work in this cultural context? How would a deep participatory process be received in the post-disaster realities of Vanuatu? For the group of women who decided to participate there was a strong curiosity as well. What would they discover in this new world of theatre, performance and storytelling? How would this initiative make their

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39 'Cycles of collective action in public space, communal activities, reflection, and narration are all cited as important process in recovery to enable the development of collective resilience'. Saul, *Collective Trauma Collective Healing*, 2.



voices heard in public, and what would this kind of social engagement mean for them?<sup>40</sup>

In Haiti, with its long history of dependency on international aid exacerbated after the 2010 earthquake, it was relatively easy to find an institutional framework to develop social theatre projects that assisted individuals to re-find and experience a sense of community. However, during the theatre workshops, the team-building and trust-building exercises required a longer time for the participants to experience safety and collective support through simple actions, revealing the extent to which such experiences of collective support and safety were not part of their everyday life. Safety emerged as an important factor in setting performances in public places, something that had to be carefully negotiated with community leaders and other stakeholders.

In Vanuatu post-disaster, where community bonds were still strong, women's individual and collective resources were an orienting theme in *Aelan Gel*. The project became one of working in between – between the formal structures of organisations and cultural recovery programs and the lives of the women; between the lunch and dinner hours of the market restaurants, in between tables of each *mama's* stall; between generations of women and their languages; between rural memories and urban life.

#### STORYTELLING IN PLACE

The creative process took place over two months, sometimes in a nearby rehearsal space when the group's storytelling sessions required privacy and active listening, and sometimes in the market where the movements, actions and scenography of the performance were shaped. Crosato reflects:

We started the co-creative process without written text, aesthetic ideas about staging or any message to predetermine the content of the final performance. We simply began with a question: 'What do we know and think about the

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<sup>40</sup> Marilena Crosato, 15 October 2015.

lives of women, power and violence?’ We brought to this the richness of personal experiences and stories. We talked and played together.<sup>41</sup>

While the project was taking shape, the market’s economy slowly regained its strength, as a variety of products and newly grown crops began to refill the stalls. This recovery fed the creative project, drawing out the adversity-activated development that characterised the lived experiences of many of the women after crisis.<sup>42</sup> Stories came forth reflecting on expressions and experiences of resilience, shaping a direction for the overall narrative. For example, the following statement made by Ryndo:

My name is Ryndo and I come from the island of Tanna. My husband divorced me, I had to pay school fees for my children, but I didn’t have enough money, so I came to Port Vila to look for work, but there was no work. I went to my family and they gave me a piece of land to make a vegetable garden. Then I came to the city to sell the products from my garden to pay the children’s school fees. Now I pay for books, clothes, school materials, food ...<sup>43</sup>

Approaching the topics of women, power and violence from a personal perspective revealed the group’s common problems and values. Strategies that women were able to put in place to respond to the logic and obstacles of power began emerging from their stories and the witnessing of each other’s stories. Autobiographic narrations and shared observations link ethnographic practice with theatre and local culture.<sup>44</sup> Traditional storytelling styles emerged across the group, offering a pathway into performer–audience interaction, a key principle of theatre practice. Call and

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41 Marilena Crosato, 15 October 2015.

42 There are many accounts of Ni-Vanuatu reaction to the natural adversity caused by the cyclone. See Tony Rey, Loic Le De, Frederic Leone and David Gilbert, ‘An Integrative Approach to Understand Vulnerability and Resilience Post-disaster: The 2015 Cyclone Pam in Urban Vanuatu as Case Study’, *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal* 26 (2017): 268. Reno Papadopoulos analyses ‘new positive developments that have been activated by the person’s very exposure to adversity’, in ‘Refugees, Trauma and Adversity-activated Development’, *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling* 9, no. 3 (2007): 306.

43 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 19.

44 Autobiographic narrations in theatre have been elaborated in different ways in the monologues of Italian narrative theatre. See for example Gerardo Guccini (ed.), *La bottega dei narratori* (Roma: Dino Audino Editore, 2005). See also James Clifford, *Routes – Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: Harvard University Press, 1997).

response, names and descriptions of places, third-person dialogues, moral and practical advice given to the youth, and the presence of music melodies characterised the storytelling styles.<sup>45</sup> The stories became the common social and creative ground of discussion, carrying layers of past and present, symbolism and reality, authentic experience and creative representation.



**Figure 3** Aelan Gel performers, the final scene, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Marilena Crosato.

The approach supported the women to share and gather stories on the themes of gender, power hardship and resilience through conversation and story circles characterised by a non-judgemental environment and active listening. Storytelling and guided discussions about what the group members were observing in their own lives and more widely in the Ni-Vanuatu social environment were a starting point. On the one hand autobiographic stories brought the group to know about the island-based identity of each participant's memories, knowledge and roots. On the other

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<sup>45</sup> Lamont Lindstorm highlights how in Vanuatu songs, like stories, are part of the custom tradition and help fix historical events in collective memory. For example, 'Big Wok: The Vanuatu Cultural Centre's World War Two Ethnohistory Project', in John Taylor and Nick Thieberger (eds), *Working Together in Vanuatu: Research Histories, Collaborations, Projects and Reflections* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2011), 54.

hand, returning to life in the market kept the work rooted in the present, with the challenges the women were facing as female business owners after TC Pam.

Oral narration was used as a tool to develop content and to build public-speaking confidence in the performers. It was often combined with physical games and voice exercises, from a repertoire developed through training and practice and refined in cross-cultural contexts.<sup>46</sup> In addition to storytelling, image-theatre – a technique that represents social situations and analyses their underlying dynamics by composing living pictures – was a way to lead the group from realistic to symbolic forms of representation.<sup>47</sup> With each workshop the *Aelan Gel* women drew more of their own ways of working together into the process. Together they shaped a replicable text through repetition, giving each other feedback on style and content of performance, discussing the intricacies of story and expression, taking charge of the group dynamics, translating – literally and metaphorically – across differences of age, language and experience.

The group was formed by a mix of women of different ages and different cultures, not linked to a single *kastom* identity. Women brought different approaches to their storytelling, and the group worked with different kinds of stories – personal, observed or overheard, as well as traditional *kastom* stories.<sup>48</sup> Over time the diversity in the group proved to be a key strength of the creative process. Autobiographic storytelling mixed with fictionalisation and the overlaying of different women's stories became a strategic process, giving participants the freedom to shape their messages and challenge audiences' preconceived ideas about women's creative self-expression and revelation. The group made conscious choices to push back on stereotypical narratives of an affected group in the phase of early recovery after a natural disaster.

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46 See Eugenio Barba, *The Paper Canoe* (London: Routledge, 1994); Claudio Bernardi, *Il teatro sociale. L'arte tra disagio e cura* (Rome: Carocci, 1994); Jacques Lecoq, *Le Corps poétique, un enseignement de la création théâtrale* (Arles: Actes Sud-Papiers, 1997); Santiago García, *Teoría y práctica del teatro* (Bogotá: Ediciones Teatro la Candelaria, 1983).

47 Augusto Boal, *Games for Actors and Non-actors* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

48 One issue specific to Vanuatu *kastom* culture and storytelling is related to story ownership. This is particularly so with *kastom* stories. See Lindstrom, 'Big Wok', 49–50.

The project's creative approach and workshop process danced between autobiographic memories, fictionalised stories and public and private spaces and relationships, much in the way that the market restaurants straddle public and private for the women who own and cook in them. The choice to develop part of the creation process in a public space had multiple functions, disrupting the routine of people passing by and offering customers and other workers a moment to listen to the women, to agree or disagree with them, to recognise themselves in the stories that were told. The dynamism of the market also offered a first audience to the group, helping them to associate new meanings and new memories to their usual workplace and progressively internalising a new public social role.



**Figure 4** Audience members at the long table during *Aelan Gel* performance in the market, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Murray Lloyd.

These processes of co-creation and collective decision-making shaped the content of the performance and its form. Through the process of storytelling, listening, theatre games and exercises, the group transitioned from abstract values and general ideas and started uncovering new insights into women's lives in contemporary Port Vila. In addition to the widespread presence of gender-based violence across the stories, the struggle to pay school fees unified all the mothers within the group and the



importance of education was articulated as a tool to generate and resist power. As these themes emerged, the group chose which woman's story best represented their common experiences of the pride felt in succeeding in sending children to school thanks to the hard work at the market.

Anna's story was chosen by the group because she was offering to all her seven children a good education – a huge accomplishment in Vanuatu. In this local context her story aroused great admiration and respect. Anna, who had always considered her work a necessity caused by her own lack of education, started to significantly change her way of behaving with customers and authorities, gaining self-confidence and leadership skills during the months following the *Aelan Gel* project.<sup>49</sup>

### AELAN GEL, STORIES OF VIOLENCE AND RESILIENCE

Aesthetic choices came from physical improvisations, rehearsals and long hours spent observing market life. In the market, privacy is carved out through strategic positioning of tables, delineated by mats or benches, cloths draped over objects or sleeping people. *Aelan Gel* drew on these methods and symbols. The stage was set as a long table at the centre of the market, a swing hung at the entrance to the restaurant area and a bench was used to display everyday objects evoking stories of daily life and violence: a bottle and a beer can; a kava bowl; a box of matches; cigarettes; chilli pepper; scissors; small and large knives; a stone; a meat pestle and a hammer.<sup>50</sup> All these objects emerged in the narrations and some of them were set as protagonists of the stories. This choice was in line with Vanuatu being described by Taylor as 'a cultural milieu in which material objects such as stones or houses may be sentient and agentive'.<sup>51</sup> Objects evoking tradition and rural life were placed next to objects

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49 Marilena Crosato, interviewed by Maya Haviland, Port Vila, 15 January 2016, recording and transcript held by Maya Haviland.

50 Kava is a culturally important drink in Vanuatu which has psychoactive effects, mainly sedative. Originally, the consumption of kava was linked to ceremonies and rituals. Nowadays, kava has been commercialised and can be purchased in 'kava bars'. See John P. Taylor, 'Janus and the Siren's Call: Kava and the Articulation of Gender and Modernity in Vanuatu', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 16, no. 2 (2010): 279–296.

51 'The idea of *man ples* (place-based identity) and of being firmly rooted in the land like a banyan tree is highly valued. Related to this, while purposeful journeying is positively valued, aimless wandering is generally deplored and considered both unhealthy and dangerous. (*continued over page*)

from contemporary life merging and acquiring new meanings. Everyday objects activate a range of sensations and emotions related to personal stories, giving life to relationships and images that are intertwined with the living narratives of one's own cultural environment. In the extraordinary space of the theatrical scene, objects encourage imagination and identification, mediating access to an intermediate space between reality and illusion, social normativity and creation.<sup>52</sup>



**Figure 5** Objects of violence displayed on a bench during the performance, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Marilena Crosato.

At the beginning of the *Aelan Gel* performance, a swing in motion marked the rhythm of a children's song, echoing from the women's memories, sung as a call to the market's vendors and customers to gather around the performance space.

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This is especially the case for women. Not only are women's actions – in this case involving sexual behaviour especially – controlled by men, but they must also face or otherwise live out the moral consequences of such actions. While mobile phones themselves may indeed provide a useful tool for social change, such as in the empowerment of women, the meanings and narratives that surround them may by marked contrast entail much more negative continuations of already existing relations of power and inequality.' Taylor, 'Drinking Money and Pulling Women', 7.

52 Donald W. Winnicott analyses transitional objects and their role in the child's psychosocial development and transitional phenomena in the adult's life. See Winnicott, 'Transitional Objects and Transitional Phenomena – A Study of the First Not-Me Possession', *International Journal Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953): 91.



Through the swing and the music, a dimension of intimacy was brought into the public space of the marketplace, in which the nostalgia of childhood became the voice of the women unified in a single stream of music. Following the same melody, the names of the islands of origin were called out, enriched by the personal memories of their beauty and their products.

**Johanna:** I come from a small island near Mallicollo, Atchin. I love my island, because we have small pirogues with which we catch fish to make *laplap sosor*, mmm!<sup>53</sup>

Baskets, fruits and yams that are sold at the market, as well as volcanoes and pirogues that appear in the narrations, are the marks of identity of the women circulating between different locations and cultures in the Pacific.<sup>54</sup>



**Figure 6** *Aelan Gel* performers on the swing in the opening scene, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Murray Lloyd.

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53 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 16.

54 See for example Marilyn Strathern, *Partial Connections* (Savage, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1991), 135.

Once the audience had gathered and focused their attention, they were invited to sit around the long table and listen to the performers' stories. The recipe of a local dish, usually served at the market, introduced the voices of the women. They told how they arrived in Port Vila, faced difficulties, and sought support from their families, how they managed to work at the market and have their children enrolled at school.

The stories in the register of everyday life introduce tensions and violence. Hidden or visible, violence is always latent and it reveals something about Ni-Vanuatu society by the way the women react to it. Myriam, one of the performers, told of collecting stones on a beach and seeing a girl being chased by a man with a knife. Fearing for the girl's life, in front of a community unable to intervene, she starts throwing the little stones at the man. She manages to hit him and push the man away. She comes to be called the 'Stone Woman' by the people of this village.

**Myriam:** I gathered these little stones because I found them nice, black and white, round. I wanted to put them in my room as a decoration.<sup>55</sup>

Parts of the performance were first-person narratives about how each woman came to cook in the market, sharing the challenges related to business and economic independence in the context of divorce, illness, distance from family, while celebrating the independence that these businesses provide.

**Anna:** The people of Pentecost didn't know what a market was and my father explained it to them. He spoke with the chiefs about this project. Then those who had pigs brought them, as well as those who had chickens. Those who had yam, taro, sugar cane and cabbage brought their products and my father explained to them how to make a market. My father showed them how to put a price on their products and sell them, and now all the people of Pentecost know how to work for the market.<sup>56</sup>

These stories were performed as intimate confidences given across the table to the audience. Other elements of the show were partially fictionalised performances, enacting

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55 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 30.

56 English translation by Crosato from the original text, Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 22.

archetypal stories of violence bubbling under the surface of social interactions, drawn from a range of stories told in workshop and rehearsal. Using fictionalised versions of lived experience protected the confidences of individuals and distilled common experiences. Processes of fictionalisation enabled performances that embodied the humour used in real life to diffuse and deflect violence in the urban spaces of Port Vila, while echoing the comedy of TV soap opera. Included also were stylised moments of physical and voice performance where the women moved as one, speaking directly to the themes of empowerment and participation that had threaded through the women's stories in the workshops.

During the making of *Aelan Gel* the women had been inspired by a poem by the Ni-Vanuatu poet and politician Grace Mera Molisa. A poet, publisher and political figure in Vanuatu, Molisa was integral to the women's movement in Vanuatu and in the Pacific.<sup>57</sup> The last part of the *Aelan Gel* performance opened with a two-voice reading of Molisa's poem 'Delightful Acquiescence'.<sup>58</sup> The women united in a group, whispering with a stylised strength, enacting the final message the women articulated: a claim for space in the political and public arena, a self-affirmation of their social role within the family and in the public sphere.

**Myriam:** We want all Ni-Vanuatu women to stop being silent.

**Eunice:** Stop being quiet.

**Myriam:** We must talk about it.

**All:** Politics, school, health, respect, violence, money, peace, happiness, business, love, *kastom*, family, joy, religion, sport, music ...

**Myriam:** Everything, everything!

We want all Ni-Vanuatu women not to be afraid.<sup>59</sup>

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57 Molisa was the first Ni-Vanuatu woman awarded a university degree, the only woman member of the National Constitution Committee and a signatory to the Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu in 1979. As founding member of Transparency International and Vanuatu's National Arts Festival, she published the voices of indigenous Pacific women through her press, Blackstone Publishing.

58 While the whole performance was played in Bislama, the poem was read in Bislama and in its original language, English. Grace Mera Molisa, *Black Stone II* (Port Vila: Black Stone Publications and Vanuatu University Pacific Centre, 1989), 24.

59 English translation by Crosato. Crosato et al., *Aelan Gel*, 34.



**Figure 7** Aelan Gel performer Ethline Dick reads Grace Mera Molisa's poem, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Groovy Banana.

#### AUDIENCE RESPONSES

The process of gathering and considering stories and the lived experiences of women in Port Vila in late 2015 was a political act. In Vanuatu there are very high rates of violence against women across all provinces, age groups, education levels and religions. The women who took part in the project were highly aware of the political nature of their process and they made considered and strategic choices about the nature of their public intervention.<sup>60</sup>

The role of women in dealing with violence in different circumstances was illustrated in a non-conventional way;

they pictured themselves as proactive characters managing to solve critical situations. They also explored the dynamics of violence between women. The choice to perform in the public space of the market, the workplace of many of the women in the group, showed the women in a different capacity to the cooks and business women that they were known as. The group had to consider how much of their personal stories should be told and what the implications might be of the ways in which they were presented.

The simple action of performing in a public space was a meaningful intervention about the role of women in public and political life in Vanuatu.<sup>61</sup> The choice to

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60 As shown by a study from the Vanuatu National Statistics Office: 'The prevalence of intimate partner violence in Vanuatu is among the highest in the world ... For most women who experience physical or sexual violence, it occurs frequently, and it is often very severe'. *Vanuatu National Survey on Women's Lives and Family Relationships* (Port Vila: Vanuatu Women's Centre, 2011), 181.

61 The National Parliament of Vanuatu has 52 members. Since Independence, only five women have been elected to Parliament and at the time of writing there are no women in the Parliament.

perform in the market, a space dominated by working women, amplified the communication the women were making with their words and bodies. The performance brought forth the market as a key cultural space in the city – albeit one distinct from the more officially recognised cultural spaces of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre and the French embassy or the local theatre of Wan Smolbag.

The final performance of *Aelan Gel* was staged for an invited audience in the market at noon on a weekday, in the middle of the busiest time for the market restaurants. It was performed as part of an international book fair held by the Alliance Française in Port Vila. The literary event spilled into the quotidian spaces of market life. Audience members sat at the long table and formed another circle of performance. They had their own audience of passers-by and customers seeking a meal from their usual stall. For the *Aelan Gel* women a further performance staged at the Alliance Française, a few blocks away from the market, held great personal and social importance, bringing them literally centrestage within an established cultural space in Vanuatu.



**Figure 8** *Aelan Gel* performer telling a story at the table with the audience, Seaside Market House in Port Vila, 2015. Photograph by Maya Haviland.



At each performance audience members were moved to tears and laughter, with a solemn reverence descending during the speaking of Molisa's poem; it was evident that the poem played a crucial role in establishing the validity of the whole artistic intervention. For those who had perhaps never considered local women working at the market as intellectually engaged, the use of the poem was a demonstration of how the *Aelan Gel* women carry complex reflections on Ni-Vanuatu society and are alive to a range of cultural influences and references.

Not all audience members responded in the same way to the mixture of personal story, creative non-fiction and stylised performance. While the content and form of the artistic work provided action and commentary on the social and political life of urban women in Vanuatu, the moment of performance (when the group met the audience) was its own moment of research and discovery about perceptions of women. Some responses revealed the discomforts that the mixing of creative arts with ethnographic stories can pose to audiences, whose expectations of 'authenticity', 'cultural identity' and 'truth' can be challenged by the tools of creative production, and the hybrid stories that emerge from collaborative and co-creative processes.<sup>62</sup>

One Ni-Vanuatu man, who participated in a round-table discussion about the performance at the Alliance Française, criticised the women for not engaging more directly with their *kastom* identities in the work. His comments revealed uneasiness with the hybrid identities presented by the women – as modern business owners, urban dwellers with island roots, mothers, sisters and workers – living in the in-between space of contemporary Vanuatu where *kastom* and contemporary life mix in the realities of family, economic necessities and changing opportunities. Another audience member, an expat with powerful influence in the cultural scene of Port Vila, expressed her disappointment that the show did not tell the 'hard' stories of women's lives. She was expecting, perhaps, a form of social realism that the group itself had intentionally chosen to subvert, in favour of a creative production that distilled the experiences and narratives of many, and challenged assumptions of

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<sup>62</sup> Haviland, *Side by Side?*, 82–110.

victimhood and the simplified stereotypes around the causes and experiences of violence against women.

#### FROM ORALITY TO WRITTEN TEXT

The ripples of *Aelan Gel* spread into different art forms and forums. A documentary video about the project was produced by local media-making association Further Arts, a photographic exhibition displayed images from the performances and the artist Julie Sauerwein, inspired by *Aelan Gel*, captured the social and political messages put forward in the show. Her work of art was displayed during an exhibition held for International Women's Day. From early on the project provided a catalyst for local and international artists: photographers, researchers, video-makers, designers and musicians. In part this reflected the energy that co-creative processes, drawn from lived experience, can generate. This was especially true in contexts such as Port Vila post TC Pam, where the enthusiasm for the project demonstrated how grassroots creativity and cultural representations were sought out and valued by a community in the process of recovery.



**Figure 9** *Aelan Gel* poster created for International Women's Day 2016, by Julie Sauerwein.

As the simple idea of *Aelan Gel* grew into a range of other creative outputs, the group took the decision to collectively write and edit a script drawn from the performance. It was intended as a lasting testimony of the project, and an example of how authorship and literature are accessible to Ni-Vanuatu women and oral storytellers. Over the year following the performance the group transcribed and edited *Aelan Gel* for multi-lingual publication through the Alliance Française in Port Vila. Grace Molisa remained a source of inspiration: in over 35 years of independence there had never been more than



two female representatives in Parliament and few Ni-Vanuatu women were provided with literary opportunities. After the publication of the *Aelan Gel* book, other publications have been offering space for female writers in the form of anthologies and other texts.<sup>63</sup>

The process of turning the live performance into a written text empowered the women as writers. The group discussed how to transpose an oral text and ephemeral performance into written form, making it accessible to a wider audience. This was the third step of the process that started from sharing individual stories in the private space, to their translation and transformation in a collective performance displayed in the public space, and then translation into written literature.

The writing process took place at the market, in the quieter hours during which women are cleaning their kitchens and preparing for dinner customers. A smaller core group consolidated around the writing initiative. Those who were able to write assisted Crosato in writing in Bislama and those who had the best memory helped to recall the words used in the performance accurately. The group worked on refining the text, producing several drafts that were printed and read aloud at the market. A new awareness was raised, through discussions of keywords and paragraphs and the choices made for a written text as distinct from those spoken in live performance. The women knew they were making a book that would enter them in the national literature. This process of drafting, printing, reading aloud and discussing text choices happened several times, until the final text was ready.<sup>64</sup>

In 2018 the book was launched at the national book fair 'Pirogue' with the participation of all the authors. In the women's accounts, shared two years after the performance, many of them linked the *Aelan Gel* experience to choices they made

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<sup>63</sup> Various authors, *VOES* (Port Vila: Alliance Française, 2020).

<sup>64</sup> Co-authorship and ownership were discussed as well, including the names of all the performers/creators and of the smaller group that collectively wrote the text. Alliance Française's team, with their expertise in publishing texts in Bislama and translating into French, supported the group in the editing process. The visual artist Julie Sauerwein designed the project graphically.

subsequently.<sup>65</sup> The leader of the Local Restaurant Market House Association, Myriam Malao, for example, had gotten into politics. She regularly mentioned that the *Aelan Gel* experience contributed to her confidence to make this choice, as well as giving her public visibility that helped her political life.<sup>66</sup> Five years later Myriam described the transformative value of *Aelan Gel*'s experience as a volcano having the power of entering women's words and aspirations into the public debate.<sup>67</sup>

## CONCLUSION

We have drawn on the experiences of the *Aelan Gel* project to explore an approach to using oral history and storytelling as a foundation for social and cultural action, in this specific case with a group of women in Port Vila, Vanuatu. Storytellers participated in iterative cycles of creative production that drew out the specifics of lived experience and shared autobiographical narratives. They worked collectively to co-create site-specific socially engaged performance, and, over time, generate a collective text intended for an enduring place in the literary and cultural history of women in Vanuatu.

In this project about women's experiences of resilience and forms of violence in a post-disaster context, place, so central in Ni-Vanuatu identity, was presented through memories and objects that emerged as characters in the narrations and stories, told and retold as the project evolved. Place was both character and setting, used to invoke deeper empathetic understandings of the lived experiences of women and their agency. The role of devising and performing the creative work in a specific site, namely the Seaside Market House in Port Vila, added another dimension to the social intervention of storytelling by women, enabling interactions and attribution

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65 Anna Pakoa, interviewed by Marilena Crosato, Port Vila, 19 April 2018, recording and transcript held by Marilena Crosato.

66 Myriam Malao, interviewed by Marilena Crosato, Port Vila, 20 April 2018, recording and transcript held by Marilena Crosato.

67 On 26 March 2021, Myriam took part in the audio documentary dedicated to Vanuatu in Radio Canada's *Immersion* series. She performed the story of the 'Stone Woman' from *Aelan Gel* and she added: '[*Aelan Gel*] has been for us a way to put the *mamas* in front, to break that silence, to really come out of nowhere [...] in the form of a volcano. You know, when there is a volcano that comes out of nowhere and starts to simmer and spill out, it is a fact and it means something. [*Aelan Gel*] had an impact that made boom, that's it. The cyclone passed'. English translation by Crosato from the interview in French.

of meanings for a wider community through the repositioning and temporary repurposing of a familiar public space.

The experience of *Aelan Gel* demonstrates how collaborative theatrical action, informed by oral storytelling and collaborative ethnography, can become a meeting space for different types of knowledge, skills and people. As we work together, artists, community members and audiences become an 'experimental community', as well as a creative one. The creation and presentation of a socially engaged performance work, drawn from autobiographical stories, seeks to activate the thoughts of those involved in the creative process and of the audience, not to convince or manipulate, but to provide a context in which they may take a stand with respect to what they are seeing and are involved in.

In this landscape the stories told by the women and the creative work as a whole are not just aesthetic objects or presentations of knowledge, but forms of relationship. Their artistic success is linked to the success of the dialogue provoked with and within the public. This public is formed by placing the work in spaces of cultural significance to the life of the city from which the stories are drawn.

The use of oral stories generated in the period of disaster recovery developed a critique of the stereotyped representations of women as carriers of traditional values or victims of human rights violations. These new narratives, supported by co-creative choices of the group, illuminated the present, provoked reactions, highlighted issues, and showed directions towards the future.

# **‘It’s Like Having Your Home Knocked Down’: Place, Identity and Community at General Motors-Holden’s Woodville Factory**

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In post-war Australia, General Motors-Holden and its factories were seen as symbols of progress, with newspapers and company literature emphasising the sheer size of the built structures (and the enormous machinery inside them), the speed of production lines and the massive outputs they generated. Usually located in industrialised, working-class suburbs, factories were built with utility, not aesthetics, in mind for work that was often dirty, repetitive, noisy and dangerous. Far from being places of untold Dickensian horrors, however, oral histories reveal how Holden’s workers inhabited these spaces and made them their own, creating socially constructed workplaces with which they forged deep connections that continued to resonate beyond their employment. This article focuses on GMH’s long-lasting factory at Woodville (Adelaide) and a group of workers who were employed there for various periods, doing a variety of jobs, between 1945 and 1990. Their memories challenge traditional impressions of factory life, and reveal deeply felt, if complicated, attachments to place that have outlasted the physical structures of the factory itself.

## INTRODUCTION

Anthony Vassallo spent four decades toiling as a blue-collar worker at General Motors- Holden's Woodville factory in Adelaide's western suburbs, his days regulated by the steam whistle that heralded the start and end of each shift. It was the place where he learned the strange ways and slang of his adopted country, earning promotion and a decent wage to support his family until his working life was cut short by a horrific industrial accident that 'crushed his leg to almost nothing'.<sup>1</sup> After years of pain, and multiple operations, he died aged 72, but he never lost his connection to his former workplace; his dying wish was to be buried in the cemetery facing the factory. Family members, many of them Holden workers themselves, were not surprised. His son George, who followed his father and grandfather into the Woodville factory when he turned 16, recalled his dad's fierce pride in having worked for 'Holden's', helping to produce 'Australia's own car'. 'My father was dedicated to his job and he loved his job ... he loved it so much that he would spend 90 per cent of the time at Holden's and only 10 per cent at home', he said. 'His wishes were that if he was to pass away that he be buried in the Cheltenham Cemetery, which was opposite Holden's, and that he'd be facing the plant; he wanted to hear the whistle every day. So, that's what we did.'<sup>2</sup>

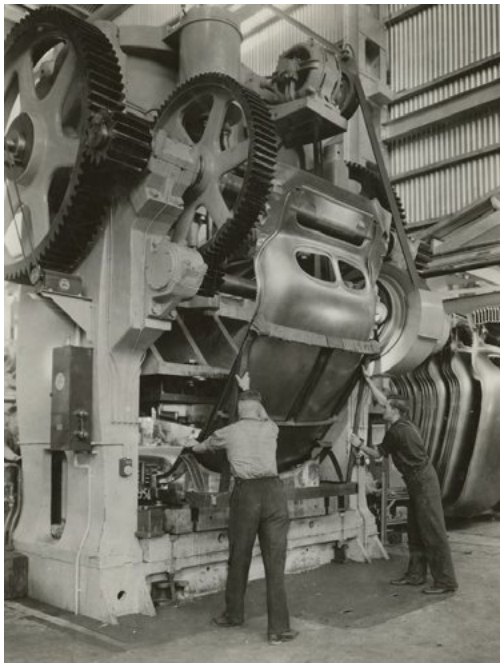
In post-war Australia, General Motors-Holden (GMH; colloquially known as Holden or Holden's) and its factories were seen as symbols of progress, with company literature emphasising the enormous size of the buildings and machinery, the speed of production lines, and the massive outputs they generated (see Figure 1). In 1969, the company employed 25,810 workers nationwide, with factories in New South Wales, Western Australia and Queensland, and two each in Victoria and South Australia, including Woodville.<sup>3</sup> Usually located in industrialised, working-class suburbs, the factories were akin to small towns, built not with aesthetics but utility in mind for work that was often dirty, repetitive, noisy and dangerous. Far from being places

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1 George Vassallo, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 10–11 February 2020, National Library of Australia (henceforth NLA), TRC 7250/31.

2 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

3 General Motors-Holden, *Annual Report*, 1969, 13.



**Figure 1** The 720-ton single action Hamilton Press performs an operation on a roof panel in the Woodville press shop, c. 1939. State Library of South Australia, BRG 213/77/48/13.

of untold Dickensian horrors, however, oral histories reveal how workers inhabited these spaces and made them their own, creating socially constructed workplaces with which they forged deep connections that continued to resonate long after their employment there ended. These were places in which workers, like Anthony Vassallo, spent more time than they did in their own homes; where, like his son, they started as boys and became men; where migrants learned the ways and the language of their adopted country; and where employees forged sub-communities (as well as motor vehicles) that acted

as second 'families', sometimes supplanting their real ones. Keen to keep and attract workers in a time of full-employment, GMH also sought to make the factories more 'worker-friendly', building social and sporting venues and sponsoring events to encourage its employees to spend their 'off duty' time involved with the factory. This article focuses on GMH's factory at Woodville, which operated between 1923 and 1990, drawing upon interviews conducted with a group of male workers who were employed there for various periods, doing a variety of jobs, post-World War II. Their memories challenge traditional impressions of factory life, and reveal deeply felt, if complicated, attachments to place that have outlasted the physical structures of the factory itself.

## PLACE, MEMORY AND IDENTITY

Place can have a variety of meanings. As Ruth Barton has noted, 'it can be a locale, a physical environment where everyday life occurs or as a locus of identity that acts as a focus of individual and collective feelings and commitments' while a 'sense of

place' refers to the emotions and feelings evoked by that space.<sup>4</sup> This sense of place is evident in a study of Woodville GMH workers, whose memories are linked to a strong sense of identity and belonging, not just to the physical domain of the factory, but to the community of people who worked there. Woodville was also a factory strongly embedded in a physical locality, with many of its workers living nearby, which may have deepened loyalty to the factory and made them less keen to later transfer to another area for work.

Studies of factory workers conducted in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom have recognised similar links between place and workers' identity.<sup>5</sup> In her 1994 study of the closure of a car factory in Wisconsin, Kathryn Marie Dudley, for example, explores the displacement that occurs when workers lose not only their work but the social structures that this work once supported.<sup>6</sup> Steven High also looks at workplace attachment and loss in his book *Industrial Sunset*.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Tim Strangleman examines the erosion of workplace identity and culture in a number of UK workplaces, including coal mines where workers expressed a yearning to return to the pits after they closed, despite the 'hard, sometimes dangerous and often boring work', because they missed 'the banter, humour, and camaraderie of their former jobs'.<sup>8</sup> While not all were engaged in dangerous or dull work, Woodville employees similarly shared strong attachments to both the physical and imagined places where they worked, and experienced a sense of displacement when their employment ended.

This article stems from an ongoing larger project, in which interviews are being conducted with 100 men and women who worked at GMH's South Australian and

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4 Ruth Barton, "'Our Tarkine, Our Future': The Australian Workers Union Use of Narrative Around Place and Community in West and North West Tasmania, Australia', *Antipode* 50, no. 1 (2018): 43.

5 See, for example, Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain since 1945* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Joy L. Hart and Tracey E. K'Meyer, 'Worker Memory and Narrative: Personal Stories of Deindustrialization in Louisville, Kentucky', in Jefferson Cowie and Joseph Heathcott (eds), *Beyond the Ruins: The Meanings of Deindustrialization* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 284–304.

6 Kathryn Marie Dudley, *The End of the Line: Lost Jobs, New Lives in Postindustrial America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994).

7 Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969–1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

8 Tim Strangleman, *Voices of Guinness: An Oral History of the Park Royal Brewery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.



Victorian factories.<sup>9</sup> During the initial recruitment process, we were surprised by the strong response from former Woodville workers, given the factory closed more than 30 years earlier and had long been demolished. We had expected the larger response to come from workers at GMH's Elizabeth factory, it being only relatively recently closed in 2017. It soon became clear, however, that many (though not all) of the former Woodville workers had remained in touch with other workmates on a semi-regular basis, often as members of the Woodville Tool Room 25-year Club, which still meets annually, and were spreading news of our project through these personal networks. This was valuable for recruitment, but it also signalled the existence of a strong collective memory of work life at Woodville, one that was frequently overlaid with a heavy sense of nostalgia for a way of life that no longer existed. This so-called 'smoke-stack nostalgia' is not unique to Woodville; it has been noted in other studies of factory workers.<sup>10</sup> Collective memory is valuable in establishing the symbolic meanings and emotional significance the factory is seen to hold for workers as a group, but we were also aware that it could prevent other stories being told that did not fit the accepted narrative. The 'life story' framework and length of our interviews (often conducted over multiple sessions) allowed interviewers to gently probe behind networked memories, setting free other memories that had not been moulded over the years by contact with others. Sometimes these were counter to the accepted 'good times, good people' narrative but even those who shared negative experiences (such as sackings, bullying, disciplinary action, and clashes with other workers) still articulated an underlying and continuing attachment to their former workplace, and the work they did there.

At the time of our interviews, our narrators ranged in age from their mid-fifties to early nineties. Some had long careers at Holden; others left after finishing their apprenticeships, were laid off or quit after only a few years. There were clear

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9 People, Places and Promises: Social Histories of Holden, funded by the Australian Research Council (LP170100860), General Motors-Holden, the National Library of Australia (NLA) and the National Motor Museum. The research team consists of Jennifer Clark, Paul Sendziuk, Carolyn Collins (all University of Adelaide), and Alistair Thomson and Graeme Davison (Monash University). All of the interviews undertaken for the project are being transferred to the NLA and will be available, subject to the conditions imposed by the interviewees.

10 See, for example, Strangleman, *Voices of Guinness*, 3–4; McIvor, *Working Lives*, 69–70.

generational differences. Older men, in their eighties and nineties, had ridden the boom times of the post-war years, often rising from teenage apprentices to senior supervisors or other ‘staff’ positions. This meant they were recollecting a time when they were not only at their physical peak, but when they were at their most powerful in terms of the authority and respect they commanded in both the workplace and at home, where they were mostly the sole breadwinners. Men who started during the more unstable economic periods of the 1970s tended not to stay as long and to have more mixed memories of Woodville as a workplace. Strangleman also noted this difference in perspective among Guinness workers in the UK who had worked during ‘the long boom’, compared to those who experienced the instability of the era of deindustrialisation in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>11</sup>

Our narrators worked across the factory in production jobs, as tradespeople and as supervisors on the factory floor. They include migrants (and sons of migrants) and members of the same family (it was common for two or three generations to work there). While women who worked at Woodville have been interviewed for the larger project, this article restricts itself to male workers. This reflects the fact that Woodville’s workforce was heavily male dominated (some men did not even remember seeing any women on the factory floor, only in the offices, canteen and medical centre). By comparison, female apprentices, tradespeople, factory workers and supervisors were more common in the later decades at Elizabeth. Our narrators included men who transferred to Elizabeth when Woodville was closing (and were thus able to compare the culture at both factories) and others who had their careers at Holden cut short through layoffs or plant closures. It was not uncommon for these men to express deep regret, even grief, that they had not been able to have ‘a job for life’ like their fathers. Yet, whatever their experiences (positive or negative), and no matter how long (or short) a period they worked there, it was clear that all the workers interviewed retained a strong connection with their former workplace – and were keen to talk about it.

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11 Strangleman, *Voices of Guinness*, 4.

## THE WOODVILLE FACTORY

The Holden name has a special place in South Australia's history, and deep roots that extend back to the 1850s when English settler James Alexander Holden set up a leather and saddlery business in Adelaide. After the Australian Government banned the import of complete vehicles, a new company, Holden Motor Body Builders' Ltd (HMBB) was formed in 1917 to manufacture car bodies. By 1923, the company was building more than 50 per cent of all car bodies in Australia, the local paper noting with pride how it had developed from 'an unpretentious shop' five years earlier into 'the largest institution of its kind in the British Empire outside Canada'.<sup>12</sup> That same year, the company purchased 22 acres of land at Woodville, and entered into an agreement with the US car maker General Motors Export Company to manufacture its car bodies at the new factory.<sup>13</sup> In 1931, following a severe downturn in business during the Great Depression, HMBB merged with General Motors (Australia) Ltd, to become General Motors-Holden's Ltd (GMH). During the war, Woodville, along with GMH's other factories, was made available for the war effort, manufacturing a vast number of products ranging from aircraft, boats and specialised army vehicles to guns, torpedo parts and canvas stretchers.

From 1948, after GMH struck a deal with the federal government to produce an Australian car, Woodville was responsible for producing all the bodies and metal pressings for the new vehicle, along with the tools, jig and fixtures (GMH's Fishermen's Bend plant in Victoria manufactured the engine, transmission and other basic components). While the final car was not assembled at Woodville, the first production body of each Holden model was always assembled, in top secret, in the factory's Die and Fixture Department's pilot room, a source of great pride among its workers.<sup>14</sup> In November 1973, when the Woodville factory celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, more than 5,000 people were employed in its Body, Tool Design and

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12 'Holden's Need Bigger Works', *Advertiser* [Adelaide], 2 October 1923, 18.

13 General Motors-Holden, *Holden: The First 25 Years* (Melbourne: Public Relations Dept, GMH, c. 1973).

14 'Woodville – 50 Yr. History', *People*, December 1973, 2. *People*, GMH's inhouse magazine for employees nationwide, was produced by its public affairs department between 1947 and 2017, initially monthly, then bi-monthly and, later, quarterly. It featured stories about individual employees and factories as well as communicating company information. The full collection is available online through Holden Retirees Club website at <https://www.hrc.org.au/holden/people-magazine.html>.

Manufacture, Automatic Transmission, Metal Stamping and Electroplating plants.<sup>15</sup> Until 1988, all GMH's South Australian apprentices were trained at Woodville in its Apprentice Training Centre.

Located about 10 kilometres from Adelaide's CBD, the main part of the Woodville factory was bounded on its three longest sides by two railway lines and Cheltenham Parade (a small site on the other side of this road, next to the cemetery, was also later developed) – see Figure 2. The factory's shortest side fronted Port Road, the main artery linking Port Adelaide with the city. A canal originally planned for the centre of the road to ferry goods to and from the port never eventuated and in the 1950s the wide grassy expanse dividing the traffic lanes was leased from the Woodville City Council by GMH to provide a car park and sporting and recreation grounds for the factory's workers.<sup>16</sup> In 1964 this included several bowling greens, an arena for 'electric light cricket', and courts for tennis, netball and basketball. Inside the factory gates, the site was progressively filled by industrial buildings, housing various plants and huge pieces of machinery that dwarfed those who operated them.<sup>17</sup>

In company publications, the giant-like proportions of Woodville's buildings, machinery, workforce and output were consistently emphasised. In 1964, for example, the company's magazine *People* reported that Woodville now covered a 72 acre site, employing 6,000 workers, including 233 apprentices, with its press shop alone covering an area of 215,355 square feet and housing '22 heavy, 101 medium and 31 portable presses which use 500 tons of steel daily to produce 200,000 parts'.<sup>18</sup> 'Two new giant machines' installed in the toolroom in 1955 measured 15 feet and 10 feet high, but were by no means the largest. A company film showed the 'monumental' Hamilton press being slowly towed along Port Road by a convoy of trucks to its new home. The wharf had to be reinforced before it could be unloaded from the ship.<sup>19</sup>

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15 'Woodville – 50 Yr. History', *People*, December 1973, 2.

16 'Sports and Social Club's New Sports Park at GMH Woodville', *People*, July 1951, 13.

17 See, for example, front cover of GMH's *People* magazine, May 1965, showing a worker operating a 'giant' HiPro Draw press, recently installed in Woodville's new press shop.

18 'Spotlight on Woodville', *People*, September 1964, 20.

19 Patrick Miller, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 23 October 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/5; General Motors-Holden, 'Hamilton Press arriving at General Motors-Holden's, Woodville' [video], 1938. State Library of South Australia, BRG 213/F-115.



**Figure 2** The Woodville factory site showing the various plants and proximity to the railway line (left of picture) and Port Road (with Holden's car park and playing fields) in the foreground, c. 1964. GMH, *People*, September 1964, back cover.

In the mid-twentieth century, factories like Woodville were designed for efficiency, not human comfort. Factory planners devised buildings and workspaces that were geared towards producing more, faster. They were highly regulated spaces, with strict rules and consequences. Activities within the factory site, and within specific plants, were clearly demarcated, so that most workers never left the specific space allocated to their job. Buildings that had to accommodate huge machinery and large volumes of workers were cavernous constructions of steel and corrugated iron, boiling hot in summer and freezing in winter. Depending on the work being done, the physical environment was frequently dirty, noisy, smelly and dangerous. While there was a strong emphasis on safety, and a fully staffed medical centre (equipped with its own X-ray machine) located on site, the underlying motivation, articulated in the company's annual reports, was to avoid disruptions to production and to get injured workers back on the job as soon as possible. Injuries were counted in terms of lost 'man hours'.<sup>20</sup> To outsiders, who had never stepped foot in a factory, and whose ideas of factory life were conditioned by nineteenth-century depictions in books and movies, factories often appeared grim places with little to recommend them.

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<sup>20</sup> GMH, *Annual Report*, 1952, 8.

## WORKERS' MEMORIES OF THE WORKPLACE

The experience of GMH workers is largely missing from the written archives and the many, frequently car-centric, commemorative histories of GMH that have been produced over the decades.<sup>21</sup> But, as labour historian Peter Winn notes, oral history provides us with an opportunity to study not just 'the structural and statistical parameters' of a factory but also 'the concrete everyday experiences of workers in the factory and community'.<sup>22</sup> While GMH emphasised the rational side of the workplace at Woodville, and popular representations of the factory accentuate its alienating, grim and unhealthy characteristics, interviews with former GMH workers provide an alternative window into daily life inside the factory, stressing the workers' emotional attachments, social interactions and sensory responses.

For some, these memories began even before their employment, with the oral histories allowing us to see the deep connections between the factory and the wider community. The Woodville factory was a prominent landmark in Adelaide's west, a place within a place, imprinting upon the childhood memories of those growing up in the surrounding suburbs.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, many of our interviewees' first memories of Holden were from outside, not inside the company gates. Several, for example, recalled the factory's steam whistle that signalled the start and finish of each shift, and which was 'heard by four generations of residents living in a five-kilometre radius of the plant for 65 years'.<sup>24</sup> Others remembered the surrounding roads being clogged by pushbikes as workers headed home after their shifts. Bruce Heaft recalled being a newsboy selling papers to workers as they rushed out the gates. 'At knock-off

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21 See, for example, Will Hagon and Toby Hagon, *Holden: Our Car 1856–2017* (Sydney: Macmillan, 2016); John Wright, *Heart of a Lion: The 50 Year History of Australia's Holden* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1998); Don Loffler, *She's a Beauty: The Story of the First Holdens* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1998). Susan Marsden interviewed Holden workers for her history of Woodville but these interviews are not publicly available. See Susan Marsden, *A History of Woodville* (Woodville: Corporation of the City of Woodville, 1977) and her 1987 update available at <http://www.sahistorians.org.au/175/bm.doc/a-history-of-woodville---susan-marsden---1987.pdf>. Accessed 8 June 2021.

22 Peter Winn, 'Oral History and the Factory Study: New Approaches to Labor History', *Latin American Research Review* 14, no. 2 (1979): 130.

23 The western suburbs, where Woodville was located, was the site of several large manufacturers including Phillips and Actil. In 1957, almost half of Adelaide's factory workers lived or travelled to work in Woodville, Hindmarsh and Port Adelaide. See, Marsden, *A History of Woodville*, 231.

24 'Wally's Final Whistle', *People*, April 1989, 8.



time you would have these thousands of people coming out, buying papers from you ... it was just a body of people, just running out', he said.<sup>25</sup> Older interviewees, like Cam Johnson, Don McDonald and Bob Hack, remembered fears during World War II that the factory would be bombed. As a young boy Bob Hack walked past the factory every day and during the war earned a few coins filling the sandbags used to protect it.<sup>26</sup> Don McDonald and his mates were paid to ensure the surrounding homes obeyed curfew, turning lights off at night.<sup>27</sup> Others had strong memories of family members, relatives or neighbours considered lucky enough to work at the factory – and to have Holden motor cars in their driveway – and the pride they had in the company and the products they made. 'My uncle Fred Baker worked there ... and he used to say, "General Motors Holden's is the greatest organisation in the world"', recalled Bob Both, whose family ran a nursery near the Woodville factory. 'We used to laugh about that. We didn't know anything about factories, we were garden people.'<sup>28</sup> For young boys growing up in the western suburbs after the war, the Woodville factory was part of the fabric of their community. Offering steady, secure and well-paid employment, working at Holden seemed like the dream job.

The connection with Holden as a workplace began at an early age. Many of our interviewees started their careers at Woodville as impressionable 15- or 16-year-old apprentices; most were straight out of school and had never been inside a factory before. When asked for their first impressions, they highlighted the size of the buildings and the machinery, but they also emphasised other sensory experiences: the smell, feel and sounds of the factory. As Paula Hamilton has noted, senses 'act as a mnemonic device or a trigger to remembering'.<sup>29</sup> For Stephen Hack, who joined Woodville as a 17-year-old electrical apprentice in 1953, these sensory memories were woven through his mind's map of the factory:

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25 Bruce Heaft, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 28 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/26.

26 Robert Hack, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 30 October 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/7.

27 Don McDonald, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Williamstown, 22–23 February 2020, NLA, TRC 7250/33.

28 Robert Both, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Encounter Bay, 16 December 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/29.

29 Paula Hamilton, 'Oral History and the Senses', in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (3rd ed., Oxford: Routledge, 2016), 105.



It smelt of soluble oil, very loud, very noisy. People everywhere. And then other parts of the plant were quiet. Down in what they called the central maintenance area was quiet. You'd go into the plating plant and it smelt of acid and again noisy with whistles and sirens going off. The press shop was massive, HUGE machines in there, huge machines, which I ended up working on, and noisy. Very, very noisy. You had to wear earmuffs. And then you'd go across to the tool room, it wasn't as noisy as the press shop, it was more quieter, lots and lots of machines, massive machines in there where they were machining tools and building dies and what have you.<sup>30</sup>

As a 15-year-old apprentice in 1945, Don McDonald struggled with the noise: 'It was very noisy, so noisy in fact that a couple of times I went and knocked off at lunchtime and went home, I couldn't tolerate the noise'.<sup>31</sup> Many workers blamed the high noise levels for their later loss of hearing. Bob Hack also recalled the noise, and the dust:

High speed bandsaws cutting the sheet metal, that screams, oh that's bad for the ears ... they are a bit dirty, a lot of cast iron dust comes up and all that sort of thing and you make a lot of swarf ... They're the chips, metal chips that the cutter cuts off the cast iron and they call it swarf ... this cast-iron dust is like sprinkling bloody coal dust all over the place because it is as black as coal ... You could get face masks if you decided you needed it ... but very rarely they did it.<sup>32</sup>

George Vassallo likened it to 'going into a coal mine':

There was no such thing as extraction fans or anything so you would come home and your face, the only bit you could see is your eyes. Your face would be black ... unfortunately that type of environment did kill a lot of friends of mine.<sup>33</sup>

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30 Stephen Hack, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Normanville, 26 October 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/6.

31 Don McDonald, 22–23 February 2020.

32 Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

33 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

Grime was not the only problem. Woodville's buildings were remembered as 'freezing in winter and stifling hot in summer'.<sup>34</sup> There was no early knock off in the hot weather – 'you would stay there until the whistle blew'<sup>35</sup> – while in winter, McDonald recalled:

They had what they called jumbos, they were like a stove, a circular stove about ... a metre and a half high. They used to put all the scrap wood in there of the morning to heat the place up because your fingers became that cold that you couldn't hold your tools [laughs].<sup>36</sup>

Not surprisingly, in their early days, some young men questioned their career choices. George Vassallo remembers complaining to his father at the end of his three-month probation period that his hands were 'black and blue' and he did not think he was going to last. He stayed after his father reassured him: 'you've gone through the worst of it, it'll get better'.<sup>37</sup> Bruce Heaft, who started as a 17-year-old apprentice, also had second thoughts when he spied his old school from the factory rooftop: 'I could see Woody High School there and I can remember having a tear in my eye thinking, what have I done?'<sup>38</sup> Despite their doubts both went on to have long careers, earning their 25-year service gold watches, and notching up 40 and 43 years' service respectively.

On the surface, workers' memories of these harsh conditions tend to reinforce outside impressions of factory life. When weighing up their overall experience of working for Holden, however, workers prioritised memories of social interactions with workmates, pride in both the company and the products they made, and the satisfaction of a job well done. When it was suggested to Vassallo, for example, that he was not creating a very appealing picture of factory life, he responded that the conditions were just part of the job:

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<sup>34</sup> George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

<sup>35</sup> George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Don McDonald, 22–23 February 2020.

<sup>37</sup> George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Bruce Heaft, 28 November 2019.

You know, it's like being a farmer and you've got to get up in the morning and milk the cows and then work with shit and everything else [laughs] ... it can't all be good but you have to look at the long-term effect, you know, how you felt.<sup>39</sup>

He then went on to stress the positives: personal achievement, good pay, job satisfaction and being part of the Holden 'family'. '[It] was part of my family. The people, I think, were more important than anything else', he said when asked to sum up what working for Holden had meant to him.

In a similar vein, when asked to pick the highlights of his 38 years at Woodville, Bob Hack, who rose through the ranks from fitter and turner to become general superintendent of the tool room, deadpanned that they were mostly 'lowlights', describing disputes with company management, long hours, shift work, and problems managing particular workers, before going on to fondly recall amusing pranks, social events and memorable workmates. When it was suggested it might have been a good place to work after all, he refused to concede, saying: 'Oh yeah, it was a circus, 24 hours, seven days a week'. But asked at the end of the interview what he wanted people listening to his interview to know about his time at Holden, he became serious, responding: 'I enjoyed every minute of it ... I loved the place'.<sup>40</sup>

Workers' memories of the workplace frequently emphasised social interactions. These often focused on a perceived sense of community which they commonly referred to as 'the Holden family'. Metaphors of 'home' and 'family' have long been recognised in oral history interviews with industrial workers but while other studies have highlighted the idea of corporate paternalism as a means of enforcing social control in a factory,<sup>41</sup> the 'Holden family', as expressed by Woodville workers, was

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39 George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

40 Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

41 See, for example, Emma M. Wainwright, 'Dundee's Jute Mills and Factories: Spaces of Production, Surveillance and Discipline', *Scottish Geographical Journal* 12, no. 2 (2005): 121–40; Jeremy Stein, 'Time, Space and Social Discipline: Factory Life in Cornwall, Ontario, 1867–1893', *Journal of Historical Geography* 21, no. 3 (1995): 278–99; and James Newbery, 'Space of Discipline and Governmentality: The Singer Sewing Machine Factory, Clydebank, in the Twentieth Century', *Scottish Geographical Journal* 129, no. 1 (2013):

based on a perceived kinship with their workmates, a shared geographical proximity and engagement in a common project. Older Woodville workers also saw themselves as having a direct link to the original Holden family through its descendants who were still associated with the factory. In this sense, place was important to workers' historical consciousness of their role in South Australia's industrial history, powerfully connecting them both to the past and the present. Bob Smith, an apprentice in the 1950s, recalled 'Mr Holden' attending his apprentice 'wind-up night' and his pride in working for a factory with strong links to the past. 'Mr Holden being one of the directors or managers of the company used to make himself known in the shop and throughout our days at canteens and picnics and you felt you were part of the family', he said.<sup>42</sup> The concept of family at the workplace also extended to more experienced tradespeople playing a paternal role in mentoring and training young apprentices, while workmates who spent more time together than they did with their actual families, often became life-long friends. The emphasis on family in the workplace imbued a sense of belonging and security.

Not all felt this way. Trevor Chesson worked as a carpenter in the model room until 1971, when he was sacked with 650 others. Only a month shy of the cut-off 10 years of service, he was 'devastated'.<sup>43</sup> Others, like Daryl Nettleton and Geoff Rilling, who witnessed this as young apprentices, are still appalled at the way GMH treated these workers.<sup>44</sup> But Chesson has managed to compartmentalise this traumatic memory from the otherwise good times at Woodville, which he still counts as the best years of his life: 'GMH was an excellent company to work for and I thoroughly enjoyed my stay there'.<sup>45</sup> In his home, he still displays framed photos of his time at GMH, even though he went on to have a long career at another workplace, and did not keep in contact with any former Woodville workmates. Nettleton's relationship

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15–35; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al., *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World* (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

42 Robert Smith, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Wallaroo, 9 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/10.

43 Trevor Chesson, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 4 May 2021, NLA, TRC 7250/65.

44 Geoff Rilling, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 7 & 8 April 2021, NLA, TRC 7250/60; Daryl Nettleton, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 11, 18 & 24 February 2021, NLA, TRC 7250/55.

45 Trevor Chesson, 4 May 2021.

with the workplace was also complicated. He began as one of the 135 apprentices starting at GMH in 1969 ‘and the only one with long hair!’<sup>46</sup> He saw Woodville as ‘a prison’, and his fellow workers as inmates in a strict, disciplinarian environment. His involvement with the anti-war movement, colourful wardrobe, and anti-authoritarian attitude saw him clash repeatedly with some supervisors. He admits he was given more than his fair share of second chances and still does not know why. Eventually, a respected supervisor issued him with an ultimatum to ‘shape up’ within three months ‘or ship out’. ‘From that day on, I changed my outlook to my job and my life in general’, Nettleton said. ‘At the end of the three months I applied for a redundancy package but I was told I was now too valuable.’<sup>47</sup> He stayed on but never saw GMH as ‘a job for life’. He left in 1985 and regrets he did not leave earlier ‘but I do not regret working at GMH ... the lessons I learnt over 16 years I have used every day in my life since’.<sup>48</sup> He also made lifelong friends at Woodville with whom he still keeps in touch.

Planners and architects allocated different areas within the factory for specific work and management laid down strict rules about how these spaces were to be used. Workers, too, recalled a highly regulated workplace, but their memories frequently involved rules being broken and illustrate the way in which they sought to make the place their own: colleagues falling asleep on the job during night shift; listening to illicit radios kept hidden in workbench drawers; workmates who moonlighted as illegal bookmakers; doing private off-the-books jobs for bosses; painting workmates’ goggles with blue dye; illegal toilet breaks and skiving off to spend an afternoon on the factory roof or at the beach.<sup>49</sup> Gullible young apprentices were frequently sent on impossible errands to fetch left-handed screwdrivers or the Hamilton Press (which was ‘like a block of flats’).<sup>50</sup> At the same time there was a strong work ethic among those interviewed, and a disdain for those who did not pull their weight; fun was

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46 Daryl Nettleton, 11, 18 & 24 February 2021.

47 Daryl Nettleton, 11, 18 & 24 February 2021.

48 Daryl Nettleton, 11, 18 & 24 February 2021.

49 See interviews with Robert Hack, Stephen Hack, Johnson, Miller, Smith, Vassallo and Heaft.

50 Patrick Miller, 23 October 2019.

fine, as long as the work got done. In this sense, workers developed their own workplace code of conduct.

Woodville was also a melting pot for post-war migrants from Europe, who picked up the strange ways and the language of their adopted country on the job, while also maintaining strong ties with other workers from their own countries. Often their first job after arriving in Australia, migrant workers like Anthony Vassallo, Don Vella and Sergio Scarpa formed deep connections with their workplace, grateful for the opportunity to forge a new life and build financial security. (Scarpa served at GMH Woodville for 30 years and then at Elizabeth for nearly 26 years more, retiring aged 84 in 2013 as the company's oldest employee.)<sup>51</sup> Given their importance to GMH's operations, much could be written about their contribution and workplace experiences, and we shall do so when more scope is allowed in other publications. In terms of the theme of this particular article – place – we note how the specific confines of the plant literally put migrant workers of different cultures into close contact with each other and with Anglo-Australians, and compelled them to come to terms with the other. Duncan Hockley, who worked as a maintenance electrician fixing machines at Woodville, might never have spoken to a German or a Pole or a Greek had he learnt his trade wiring homes or fixing appliances in the suburbs of Adelaide. As an apprentice at GMH Woodville, he listened, enthralled, as tradespeople and other workers from Germany, Poland and Italy spoke about their experiences of World War II, the ruined landscapes of Europe and what brought them to Australia. Some of our interviewees perceived a slight tension between Woodville's migrant workers from different ethnic backgrounds, and how they tended to segregate when eating lunch or having a smoke, but equally they were still able to work effectively side by side when 10 or 15 years earlier they might have been facing off in opposing armies. Hockley was amazed by their ability to get along:

What I got from all this was a wide education in contemporary European history by people who had lived through it and escaped. What I also remember from working with them was that there seemed to be little or no

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51 Sergio Scarpa, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 20–22 February 2020, NLA, TRC 7250/44.



animosities amongst them as a result of their previous life experiences. There seemed to be an attitude of a new start in a new country.<sup>52</sup>

For recently arrived migrants seeking to learn or improve their English expression, GMH Woodville provided a means. For a period of time, language classes were offered onsite by the company in one of the quieter spaces in the factory. As they greeted their workmates at the start of the shift, took smoko, mingled over lunch or lunchtime games, and spoke with their supervisors, migrant workers also picked up and practised basic English phrases. Of course, in Woodville's noisy areas, clear verbal communication was not always possible, and workers and their supervisors relied on a mixture of hand gestures, basic commands and practical demonstration. In this sense, the workplace developed its own language and the disadvantage that non-English speakers found themselves in when emigrating to Australia was lessened. Recalling the din of the press shop, Pat Miller said, 'you went in there, you couldn't speak normally, it was so noisy you had to communicate with sign language or yell in somebody's ear'.<sup>53</sup> GMH maintenance electrician Stephen Hack 'got good at reading hand signals and deciphering Italian mixed with English mixed with Greek'.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Don Vella and Tony Pittrakkou, who were given jobs operating presses at Woodville after respectively emigrating from Italy and Cyprus, barely spoke a word of English and did not find it was a barrier to securing their jobs or succeeding in them.<sup>55</sup>

The lines between the workplace and home were frequently blurred with workers spending long hours at the factory, regularly working extra shifts and overtime on weekends during busy periods. (GMH was regarded as paying higher than average wages, but this was mainly due to the ubiquitous availability of overtime.) Several workers echoed Anthony Vassallo's experience of spending more time at work than at home. In one nine-month period leading up to the release of a new car model

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52 Duncan Hockley, Expression of Interest form sent to the 'Social Histories of Holden' project.

53 Patrick Miller, 23 October 2019.

54 Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

55 Don Vella, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 16 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/35; Tony Pittrakkou, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 19–20 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/37.

in 1961, Duncan Hockley spent every day of the week except Christmas Day at the Woodville factory.<sup>56</sup> Sometimes this was a choice – more overtime meant extra money to build family homes and financial security. With hindsight, however, some workers expressed regret and resentment at the time spent away from their families. Learned behaviours from the workplace, particularly those related to organisation and timekeeping, also often carried over to the home. Stephen Hack recalled his father adhering to a strict after-work schedule, requiring his children to cut short their after-school adventures in order to be at the dinner table at 5 o'clock sharp: 'if you weren't home on time, by Crikey, you'd get in strife, yeah, you had to be home on time'. After working there himself, he understood why his father insisted on such a regimented homelife:

Holden's does that to you. You start work at 7.30, there's a 7.28 whistle where you should be at your workstation, changed, ready to go. Whistle goes, 7.30 start work. Morning tea was at whatever time it was, you'd have a whistle ... Right through ... 4.08 the whistle would go, knock off. And if you got to work late, you were docked for every six minutes.<sup>57</sup>

Just as workplace attitudes and regulations seeped into domestic life, the family often infiltrated the workplace – a feature overlooked in popular representations of factory life that focus on its grim and uncomfortable aspects. Different generations of the same family, as well as brothers and (less commonly) sisters, were often employed at Woodville; indeed, this was actively encouraged by GMH. In 1956, the company noted that 75 per cent of its apprentices had family members already at the factory, suggesting this had had a positive effect on retention rates.<sup>58</sup> In the post-war years, when there were severe labour shortages, GMH even paid bonuses to workers who recruited family members and friends. George Vassallo's dad saw this as a quick way to make money: 'My father and my grandfather, his brothers, his sons, my cousins ... sometimes when they would have functions, we would have

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<sup>56</sup> Duncan Hockley, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 29 January 2020, NLA, TRC 7250/39.

<sup>57</sup> Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

<sup>58</sup> 'GMH Apprentices', *People*, May 1956, 16.

occupied most of the tables that are supplied at Holden's', he said. '[My father] brought 90 per cent of the family into Holden's ... because money was very tight, the bonus meant a lot.'<sup>59</sup> Harold Onley's two sons, his father and three uncles all worked at Woodville, although Harold is adamant his father did not help him secure an apprenticeship when he joined during the war. Three of them were awarded gold watches for more than 25 years' service, with Harold himself working at Woodville for nearly 40 years.<sup>60</sup> Duncan Hockley, an electrician at Woodville between 1956 and 1968, noted that five of his uncles (three of whom earned a gold watch) and three of his cousins worked there too.<sup>61</sup>

Family connections strengthened emotional connections to the workplace though it did sometimes create interesting dynamics when, for example, fathers had to supervise sons (or vice versa). Leo Corrieri recalled feeling 'awkward' when he ran into his father, a foreman, at the factory. 'I wasn't sure whether to say "hey dad" or "how are you going Mick" ... he said "when you are at home, you call me dad. Here, I'll leave it up to you", so, yeah, he was pretty good.'<sup>62</sup> There was also some sage advice for Leo on his first day: 'I always remember Dad saying to me "don't stuff it up, I don't want you to make me look bad. Don't take sickies, don't do anything wrong, just do what you're told"'.<sup>63</sup> Stephen Hack's father, Bob, was also a supervisor while his mother, Joan, who worked as a secretary in the finance department, used to hand him his pay packet. It was a family joke that Holden was 'part of the Hack DNA'.<sup>64</sup> His grandfather, W.K. 'Bill' Hack, who joined GMH in 1929 as a jig maker, had been sent to the United States in 1948 as part of the original 'Holden project'.<sup>65</sup> Stephen's brother and an uncle also worked at Woodville while another uncle worked at Elizabeth. At one stage his mother's father, at a loose end after retiring from the tramways, also took a job as a 'tea lady' at Holden, wheeling a trolley through the factory

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<sup>59</sup> George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Harold Onley, interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, Adelaide, 18 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/36.

<sup>61</sup> Duncan Hockley, 29 January 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Leo Corrieri, interviewed by Carolyn Collins, Adelaide, 16 November 2019, NLA, TRC 7250/23.

<sup>63</sup> Leo Corrieri, 16 November 2019.

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

<sup>65</sup> '38 Years', *People*, December 1967, 12.

distributing free tea and selling cakes and pies. 'Dinner time was always interesting', Stephen Hack recalled:

When I was working there, my mum was working there, my brother was working there and dad so we virtually had all the plants covered [laughs]. If something was happening at Holden, we knew about it ... Something would happen at Holden's in the press shop and I'd talk to dad about it. For example, like 'today we broke a die, somebody chucked a spanner in a die and broke it' and dad said, 'yeah, I know, I've got it, it's in my machine shop'. And mum would talk about what was happening in the office...<sup>66</sup>

Bob Hack recalls telling his father he had 'met a nice girl and she works at Holden's'. 'He said, "what [the one] we call the princess?" I said, "well, she's not bad". [laughs] Yeah, he knew her.'<sup>67</sup> A photo of the happy couple emerging from nearby St Margaret's Church on Port Road, Woodville, after their marriage in 1953 featured in the company's magazine.<sup>68</sup> Romances were not uncommon. Pat Miller was best man for a workmate who proposed to the tea lady three months after escorting her to the plant Christmas picnic. 'They're still happily married with two grown-up children and two or three grandchildren', he said.<sup>69</sup>

The workplace was not limited to the physical confines of the factory floor. Workers were encouraged to maintain their links to the workplace during their off-duty hours through social activities and sporting clubs associated with the company. In 1964, *People* magazine reported that Woodville's 'vigorous' Sports and Social Club had 60 affiliated clubs.<sup>70</sup> Some of these, like lunchtime carpet bowls and darts competitions, Friday night dances in the canteen, debating and camera clubs took place within the factory's grounds; other team sports were played on the grounds outside the gates while annual picnics were held at other locations, such as the Adelaide Hills. Harold

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<sup>66</sup> Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

<sup>67</sup> Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

<sup>68</sup> 'Met in GMH Plants', *People*, September 1953, 6.

<sup>69</sup> Patrick Miller, 23 October 2019.

<sup>70</sup> 'Spotlight on Woodville', *People*, September 1964, 20.

Onley recalls attending two picnics each year, one for the ‘tool room’ – the plant in which he worked – and the other for all of Woodville’s employees. Held on Sundays, the slowest day production-wise at the factory, enabling employees to attend, the picnics featured novelty races for workers and their kids, with sacks, eggs and spoons, as well as more high-level running races in which only well-trained athletes competed (see Figures 3 and 4).<sup>71</sup> Then there were the famous Holden Christmas parties, which were the envy of non-Holden employees. These were organised by the Holden workers’ social committee and catered mainly for the children of Holden employees, who received free ice creams, lollies, fizzy drinks, and one substantial and carefully chosen present. Our interviewees recall Father Christmas arriving by various means, including the latest model Monaro and on the tray of a Holden ute.



**Figure 3** The Maintenance team defeats a team from the Tool Room in the final of the tug-of-war competition at the GMH Woodville employees’ picnic held at Belair National Park, 3 October 1948. Approximately 6,000 Holden employees and family members attended, most of them transported by three specially commissioned trains and 30 feeder buses. The company’s magazine noted the cost to the Sports and Social Club was £800, paid by workers’ weekly subscription fees, which covered the cost of transport, two merry-go-rounds, 15,500 ice creams, 150 gallons of milk, and 200 dozen soft drinks. GMH, *People*, November 1948, 7.

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<sup>71</sup> Harold Onley, 18 November 2019.



**Figure 4** Children enjoying a bun-on-a-string eating game, GMH Woodville employees' picnic, Belair National Park, 3 October 1948. With the picnic being held in forest surrounds and attended by about 6,000 people, 53 children were reported 'lost' during the day (and hopefully found!). GMH, *People*, November 1948, 7.

GMH workers' connections with their workplace co-existed on multiple levels. While they proudly identified with the company overall, referring to themselves as 'Holden workers', there were also strong connections along state lines (reinforced by interstate sporting competitions) and with individual factories. During the interviews, it quickly became evident that Woodville workers saw themselves as being part of a distinct culture within the company, as well as within South Australia. This came to the fore when many later chose not to transfer to Elizabeth.

The move to the new factory was a gradual transition that occurred in phases and over several decades, beginning in the late 1950s (though this was partially offset by the opening of a new Automatic Transmission plant in 1970).<sup>72</sup> Eventually, however, the Woodville factory's ageing facilities were deemed too expensive to refurbish.

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<sup>72</sup> GMH, *Annual Report*, 1970, 7.



In 1983, following years of rumours, GMH announced that its Woodville factory would be sold, and activities progressively phased out by 1988.<sup>73</sup> This took a couple of extra years. In 1990, after enduring what one of its workers described as ‘a death by a thousand cuts’, GMH Woodville shut its gates for good.<sup>74</sup>

Company publications record the rationale of the move (the Woodville site was now ‘completely utilised’)<sup>75</sup> and the enormity of the task (10,000 tons of equipment moved from Woodville to Elizabeth in just four months in 1959)<sup>76</sup>, but not the emotion of its workers. A feature article about the new factory in GMH’s *People* magazine in March 1960 noted that Woodville employees had ‘the option of transferring and were notified well ahead of time’. The South Australian Housing Trust, which had undertaken to provide housing for Elizabeth’s workforce, held information nights at Woodville and employees and their families were given ‘ample time’ to inspect the type of housing available. In May 1960, *People* featured an interview with fitter and turner Peter Moore, who had moved with his family to Adelaide’s new ‘satellite city’ soon after finishing his apprenticeship at Woodville and was now ‘happily installed in their own home in model surroundings’.<sup>77</sup>

The oral history interviews, however, revealed another side of the story: the stress and grief of watching the slow demise of what had become a de facto ‘home’ for many, and the dispersal of the ‘Woodville family’. For those who lived around the factory, a transfer meant considerable extra commuting time or an upheaval for their family to relocate to Elizabeth, a place many openly detested. ‘It was a bit of a Woodville versus Elizabeth thing’, Stephen Hack recalled, explaining the loyalty workers had to the old factory.

Woodville because it was the original plant, rightly or wrongly, we looked upon ourselves as the ants’ pants. We were IT, we were THE plant. We were

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73 GMH, *Annual Report*, 1983, 4.

74 Patrick Miller, 23 October 2019.

75 ‘GMH’s Newest Plant ... Elizabeth’, *People*, March 1960, 4–5.

76 ‘GMH’s Newest Plant ... Elizabeth’, *People*, March 1960, 4–5.

77 ‘A New Life at Elizabeth’, *People*, May 1960, 14.

Holden's. Elizabeth was just an assembly plant. They are all the plebs out there [laughs].<sup>78</sup>

Many simply refused to move, opting instead for redundancies, which for workers like Bob Hack and Brian Barnes meant premature retirement. Others were retrenched. In 1983, it was finally announced that Woodville would close. In February 1989, its famous steam whistle gave one last blast before falling silent after regulating the factory for 65 years, though a small section of the tool room remained until the following year. Stephen Hack recalled the slow death of the factory:

There were rumours going on and I was a leading hand electrician at the time when they started to pull out presses, like the small press lines went first, B line, C line, they went. They were only small presses, then they started to take bits of A line out and then they sold L line and the writing was on the wall and then it got announced that Woodville was going to close. How it got announced, I can't remember. I just remember that we had a list of all the electricians at Woodville and their years of service because it was last on first off, and as they kept winding down and winding down, they started sacking or retrenching people.

After 38 years, Bob Hack was one of the last to leave in August 1990. He was 57. He recalled:

The only thing that was left was the tool room, nothing else, the whole lot went and the tooling main line stayed there because two of the machines were too much, gigantic things, too much trouble, too much cost to move the things. We had one reprieve, I suppose, when we got a job from Mitsubishi to do some dies for them, that kept us going for a while but when they ran out, that was it, we had nothing. I remember, I stayed until the very last die, until it was complete and then they came up to me and told me, you can go tomorrow [laughs]. They had kept me there until they had one die left.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

Stephen Hack had dreamed of following in his father's footsteps, instead he took a redundancy when he was just 27, ending 10 and a half years at Holden. Ironically, his last day in 1985 was spent at Elizabeth, rewiring one of the Woodville presses. 'I saw it as a job for life', he recalled. 'There was no way I was going anywhere ... if they hadn't shut Woodville I would have stayed. They asked me to go to Elizabeth but I didn't want to.'<sup>80</sup>

Hack was not alone. Several interviewees insisted that Woodville had a different culture to Elizabeth, including his father, Bob. 'I wasn't going to go to Elizabeth if they paid me double', he said. 'No, I didn't want to work at Elizabeth, the culture ... annoyed me.' Asked how it was different from Woodville he replied: 'It's very different, it just didn't sit right with me'.<sup>81</sup> George Vassallo recalled that at times it felt 'like we were working for two different companies'. He was one of the workers who accepted a transfer, although it meant relinquishing his position as a work group leader and returning to the shop floor. Only one of his many relatives at Woodville went with him; the others retired or found work elsewhere. He said he was happy with the situation: 'I still had a job, I still loved my job, so it didn't worry me at all really'.<sup>82</sup> At Elizabeth however, he encountered a boss who 'didn't like anybody from Woodville at all'. Vassallo recalled:

The only thing that he didn't realise [was] that the people that were working out at Elizabeth, they were made up of people that originally worked at Woodville. And believe it or not, what actually happened, if you were a no-hoper and they wanted to get rid of you, instead of sacking you they sent you to Elizabeth. So, and that's the truth, yeah.<sup>83</sup>

Initially, the Woodville workers stuck together at Elizabeth 'because they're the only people that you really know' but Vassallo also grew attached to his new workplace:

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<sup>80</sup> Stephen Hack, 26 October 2019.

<sup>81</sup> Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

<sup>82</sup> George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

<sup>83</sup> George Vassallo, 10–11 February 2020.

'eventually we mixed and we mingled and then, you know, we became a part of a family as well'.

Loyalty to Woodville was clearly strong but within the factory distinct sub-communities also emerged that were linked to individual work areas (maintenance, stamping, trim, paint shop, tool room, for example) and work classifications (tradespeople, office workers, factory floor employees, management, etc.). The deep connection to these constructed communities is evident in the case of the Woodville tool room. The tool room occupied a large section of the Port Road end of the factory and was the place where expert tradespeople, engineers, designers and draftsmen conceived and built the tools and equipment for the manufacture of vehicle panels and bodies. At the peak of GMH's production, the tool room was producing the dies, jigs and fixtures for a new model Holden car every two to four years, with a 'facelift' every year. An area within the tool room also served as the Apprentice Training Centre, where hundreds of young men, and later women, learned their trades between 1934 and 1988. The tool room had its own social club and held its own Christmas events, cabarets and other activities, including a popular annual general meeting at a local hotel. Bob Hack was president of the social club and remembered a special sense of community that, he felt, set the tool room apart from the rest of the factory. 'Even the Holden management commented on the togetherness of the Woodville tool room', he said. 'There was an attitude in the tool room, but not so much anywhere else.'<sup>84</sup>

Many of the tool room's employees notched up long service, earning their gold watches after 25 years. When GMH scrapped its popular annual '25 year' dinners in the early 1980s, the tool room started holding its own. The brainchild of Peter 'Bomber' Lancaster, the 25-year club's first dinner in 1983 was attended by 162 current and retired tool room workers including three – Alex Cooper, Len Symonds and Geoff Owensworth – who were 50-year veterans. Bob Hack acted as master of ceremonies and reportedly 'created a bright and entertaining mood for the evening

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<sup>84</sup> Robert Hack, 30 October 2019.

with his gags and quips'.<sup>85</sup> The club continued to grow in popularity, with 350 diners attending at its peak. The comradeship has outlasted the factory. In 2011, the club celebrated its thirtieth anniversary and was still attracting an average of 200 former workers to its dinners, including many fathers and sons. By 2019, when Bob Hack stepped down as treasurer, that number had dwindled to 92. It was 'a good one and good food', he said, despite being the smallest gathering to date. 'Our numbers were down because people are dying all the time and they're getting too old to get there', he said. But the spirit of comradeship remained, and the old stories still flowed. 'It's just great to see them, and we relive all those old moments and it's all good fun', Bruce Heaft reflected.<sup>86</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The lament that often surrounds factory closures is for workers' lost livelihoods. What the experience of GMH Woodville shows is that workers also grieved the loss of community and place. While workers' memories of their physical environment accorded, in many cases, with archival records, their recollections of emotional connections and social interactions provide a different window by which to view and understand factory life. Workers' memories of place were deeply connected to their sense of identity and enmeshed in a web of social connections which gave them a sense of security and belonging. It is a connection that continued to resonate even after the factory ceased to exist. It is the reason why Anthony Vassallo wanted to be buried in the cemetery outside its gates and why old mates from the tool room continue to gather each year. Today, a Bunnings hardware store and carpark stands on the footprint of the old tool room. For Bruce Heaft, who still lives nearby, passing the site always brings back memories: 'I think I used to play cricket out here at lunchtimes [laughs] or sleep up on the roof in the sun ... [Woodville] was like a home to me and it's like having your home knocked down'.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> '25ers Relive Good Times', *People*, March/April 1983, 7.

<sup>86</sup> Bruce Heaft, 28 November 2019.

<sup>87</sup> Bruce Heaft, 28 November 2019.

# Working from Home: An Oral History of Activism, Gender and the Environment

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RACHEL GOLDLUST

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In contemporary scholarship, the prominent narrative surrounding what constitutes environmental activism in Australia from the 1960s onwards has been focused on the public domain and concerns with the protection of untouched wild spaces where humans don't live. Constituting a hybrid 'worked' landscape, the move of urbanites towards small-scale self-sufficiency on small rural and semi-rural properties has only recently come to scholarly attention as a way of proffering tangible solutions for economic, social and environmental insecurity, while tapping into rising concerns over the long-term sustainable character of industrial and post-industrial societies. This article draws on oral history testimonies to expand the common understanding of environmental activism to include the domestic sphere and explore how women have reconstructed their domesticity as an answer to the challenges of industrial modernity and to counter rising consumerism and detachment from the environment. In their quest for simplicity these women have constructed an intimate way to engage with nature through daily ritual and practice and formed a relationship to place that has involved re-creating and reframing the domestic as a form of environmental awareness, rejecting the ecofeminist logic that has sought separation from the home as a means of empowerment and social engagement.



## INTRODUCTION

I remember one of those defining moments was marching down the steps of King George Square, arms linked with a whole mob of people chanting ‘the people united will never be defeated’ and thinking, we’re going to get hammered, we’re not just going to get defeated here. Realising here that it was a silly chant ... and thinking that you don’t change it like this, you don’t win this war like this, you win this battle by living a different lifestyle and showing that it works.<sup>1</sup>

Linda Woodrow was a wide-eyed working-class young woman from the suburbs of Brisbane. Like many coming of age in the 1970s, she participated in protests over the Vietnam War and nuclear power, while also objecting to the rapid diminishing of natural heritage and environmental assets in Australia and across the world. In her reflections on what led her to live at her current home at Black Horse Creek, a 400-hectare co-operative lifestyle property in the hinterland of northern New South Wales, she recalls that her ‘Maleny vision’<sup>2</sup> grew out of a desire to ‘make the politics work’ while avoiding the hypocrisy of uranium mining for electricity – ‘using electricity and then protesting about how it was produced’.<sup>3</sup>

Participation in the broadly identified 1970s counterculture for women such as Linda was not uncommon, but their stories and life histories have only recently emerged following the normalisation of discourses on gender equality across a range of hitherto masculine fields, together with a growing interest in sustainable behaviours and activities. As Lynn Abrams recently observed, these testimonies and narratives are common to women of the global north, and can translate the ‘lived experience of being a woman into narrative – one that reclaims the female experience from patriarchal histories’.<sup>4</sup> Contributing to a range of factors and ideologies

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1 Linda Woodrow, interviewed by author, Kyogle, NSW, 16 June 2016, tape and transcript held by author.

2 Maleny is a Sunshine Coast hinterland town 80 kilometres north of Brisbane with a strong countercultural history equitable with the more well-known town of Nimbin in Northern New South Wales.

3 Linda Woodrow, 16 June 2016.

4 Comparing interviews with British, North American and Australian women, Abrams asserts the propensity of the post-1940s generation to ‘place themselves at the centre of their narratives as (*continued over page*)

that have shaped the broad move back to the land as both creative acts of personal and social transformation and as a rebellion against distressing aspects of industrial modernity, such testimonies will help explore a hitherto overlooked intersection of environmental activism, gender and relationship to place in late-twentieth-century Australia.<sup>5</sup>

This article is concerned with the intimate space of home-based activism as expressed through a largely overlooked tradition of back-to-the-land self-sufficiency across rural and semi-rural Australia. Using oral testimonies drawn from broader research concerned with the historical move ‘off-grid’ in Australia, this article considers the rise of post-1970s back-to-the-landers, particularly women, as a cohort of activists whose divergence from mainstream conservation practices was embodied by a simple, low-carbon life shaped by the tenets of post-materialism.<sup>6</sup> Contributing to research broadly concerned with the historical context for why urban people continue to embrace aspects of self-sufficiency, I argue that the move back to the land, often seen as escaping or avoiding the problems of modern society, has also inculcated concern for protecting the environment and, more recently, finding a better balance for living in a climate emergency.

This article considers the stories of three women from the 1970s, ’80s and ’90s drawn from a sample group of 35 people, both male and female, across generations, coupled and single in both heterosexual and same-sex relations who chose

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heroes of their own life stories’. See Lynn Abrams, ‘Heroes of Their Own Life Stories: Narrating the Female Self in the Feminist Age’, *Cultural and Social History* 16, no. 2 (2019): 207.

5 North America has a much larger demographic and established back-to-the-land culture and associated research that explores similar narratives and ideas of environmental care and concern. See Mark Leeming, *In Defence of Home Places: Environmental Activism in Nova Scotia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); Rebecca Kneale Gould, *At Home in Nature: Modern Homesteading and Spiritual Practice in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 203–17. Australian research has largely overlooked this intersection. See Ruth Liepins, “‘Women of Broad Vision’: Nature and Gender in the Environmental Activism of Australia’s ‘Women in Agriculture’ Movement”, *Environment and Planning A* 30, no. 7 (1998): 1179–96; Ruth Fincher and Ruth Panelli, ‘Making Space: Women’s Urban and Rural Activism and the Australian State’, *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography* 8, no. 2 (2001): 129–48; Daniela Koleva, ‘Narrating Nature: Perceptions of the Environment and Attitudes towards It in Life Stories’, in Stephen Hussey and Paul Richard Thompson (eds), *Environmental Consciousness: The Roots of a New Political Agenda* (London: Routledge, 2000), 63–75.

6 Ronald Inglehart, ‘Post-Materialism in an Environment of Insecurity’, *American Political Science Review* 75, no. 4 (1981): 880–900.

to be interviewed on their back-to-the-land experiences. These three stories help elucidate how ordinary domestic activities and identities can be reconstituted as divergent forms of environmental activism.<sup>7</sup> By no means unique, these testimonies are representative of the alternative frameworks brought to bear on rural self-sufficiency (united by the term ‘off-grid living’) and selected to demonstrate both spatial and social diversity, and a shared identity across the states and generations. In this way, these testimonies share a sustainability and environmental lifestyle focus and may not be representative of the broad category of counter-urban migrants who commonly demonstrate a desire for better amenity, employment opportunities, affordable land, and overall quality of life concerns.<sup>8</sup> The stories shared here are thus selective of experiences but demonstrative of how women’s domestic activism can embody a broad-based and expansive environmental understanding that transcends the private domain, and is distinct to concern for specific habitats, landscapes or environs in the public domain.

Although ideas of the domestic are often confined to the home and family, Pam Nichols suggests it is time to expand the scope of environmental history to translate care and concern for one’s home (and health) into broader spatial and social locations.<sup>9</sup> Beyond direct action campaigns, this article suggests simple acts of self-sufficiency parallel what researchers have coined ‘everyday materialist practices’, and can challenge established binaries that essentialise the relationship between women, nature and the domestic sphere.<sup>10</sup> By expanding the domestic sphere to

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7 Rachel Goldlust, ‘Going Off-Grid: A History of Power, Protest and the Environment in Australia, 1890–2016’, (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 2020).

8 Neil Argent et al., ‘Amenity-Led Migration in Rural Australia: A New Driver of Local Demographic and Environmental Change?’, in Gary Luck, Digby Race and Rosemary Black (eds), *Demographic Change in Australia’s Rural Landscapes* (Dordrecht: New York: Springer, 2010), 23–44; Michaela Benson and Karen O’Reilly, ‘Migration and the Search for a Better Way of Life: A Critical Exploration of Lifestyle Migration’, *The Sociological Review* 57, no. 4 (2009): 608–25.

9 Pam Nichols, ‘Expanding the Scope of Environmental history: Householders Campaigning for Safer Homes’, in Andrea Gaynor, Mathew Trinca and Anna Haebich (eds), *Country: Visions of Land and People in Western Australia* (Perth: WA Museum, 2003), 241–55.

10 Niamh Moore, ‘Ecofeminism as Third Wave Feminism? Essentialism, Activism and the Academy’, in S. Gillis, G. Howie and R. Munford (eds), *Third Wave Feminism* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 227–39; Aidan Davison, ‘A Domestic Twist on the Eco-efficiency Turn: Environmentalism, Technology, Home’, in Ruth Lane and Andrew Gorman-Murray (eds), *Material Geographies of Household Sustainability* (London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 35–49.

incorporate small acreage which, as Valerie Padilla Carroll points out, extends the spatial and labour association to include the ‘imagined self-reliance of smallholder independence offered by back-to-the-land, self-sufficiency, and urban homesteading movements’ the home (or domestic space) is expanded spatially, while the self is re-appraised within a wider community of people and natural/biological elements.<sup>11</sup> Building on a growing interest in sustainable materialism that explicitly recognises human immersion in non-human natural systems, this article explores how some women of the post–World War II generation found they could ‘work from home’ as Linda claimed above, by ‘living a different lifestyle and showing that it works’.<sup>12</sup>

## HISTORIES OF ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

Over the past four decades, Australian environmental activism has largely been associated in both public imagination and in academic research as a function of public demonstrations, actions and boycotts.<sup>13</sup> According to scholarship, the contemporary green lobby constitutes an informal social protest movement whose roots are traced back to the urban Green Bans and conservation campaigns of the late 1960s and 1970s, later consolidated by the advocacy of grassroots groups such as Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and the Tasmanian Wilderness Society.<sup>14</sup> According to this

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- 11 Valerie Padilla Carroll, ‘The Radical Possibilities of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity: Housewifery as an Altermodernity Project’, *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 23, no. 1 (2016): 51–70. New Domesticity was coined by Emily Matchar, *Homeward Bound: Why Women Are Embracing the New Domesticity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015), 5.
- 12 David Schlosberg and Romand Coles, ‘The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life: Sustainability, Material Flows and Movements’, *Contemporary Political Theory* 15, no. 2 (2016): 160–81. See also Thomas S.J. Smith, ‘Ecological Ethics of Care and the Multiple Self: Revisiting the Roots of Environmentalism’, in *Sustainability, Wellbeing and the Posthuman Turn* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 63–90.
- 13 Stephen Cotgrove and Andrew Duff, ‘Environmentalism, Middle-Class Radicalism and Politics’, *Sociological Review* 28, no. 2 (1980): 333–51; Stephen Crook and Jan Pakulski, ‘Shades of Green: Public Opinion on Environmental Issues in Australia’, *Australian Journal of Political Science* 30, no. 1 (1995): 39–55; Bruce Tranter, ‘Environmentalism in Australia: Elites and the Public’, *Journal of Sociology* 35, no. 3 (1999): 331–50; Joanne Dono, Janine Webb and Ben Richardson, ‘The Relationship Between Environmental Activism, Pro-environmental Behaviour and Social Identity’, *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 30, no. 2 (2010): 178–86.
- 14 Verity Burgmann, *Power, Profit and Protest: Australian Social Movements and Globalisation* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 2003); Rowan J. Cahill and Beverley Symons, *A Turbulent Decade: Social Protest Movements and the Labour Movement, 1965–1975* (Newtown, NSW: Australian Society for the Study of Labour History, 2005); Jon Piccini, *Transnational Protest, Australia and the 1960s* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

narrative, across the environmental, social and political justice movements from the 1960s onwards, care and concern over issues, both big and small, were enacted across particular natural settings such as the Great Barrier Reef (1967–1975), Little Desert (1969), Myall Lakes (1969–1970) and Lake Pedder (1967–1973), sometimes buoyed by dedicated letter-writing campaigns and political petitions.<sup>15</sup> In this way, much of the recording of this movement has been concerned with prominent figureheads, tracing grassroots collective action campaigns, and navigating the intersection of politics and conservation as it has reflected a concern for the plight of untouched ‘wild’ places.<sup>16</sup> While much of the historiography has focused on wilderness campaigns, there has been a move towards recognising activism on a private and community level, particularly across the changing demographic and land-use concerns of rural and semi-rural areas that has attracted fleeting interest.<sup>17</sup> Within a broader shift in environmental politics from large-scale public advocacy to consumer choices and a more individualised move to a low-carbon footprint, the emergence of a particular feminised discourse through this convergence has only nominally and tangentially been investigated in the Australian context.<sup>18</sup>

Taking Linda’s testimony above as an entry point into a new narrative of environmental concern involves generating a different archive and asking a different set of questions. Oral history can help illuminate the human immersion in non-human natural systems, in this case, the motivation behind moving onto a piece of land and

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15 Drew Hutton and Libby Connors, *A History of the Australian Environment Movement* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Timothy Doyle and Tsarina Doyle, *Green Power: The Environment Movement in Australia* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000).

16 Libby Robin, *Defending the Little Desert: The Rise of Ecological Consciousness in Australia* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1998); Iain McIntyre, ‘Tree-Sits, Barricades and Lock-Ons: Obstructive Direct Action and the History of the Environmental Movement, 1979–1990’ (PhD thesis, University of Melbourne, 2018); Vanessa Bible, *Terania Creek and the Forging of Modern Environmental Activism*, Palgrave Studies in World Environmental History (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2018).

17 John Holmes, ‘Impulses Towards a Multifunctional Transition in Rural Australia: Gaps in the Research Agenda’, *Journal of Rural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2006): 142–60; Nicholas Gill, Peter Klepeis and Laurie Chisholm, ‘Stewardship Among Lifestyle Oriented Rural Landowners’, *Journal of Environmental Planning and Management* 53, no. 3 (2010): 317–334; Benjamin Cooke and Ruth Lane, ‘How Do Amenity Migrants Learn to Be Environmental Stewards of Rural Landscapes?’, *Landscape and Urban Planning* 134 (2015): 43–52.

18 Ruth Liepins, ‘Fields of Action: Australian Women’s Agricultural Activism in the 1990s’, *Rural Sociology* 63, no. 1 (1998): 128–56; Kyra Clarke, ‘Wilful knitting? Contemporary Australian Craftivism and Feminist Histories’, *Continuum* 30, no. 3 (2016): 298–306.

rejuvenating the immediate environment, learning to live with the seasons, build from locally sourced materials and trade within local networks.<sup>19</sup> As Holmes and Goodall remind us, while oral historians often write about place, attachment and meaning, they are less adept at approaching the ‘human/nature inter-relationship and the way these change’.<sup>20</sup> And while interdisciplinary scholarship on environmental change and our relationship to it often draws on oral resources, they tend to inform and complement scientific approaches to land management or ecological systems, with a repeated focus on weather phenomena, dramatic landscapes or popular spaces such as national parks, mountain ranges and watercourses.<sup>21</sup> In his treatise on living and working in nature, Richard White argues smallholdings and rural lifestyle properties can help create knowledge, familiarity, and in some cases, offer a solution to our problematic relationship with the nonhuman world, but these efforts are often discounted in environmental literature.<sup>22</sup>

In existing historiography, much like their American counterparts, the first generation of Australian environmental historians and geographers often located the

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19 Often conflated with homesteading in North America, and smallholding traditions in England and Europe, the phenomenon is characterised by subsistence agriculture, home preservation of food and small-scale production of textiles, clothing and craftwork for household use or sale. Pursued in different ways around the world – and in different historical eras – it is generally differentiated from rural village or commune living by isolation into family units (either socially or physically). See David Ernest Robinson, *The Complete Homesteading Book: Proven Methods for Self-Sufficient Living* (Charlotte, Vermont: Garden Way Publishing, 1974), 2–3.

20 Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall (eds), *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment*, Palgrave Studies in World Environmental History (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 4.

21 Ruth Lane, ‘Oral Histories and Scientific Knowledge in Understanding Environmental Change: A Case Study in the Tumut Region, NSW’, *Australian Geographical Studies* 35, no. 2 (1997): 195–205; Leena Rossi, ‘Oral History and Individual Environmental Experience’, in Timo Myllyntaus (ed.), *Thinking Through the Environment: Green Approaches to Global History* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 2011), 135–55; Heather Goodall, ‘Rivers, Memory and Migrancy: Everyday Place-Making in Changing Environments’, in Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall (eds), *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 31–50. For recent work that relates to less wild agricultural landscapes see Andrea Gaynor and Joy McCann, ‘“I’ve Had Dolphins ... Looking for Abalone for Me”: Oral History and the Subjectivities of Marine Engagement’, *The Oral History Review* 44, no. 2 (2017): 260–77; Karen Twigg, ‘“Another Weed Will Come Along”: Attitudes to Weeds, Land and Community in the Victorian Mallee’, *Telling Environmental Histories* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 213–40.

22 Richard White, ‘“Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?:” Work and Nature’, in William Cronon (ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996), 181.



aesthetic, ethical and spiritual dimensions of environmentalism through the relation of the individual to an uncharted wilderness.<sup>23</sup> Early investigations into colonial and post-colonial engagements with nature were reluctant to locate a spiritual dimension in farming or agriculture as such activities, Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths confirm, lay at the heart of the colonialist settlement project – one characterised by overwhelming ‘environmental destruction and cultural loss’.<sup>24</sup> Tapping into the cultural turn from the 1990s that embraced hybrid landscapes, newer narratives have begun to incorporate holistic agricultural approaches – thus small-scale farming lifestyles that had previously been associated with destructive agricultural systems have begun to be re-appraised as potent forms of environmental thinking and activism.<sup>25</sup>

My research has mapped the move to small acreage self-sufficient farming in Australia (sometimes called the ‘quiet revolution’) since the late nineteenth century – where ordinary urban people learn how to grow, conserve and fix things themselves and, through these simple acts, find meaning, purpose and belonging.<sup>26</sup> American historian Rebecca Gould has highlighted in her work on homesteading that such a study begs investigation into what people do, why they do it, how what they do functions as an expression of their most deeply held values and beliefs about what the world should be like, and how they want to live in it.<sup>27</sup> Largely inexperienced, and making

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23 Roderick Nash, ‘The American Wilderness in Historical Perspective’, *Forest History* 6, no. 4 (1963): 2–13; Donald Worster, *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Joseph M. Powell, *Mirrors of the New World: Images and Image-Makers in the Settlement Processes* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1978); William J. Lines, *Taming the Great South Land: A History of the Conquest of Nature in Australia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Thomas R. Dunlap, ‘Australian Nature, European Culture: Anglo Settlers in Australia’, *Environmental History Review* 17, no. 1 (1993): 25–48.

24 Libby Robin and Tom Griffiths, ‘Environmental History in Australasia’, *Environment and History* 10, no. 4 (2004): 440–3.

25 Richard White, ‘From Wilderness to Hybrid Landscapes: The Cultural Turn in Environmental History’, *The Historian* 66, no. 3 (2004): 557–64; Charles Massy, *Call of the Reed Warbler: A New Agriculture, A New Earth* (St Lucia, Qld: University of Queensland Press, 2017).

26 Some foundation texts are Helen Nearing and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life: How to Live Sanely and Simply in a Troubled World* (Harborside, Maine: Social Science Institute, 1954); Maurice Grenville Kains, *Five Acres and Independence: A Practical Guide to the Selection and Management of the Small Farm* (United States: Courier Corporation, 1973); John Seymour, *Farming for Self-Sufficiency: Independence on a 5-Acre Farm* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973); Duane Elgin, *Voluntary Simplicity: Toward a Way of Life That Is Outwardly Simple, Inwardly Rich* (New York: Morrow, 1981).

27 Gould, *At Home in Nature*, 3.

the exodus as a choice rather than a necessity, the move has generally engaged those with no agrarian background, migrating in search of an autonomous (free from wage labour and market), but most importantly, a desire for a close-to-nature and ecological way of life.<sup>28</sup>

## WOMEN GO BACK TO THE LAND TOO

Across a broad field concerned with gender and agricultural activities, scholars such as Dee Garceau, Sarah Carter and Valerie Padilla Carroll have recently focused on the prominence of women, single and divorced, within the North American practice of homesteading.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, Carroll argues that the home provided a ‘liberatory, even feminist space’ for the homemaker who supplied vital domestic labour to the self-sufficiency project.<sup>30</sup> Challenging a second prominent narrative in Australian historiography that has long viewed yeomanry as a distinctly masculine or family-oriented activity, there have been few studies that consider female-only or female-centric farming practices and institutions.<sup>31</sup> With the cities long seen as sites of human degradation and a symbol of corruption and exploitation, the ‘bush’ has long offered a place of revitalisation and fulfilment.

Nostalgia for the rural idyll has been a critical aspect of the modern condition throughout the twentieth century, providing a space for new relationships to the land to emerge, and where individuals could ensure the progress of civil society.<sup>32</sup>

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28 ‘Back-to-the-Landers’, in Giacomo D’Alisa, Federico Demaria and Giorgos Kallis (eds), *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era* (London: Routledge, 2014), 143–144.

29 Dee Garceau, ‘Single Women Homesteaders and the Meanings of Independence: Places on the Map, Places in the Mind’, *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 15, no. 3 (1995): 1–26; Sarah Carter, *Imperial Plots: Women, Land, and the Spadework of British Colonialism on the Canadian Prairies* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: University of Manitoba Press, 2016). See also Vivien Ellen Rose, ‘Homesteading as Social Protest: Gender and Continuity in the Back-to-the-Land Movement in the United States, 1890–1980’ (PhD thesis, State University of New York, 1997).

30 Valerie Padilla Carroll, ‘Fables of Empowerment: Myrtle Mae Borsodi and Back-to-the-Land Housewifery in the Early Twentieth Century’, *The Journal of American Culture* 40, no. 2 (2017): 119–33.

31 Richard Waterhouse and Kate Darian-Smith, ‘The Yeoman Ideal and Australian Experience, 1860–1960’, in *Exploring the British World: Identity, Cultural Production, Institutions* (Melbourne: RMIT Publishing, 2004), 440–59. A notable exception is Kate Hunter, ‘The Drover’s Wife and the Drover’s Daughter: Histories of Single Farming Women and Debates in Australian Historiography’, *Rural History* 12, no. 2 (2001): 179–94.

32 Michael Roe and Russel Ward, ‘The Australian Legend’, *Meanjin Quarterly* 21, no. 3 (1962): 363–8.

Kate Murphy has convincingly argued that far from being exclusionary to women, such nostalgia for the rural lifestyle contains a vital relationship between gender, modernity, and both rural and urban spaces.<sup>33</sup> While Murphy has documented the move of urban women onto the land during the interwar period as predicated on a certain ‘naturalising’ of manhood and womanhood and upholding ‘natural’ gender qualities, there has been little work on women undertaking the same move half a century later as a continuation or a challenge to these qualities.<sup>34</sup>

The 1970s saw a reconfiguration of colonial yeoman traditions when it came to embracing the turn back to the land as an emergent interest in ‘quality of life’ overtook the narrower material-security concerns of previous generations. For those seeking alternatives, highly influential books with a global message and broad reach such as Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968), Barry Commoner’s *The Closing Circle* (1971), the Club of Rome’s *Limits to Growth* (1972) and Ernst Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful* (1973) proved vital to their thinking. These authors looked to spread the message of humankind’s increasingly detrimental impact on nature under the guise of progress, and their popularity ushered in a new environmental ethic based upon individual responsibility and consumer choices.<sup>35</sup> The movement’s new hero, Rachel Carson, saw humans as ecological creatures, and challenged the basis of the established conservation ethic. Carson was the first and most influential figure

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33 Kate Murphy, ‘Rural Womanhood and the “Embellishment” of Rural Life In Urban Australia’, in Graeme Davison and Marc Brodie (eds), *Struggle Country: The Rural Ideal in Twentieth Century Australia* (Monash University ePress, 2005), 02.1–02.15.

34 Kate Murphy, ‘The “Unnatural” Woman: Urban Reformers, Modernity, and the Ideal of Rurality after Federation’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 21, no. 51 (2006): 369–78. Much of the writing on countercultural and organic lifestyles in Australia is nominally concerned with women’s issues and voices. See Chapter 4 of Rebecca Jones, *Green Harvest: A History of Organic Farming and Gardening in Australia* (Collingwood, Vic.: CSIRO Publishing, 2010), 87–102. An exception is recent work by Carroll Pursell, ‘“Back-to-Earth” Movements in the Australian 1970s’, in *How the Personal Became Political: Re-Assessing Australia’s Revolutions in Gender and Sexuality in the 1970s* (ANU, 2017). Available at <http://www.auswhn.org.au/blog/personal-became-political/>. Accessed 22 April 2021.

35 Maril Hazlett, ‘Voices from the Spring: Silent Spring and the Ecological Turn in American Health’, in Virginia Scharff (ed.), *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 120.

to talk about environmental loss and importantly, used ecology to define people's 'homes, gardens, and health as part of the natural world'.<sup>36</sup>

Providing a unifying image for a politically charged countercultural generation, rural self-sufficiency, and by association, an authentic life engaged in agriculture featured prominently as part of the emergent aspirations, and agitations, for social, political and environmental change in Australia. Women were vitally and equally engaged in this vision.<sup>37</sup> Prominent cultural critic Dennis Altman observed that although the return to 'traditional rural values' was a less-than-revolutionary position, its re-deployment had emerged within a progressive mindset intent on challenging aspects of the system through reduced consumption and dependence on manufactured goods.<sup>38</sup> But the return to what Valerie Padilla Carroll has termed the 'heteropatriarchal refugium' of previous generations with 'the heterocouple complete with attached gendered roles and expectations' was primed for a challenge as women realised, with support from the growing liberation movement, they too had a yearning for authenticity, self-realisation and to not be restrained by traditional modes of authority.<sup>39</sup>

From the early 1970s, the self-sufficiency movement's ideology emerged through alternative lifestyle magazines such as *Grass Roots and Earth Garden*, both of which painted an idyllic picture of farm life that was autonomous and liberating, encouraging ordinary Australians to 'kick the 9–5 habit by getting a shift worker's job. Laze on the beach during the day, travel to work without traffic jams and save money by doing it yourself'.<sup>40</sup> The duty and responsibility of ordinary people to liberate themselves from the constraints of the 'system' was presented as a challenge facing both men and women equally, while activities such as gardening, building, mending, cooking

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36 Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (Boston: Cambridge, Mass: Houghton Mifflin; Riverside Press, 1962); Maril Hazlett, 'Woman vs. Man vs. Bugs: Gender and Popular Ecology in Early Reactions to *Silent Spring*', *Environmental History* 9, no. 4 (2004): 701.

37 Richard Fairfield and Timothy Miller, *The Modern Utopian: Alternative Communities of the '60s and '70s* (London: Process, 2010); Vanessa Bible, 'Australian Counterculture', in *Terania Creek and the Forging of Modern Environmental Activism* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Pivot, 2018), 9–34.

38 Dennis Altman, 'The Counter Culture: Nostalgia or Prophecy?' in A. Davis, S. Encel and A.M. Berry (eds), *Australian Society: A Sociological Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1977), 457.

39 Valerie Padilla Carroll, 'Ralph and Myrtle Mae Borsodi's Vision of Back-to-the-Land as a White Heteropatriarchal Refugium during the Great Depression', *Environment and History* 27, no. 2 (2021): 303–21.

40 'Making the Most of It: Down on the Farm', *Earth Garden* (October 1972): 4.

and crafting were reconfigured as shared activities that transcended proscribed ideas of men's and women's work. By the mid-1970s, 'living better for less' was the corollary to a new 'ethic of frugality' that may not directly address the issue of gender, but which was being applied to 'every individual in [his] private life'.<sup>41</sup>

### FEMINIST DOMESTICITY AS HOME-BASED ACTIVISM

In their work on countercultural femininities, Rosanna Hunt and Michelle Phillipov have argued that progressive politics around consumption have long been expressed through images and aesthetics 'culturally coded as conservative'.<sup>42</sup> Notions of ethical consumption, they argue, are often paralleled by resurgences in practices associated with domesticity and traditional femininities. For Jaki Lockyer, who purchased a rural property in 1971 on the mid-north coast of New South Wales, it was such a paradox that enabled her to pursue her dream of rural simplicity. Jaki had attended university and begun working for the national broadcaster, the ABC, in Sydney while her boyfriend Jon completed his draftsmanship training. With a professional career in sight, it was a romantic turn that led them towards their future property, found by accident on a road trip north, fuelled by a growing 'dissatisfaction with city living which seemed to be becoming increasingly materialistic'.<sup>43</sup> To emphasise her independence and that it was a personal, as much a shared dream, she recounted the story of her transgressions as a young, single woman fighting 'the system':

So, I went to the bank and said, 'I want to borrow two and a half grand'. I was then 18. And they said 'No, we're not going to give you the money because you're only 18 and in 6 weeks' time you'll be spending the money on shoes'. I took all my money out of the bank, and I went to my credit union, and I said, 'are you going to lend me the money?' and they said 'yeah, sure we will, but we can't lend it to a woman without a male guarantor'. This is

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41 Bill Metcalf, 'The Ethic of Frugality', *Eco Info, the Newsletter of the Queensland Conservation Council* 1, no. 3 (1973): 31.

42 Rosanna Hunt and Michelle Phillipov, "'Nanna Style': The Countercultural Politics of Retro Femininities", *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 (2014). Available at <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/901/>. Accessed 9 August 2018.

43 Jaki Lockyer, personal communication with author, 18 March 2016. Transcript held by author.

1971. And I thought, well I don't want my dad to be guarantor, and I said, 'I've got a boyfriend' and they said 'fine', and I said, 'but he's studying, he doesn't have a job, he's living off me at the moment' and they said 'it doesn't matter'. So that was the first time I met, quite so blatantly, the qualifying criteria of having a penis.<sup>44</sup>

In this well-trodden personal narrative, Jaki establishes herself as a rebellious agent that was completely in control of how she and her soon-to-be husband Jon moved onto the land, though it is likely she was not aware of the gender implications at the time. Both Jaki and Jon were active in anti-war protests, environmental and moratorium marches, and Jaki reflects that it was because of the progressive politics of the women's movement that she could enact her dream, and the couple could engage with self-provision on equal footing. In Jaki's re-telling, dealing with the bank manager is a poignant symbol of her deviation from conventional gender expectations and highlighted the ongoing struggle of women to assert control over their finances and choices. Within what feminist scholar Susan Magarey has called the 1970s utopian dream in which sexual difference would not mean major differences of power, Jaki saw living off the land as empowering rather than limiting.<sup>45</sup>

The women's liberation movement had certainly facilitated Jaki's ability to walk away from a professional career to start a family and build on a rural property. Unlike previous generations where freedom for women meant the ability to earn an independent income and turn their back on the restrictions of conventional (read suburban) domesticity, for Jaki it meant the ability to choose. Choosing domesticity in this context, functioning within Valerie Padilla Carroll's definition of a 'radical, eco, and feminist housewifery', was Jaki's way of challenging the ubiquity of modern conveniences and conventions associated with the excesses of materialism and mindless consumption.<sup>46</sup> When asked why she would return to a life of domestic

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<sup>44</sup> Jaki and Jon Lockyer, interviewed by author, Bellingen, New South Wales, 9 June 2016, tape and transcript held by author.

<sup>45</sup> Susan Magarey, 'Dreams and Desires', *Australian Feminist Studies* 22, no. 53 (2007): 338.

<sup>46</sup> Feminist scholars have argued that the home was not always opposed to or a place to retreat from the modern world but could represent a different vision of modernity. Although second-wave feminists positioned the home as a retreat from progressivism, the home was not anti-modern, (*continued over page*)



drudgery when women had fought for generations to remove themselves from the kitchen sink, Jaki's answer was simple: 'there was no sink, we lived in a tent'.<sup>47</sup>



**Figure 1** Jaki and Jon Lockyer in front of their temporary home in Grace's Gully, 1975. Photograph courtesy of Jaki Lockyer.

Though she would have undertaken much of the household labour, Jaki's response highlights two competing frameworks affecting the way women understood their decision to escape the system: a desire to escape the structures of patriarchy, symbolised by the structures of capitalism, and the disassociation caused by industrial

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but in fact central to the very project of modernity in the post-war era. See Lesley Johnson, "As Housewives We Are Worm": Women, Modernity and the Home Question', *Cultural Studies* 10, no. 3 (1996): 449; Carroll, 'The Radical Possibilities of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity', 51.

<sup>47</sup> Jaki and Jon Lockyer, 9 June 2016.

modernity that affected both genders as a common enemy. Homemaking in this context, a home-centred lifestyle that favoured a purer, simpler and more authentic way of life based on a DIY approach to meeting one's own needs, had become an empowering act that challenged both gendered perceptions of domesticity, alongside capitalist assumptions regarding the domestic sphere and excessive consumption. As Abrams has observed, these women's life stories were enabled by the confluence of the post-war cultural context, 'whereby the ethic of authenticity bred feminism with its practices of self-care, alongside other critical political and social movements and the critique of patriarchal structures and mindsets'.<sup>48</sup>

In examining the Lockyers' narrative, it is necessary to acknowledge a common critique of oral history testimonies. In this case, that their recollections may transcend accurate reflections of the past to become a representation of a present reality that is susceptible to a nostalgic romanticism.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, these are political narratives that have been pressed onto distant events in order to ratify and justify the decisions made at a time of youthful enthusiasm. Lynn Abrams has argued that in her experience of a similar demographic of women, when encouraged in an interview to tell a story about the self, 'these women unshackle their memory stories from conventional expectations of what a woman's life story should look like'.<sup>50</sup> In this case, Jaki's bank encounter has become a symbol of her deviation from conventions, and a marker of how she had begun to think differently from a young age.

Alistair Thomson views the so-called un-reliability of memory as its strength. Its very subjectivity, he claims, elucidates not only the meaning of historical experiences, but the relationships between past and present, between memory and personal identity.<sup>51</sup> Although these interviews are peppered with both nostalgia and romanticism, testimonies like Jaki's reveal some nuance of the post-war generations post-materialist view on the meaning of home, family and lifestyle as they began to identify with a

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48 Abrams, 'Heroes of Their Own Life Stories', 207.

49 Nathan Wachtel, 'Introduction', in Marie-Noëlle Bourguet, Lucette Valensi and Nathan Wachtel (eds), *Between Memory and History* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1990), 5.

50 Abrams, 'Heroes of Their Own Life Stories', 208.

51 Alistair Thomson, 'Memory and Remembering in Oral History', in Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2011), 91.

subculture, and unite in their separation from urban and conventional expectations of their parents' generation. As both a form of self-realisation, and establishing a political and social identity, Jaki and Jon's testimony speaks to a wider counter-cultural viewpoint emergent in the early 1970s that saw a new generation shape their lives not around economic livelihood, growth and material gains, but to living itself.



**Figure 2** Jaki and Jon Lockyer taking down a convict-built timber church in Narrabeen, 1972, for their home-to-be. Photograph courtesy of Jaki Lockyer.

### **LIVING SIMPLY AS ENVIRONMENTAL CARE AND STEWARDSHIP**

According to historian Rebecca Jones, the 1970s countercultural move onto the land drew heavily on a romantic tradition in which wilderness was revered as



untrammelled by human destruction, akin to the Garden of Eden before the fall.<sup>52</sup> The longing to create a garden in the wilderness also found resonance within enduring settler mythologies and metaphors for human achievement and ethical endeavour. Following the convergence of ideas at the Nimbin Aquarius Festival, land settlement came to signify more than a collection of autonomous rights, but rights imbued with a corresponding duty to protect its ecological wellbeing. According to John Page who participated in the festival in 1973, property began to embody self-meaning within a communitarian context, 'premised on obligation, ownership had become more than a bundle of autonomous rights, but rights imbricated with a corresponding duty to land health'.<sup>53</sup> Another interviewee, Adrienne Weber, shared her reflections on how their property, and dreams of rehabilitation, were likewise tied to a bigger ecosystem vision built into the progressive politics of the time.

After travelling through the Pacific Islands where she observed that each village was able to meet their own needs for food, shelter and community, Adrienne and her husband Erwin moved to the Tweed Valley on the New South Wales and Queensland border in the late 1970s. There they established a successful solar design architecture business and cultivated a holistic approach to living by building an ecologically sensitive home from local natural materials and working on others in their community. Adrienne talked of how their block, previously a denuded banana plantation, symbolised the broader issue of land left degraded by generations of extractive agriculture practices and a legacy of poor soil health. More than simply building and living, they saw value in regenerating a native landscape while learning about the region's biota. Acknowledging the slow but consistent deforestation of Australia's wet sclerophyll forests, and their often discounted or undervalued ecological status, Adrienne reflects that their decision was not uncommon:

Around here there are so many people who are like-minded and ... none of them have really been trained but they've come and lived in a place where

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<sup>52</sup> Jones, *Green Harvest*, 93.

<sup>53</sup> See John Page, 'Counterculture, Property, Place, and Time: Nimbin, 1973', *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 (1 October 2014). Available at <http://www.journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/900>. Accessed 8 October 2019.

you could spend your whole life trying to get on top of the lantana and it would keep coming back unless you work with the natural systems. So, you go to the part of your little creek where you've got the best canopy and the most natural/native plants, and you work from there out to the other bits. We know hundreds of people who have all found out that this is what you need to do: bushland regeneration, trying to restore habitat. That to me underpins many of the other things we do for the people, and it also underpins people's survival on earth.<sup>54</sup>

In this passage we see how Adrienne saw her efforts in the context of her wider community, with a shared desire to restore local habitats a tangible response to broader social, economic and environmental concerns and a destructive societal vision of progress and development. The ability to be active and engaged with big-picture and systemic environmental issues such as deforestation, invasive species, waterway destruction and habitat loss is centred upon and focused through the rehabilitation of a single piece of land, which then ripples through their communities. As David Holmgren, one of the founders of permaculture, argues for the work ordinary landholders do by naturalising plants:

Compared with other active campaigns of the environmental movement against nuclear power, genetic engineering, coal mining or even native forest logging, the demonizing of naturalized species was not up against established powerful interests and found a psycho-social resonance in the general population that could relate to the idea of pest plants and animals. A war against 'environmental weeds' or simply invasive species was a natural extension of the war against agricultural weeds that had its origins with the beginnings of agriculture and civilisation.<sup>55</sup>

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54 Adrienne Weber, interviewed by author, Chillingham, NSW, 23 June 2016, tape and transcript held by author.

55 David Holmgren, 'Weeds or Wild Nature: A Permaculture Perspective', *Plant Protection Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (2011): 92.

Whether consciously practised or not, back-to-the-landers such as Adrienne and Erwin are part of a growing cohort of small landowners who saw their work as part of a dispersed but growing grassroots movement, motivated and shaped by the principles of permaculture.<sup>56</sup> Most who volunteered to share their stories with the broader oral history project on back-to-the-land experiences were still living on their original property, but many admitted they had seldom given much thought to their reasons or ideas since they moved at a young age and were motivated by passion and idealism as opposed to adhering to concrete beliefs or formalised systems of thinking such as permaculture (which only emerged after 1976). Telling their stories, in the context of this broader longitudinal research, was one of the first opportunities many had had to reflect on their decision as more than youthful passion based on having few economic assets, but as one that embodied a set of core values and beliefs that had guided them towards self-sufficiency and, consequently, land restoration. As interest continues to grow in this type of lifestyle globally, those who went back to the land during the 1970s have found their decisions and reasons validated by successive generations keen to pursue similar actions, albeit through a more focused ‘organic’ and sustainability lens.<sup>57</sup>

## ORGANIC LIFESTYLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

I think about how I grew up. The streets were safe, a lot of people grew food, we borrowed and traded tools and people looked after each other, there was this great sense of community.<sup>58</sup>

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56 Combining ‘permanence’ and ‘agriculture’, permaculture maps out a comprehensive design framework based on the management of a multi-crop of perennial trees, shrubs, herbs, fungi and root systems and looks to address the damage caused by humans on their surroundings and balance natural ecosystems with human agricultural systems. See Bill (B.C.) Mollison and David Holmgren, *Permaculture* (Ealing [England]: Transworld Publishers, 1978–1979).

57 Ryan H. Edgington, “‘Be Receptive to the Good Earth’: Health, Nature, and Labor in Countercultural Back-to-the-Land Settlements”, *Agricultural History* 82, no. 3 (2008): 279–308; Keith H. Halfacree, ‘A “Place for Nature?” New Radicalism’s Rural Contribution,’ in *Innovations in Rural Areas* (Worcester: Presses Univ Blaise Pascal, 2003), 51–66.

58 Morag Gamble, interviewed by author, Maleny, Queensland, 27 June 2016, tape and transcript held by author.

As part of the 1970s back-to-the-land movement, Morag Gamble's parents built in an outer suburban semi-bushland neighbourhood of Melbourne. There they cultivated a native garden, designed a passive solar house and were committed vegetarians. In our interview conducted on Morag's property in south-east Queensland, she warmly recalls her parents' commitment to creating a home, albeit in the suburbs. To them the house was 'not a commodity, a house is where you are, you build it, and you create it, and you craft it and its where your life happens ... You can see that. It's how we've created this place'.<sup>59</sup> Such thinking appears far from radical, but Morag's idealisation of her childhood, and construction of domesticity and locality belies a complex negotiation that integrates traditional aspects of home, work, family and community with a progressive personal political and global environmental vision. As Schlosberg and Coles have outlined, such a shift to a more sustainable materialism functions as a form of indirect environmental activism by moving 'beyond an individualist and value-focused notion of post-materialism, into a focus on collective practices and institutions for the provision of the basic needs of everyday life'.<sup>60</sup>

When asked about the conditions or ideas that led her towards her current lifestyle, Morag recalled a hugely symbolic moment that catalysed her thinking and behaviours – learning to make bread as part of a traditional grain harvest. As a young design student, she had travelled overseas and found herself in Ladakh in northern India, studying under academic Helena Norberg-Hodge as part of the English-based Schumacher College.<sup>61</sup> Although Morag could see that the locals were financially insecure as they transitioned from a more traditional to a neoliberal society, she reflected on a certain 'richness of experience' embodied by their connection to the land and seasons. With great passion she described the interrelation between the people, animals and their clothes, food and culture – embodied by a warm fresh piece of bread:

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<sup>59</sup> Morag Gamble, 27 June 2016.

<sup>60</sup> Schlosberg and Coles, 'The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life', 160.

<sup>61</sup> Helena Norberg-Hodge, *Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1991). Schumacher College in Devon, England was founded in 1990 and runs holistic education courses on ecology and sustainability, in which 'students are encouraged to develop a deep, participatory relationship with nature'. Available at <https://www.schumachercollege.org.uk/>. Accessed 21 April 2021.



All of a sudden, I had this immense sense of ... deep purpose and connection. I thought ... I never knew how to make bread before! I could earn some money, go buy a loaf of bread, and buy some butter, but there was no meaning in that. The meaning embodied in this bread that I was eating and knowing all the processes that were a part of that and being connected to the animals and the land and the seasons and the people and the culture and the song. Everything about it ... and seeing an amazing joy that people got out of living like that ... had this enormous impact on me.<sup>62</sup>

It is difficult to convey the immense passion and aliveness evoked in Morag's telling of this story, but this memory was clearly significant to interpreting the evolution of her family life, home and profession, and in her own thinking about ethics, rights, duty and responsibility. The ritual and relational processes of harvesting, milling, milking and baking became a seed to start engaging seriously with agriculture and self-provision, to co-operate in shared economies, and to enliven her life with simple activities based around the unit of the kitchen table. As a poignant representation of domesticity and wholesomeness, bread making is transposed into ethical and bioregional relationships between seasons, processes and networks – where good food and good social practices can be both traditional and progressive, nostalgic and forward looking.

Food scholar Michelle Phillipov has pointed out that in this context, nostalgia works to reframe the potentially conservative dimensions of food politics (especially in relation to class and gender) as pleasurable, politically progressive choices.<sup>63</sup> She writes further that in presenting the ritual of home-based bread making as ethical, certain domestic tasks become an appealing alternative to the consumption patterns fostered by industrial food systems, elevating certain rituals from 'domestic drudgery' to a freely chosen political act.<sup>64</sup> In this way, we can identify in Morag's decision to

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<sup>62</sup> Morag Gamble, 27 June 2016.

<sup>63</sup> Michelle Phillipov, 'Resisting "Agribusiness Apocalypse": The Pleasures and Politics of Ethical Food', in Michelle Phillipov (ed.), *Media and Food Industries: The New Politics of Food* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 17.

<sup>64</sup> Phillipov, 'Resisting "Agribusiness Apocalypse"', 46.

re-orient her day-to-day life around the home as an act of social reform within an ethic that the personal choices and behaviours of how and why we structure our everyday life, becomes inherently political. While going back to the land also meant going ‘back to the kitchen’ as depicted in the 1960s and ’70s, for Morag it became a critical basis from which she could reassemble and re-establish pre-modern traditions vital for creating networks of trade and relationship missing from post-industrial societies. Supporting Schlosberg and Coles’ observations, though this ambition may seem minor, it signifies the gradual reconstitution of a number of ‘individuals, communities and practices of (agri)cultural production, fabrication, distribution and consumption’.<sup>65</sup>

Following her experience in India, Morag and her husband Evan moved to a rural ecovillage called Crystal Waters in the subtropics of Queensland in the early 1990s, where a large proportion of its 220 residents live self-sufficiently.<sup>66</sup> With a mind to the particular subtropical climate and the seasons, and with little previous experience, the couple hand built their home and set up systems to harvest rainwater, solar power and built a bountiful food garden as they grew their family. Unlike some negative connotations associated with previous generations who went to ‘drop out’, Morag’s move was very differently constructed. From the outset, Morag wanted to establish an ‘outward looking lifestyle’ that drew heavily on ‘organic social relationships’ that replicated the values and systems of economy of her suburban childhood, and later identified in the traditional village life of Ladakh.<sup>67</sup>

Veneration of so-called ‘organic lifeways’ is also problematic as it is a selective interpretation of what constitutes the ‘good life’. By removing singular activities like bread making from their political, economic and historical context, proponents can romanticise pre-modern societies while rejecting the notion that technology,

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65 Schlosberg and Coles, ‘The New Environmentalism of Everyday Life’, 177.

66 Though they vary greatly in their constitution, principles and practices, ecovillages are defined as communities that share a low impact way of life. See Karen Litfin, ‘Reinventing the Future: The Global Ecovillage Movement as a Holistic Knowledge Community’, in Gabriela Kütting and Ronnie Lipschutz (eds), *Environmental Governance: Power and Knowledge in a Local-Global World* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 124–42.

67 Morag Gamble, 27 June 2016.

modernity and the developed world contain the answers to eco-societal problems. While the concept of organic lifeways plays into the nostalgia pertinent to maintaining the rural idyll, the low-impact qualities of pre-industrial civilisations become divorced and elevated from the allegedly destructive political and economic systems of which they are a product. Critics of the selective appropriation of traditional societies have long pointed out the inconsistencies, pointing to the ubiquitous paradox of those who most benefit from urban-industrial capitalism as the first to believe they must escape its debilitating effects. Such powerful mythologising, as historian Alistair Thomson observes, means earlier activities become a ‘bright affirming memory ... [and] draw upon the language and meaning of the wider culture to create stories about our individual lives’.<sup>68</sup> While Morag did reflect on her selective appropriation of traditional culture, a certain ambivalence remains over who gets to access lifestyles of simplicity, and under what terms. As Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman observe, when the global becomes the universal logic of capitalism, identifying with the local becomes a point of resistance to this global logic, but such ‘reflexive’ localism often contains problematic social justice consequences.<sup>69</sup>

The politics of class, therefore, is central to a new economics of the home as the reconstitution of the domestic realm is selective, and it exposes a growing disconnect between those who can afford to make sustainable choices, and the traditional communities and cultures that inspire these positions. That class, race and social justice issues were seldom brought up during the interviews I conducted reflects a general silence in accounts of alternative lifestyles, whose proponents have long identified as having political and activist orientations stemming from a crisis within the middle class rather than across class.<sup>70</sup> As the economic chasm between the classes grows deeper, to opt in or out of the system – whether in regard to consumption,

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68 Alistair Thomson, ‘Moving Stories, Women’s Lives: Sharing Authority in Oral History’, *Oral History* 39, no. 2 (2011): 303.

69 Melanie DuPuis and David Goodman, ‘Should We Go “Home” to Eat? Toward a Reflexive Politics of Localism’, *Journal of Rural Studies* 21, no. 3 (2005): 359–71.

70 Patrick Williams and Erik Hannerz, ‘Articulating the “Counter” in Subculture Studies’, *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 (2014). Available at <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/912>. Accessed 12 April 2019; Tom Philpott, ‘The Racist Roots of Joel Salatin’s Agrarian Dream’, *Mother Jones* (blog), Available at <https://www.motherjones.com/food/2020/11/joel-salatin-chris-newman-farming-rotational-grazing-agriculture/>. Accessed 20 November 2020.

living situations, education or other lifestyle choices – can signal shared values on the exploitation of the natural world, but the ability to choose to work, or work from home, or reconstruct one's homelife can only be undertaken by a certain class that has the leisure, freedom, opportunities and education to do so.<sup>71</sup> This phenomenon is not restricted to Australia, as much of the literature on lifestyle amenity and sustainable materialism echoes this selective narrative of simplicity, organic lifestyles and return to traditional values in movements found across North America, England and Europe.<sup>72</sup>

The cycles of harvest, bread making and other traditional activities may have shaped Morag's version of what constitutes an organic life, but they also reveal more than an admiration of simple living as an anti-corporate rebellion. They also suggest a complex negotiation with modern feminism that looks to carve out a space for liberation within the back-to-the-land project. In moving beyond the self to the political, Morag participates in Valeria Padilla Carroll and Emily Matchar's idea of 'new domesticity' that sees simple living as a radical but positive counter to environmental and social injustice.<sup>73</sup> Although home-based self-sufficiency activities arise within a 'politically ambiguous nexus of compliance and resistance', both men and women are forced to reconceptualise and navigate the demands of paid and unpaid work through ethical, if not moral, frameworks.<sup>74</sup> Contributing to a wider de-growth movement that has called itself 'anti-patriarchal, anti-capitalist and de-colonial' as it seeks 'different gender relations and roles, [and] different distribution of paid and unpaid work', in many cases women have to work to navigate their personal and ideological values if they want to be able to bake their ethical bread and eat it too.<sup>75</sup>

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71 Alethea Scantlebury, 'Black Fellas and Rainbow Fellas: Convergence of Cultures at the Aquarius Arts and Lifestyle Festival, Nimbin, 1973', *M/C Journal* 17, no. 6 (2014). Available at <http://www.journal-media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/923/>. Accessed 12 August 2019.

72 Keith Halfacree, 'Back-to-the-land in the Twenty-First Century – Making Connections with Rurality', *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 98, no. 1 (2007): 3–8; Andrew Wilbur, 'Growing a Radical Ruralism: Back-to-the-land as Practice and Ideal', *Geography Compass* 7, no. 2 (2013): 149–60.

73 Carroll, 'The Radical Possibilities of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity', 51; Matchar, *Homeward Bound*, 3–21.

74 Douglas Sackman, 'Putting Gender on the Table: Food and the Family Life of Nature', in Virginia Scharff (ed.), *Seeing Nature Through Gender* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2003), 169–93.

75 D'Alisa, Demaria and Kallis, *Degrowth: A Vocabulary for a New Era*, 1.

Across ecofeminist scholarship, discussions of feminism and domesticity have largely been concerned with the transformation of women's activism beyond the private sphere, the role of women in the developing world as food providers, and the role of women as both homemakers and activists in broader campaigns, but not the changing nature of domesticity as a form of environmental stewardship that can respond to issues of growth and materialism.<sup>76</sup> Sherilyn MacGregor has pointed out that writing by ecofeminists has been almost completely written out of the evolution of environmentalism's engagement with new materialism, and that its 'key analytical insights into intersectional power relations and questions about the distributions of time, work and duty – who does what in the reproduction of daily life – are rarely addressed'.<sup>77</sup> In the testimonies of Jaki and Morag, there is a desire to conflate traditional boundaries of work and labour, duty and care, the home and the outside world through the daily practices of self-sufficiency, gardening, building and childcare, even if the yearnings are seldom articulated in a feminist or environmentalist (read anti-capitalist) framework. By breaking down the binaries of conservative/radical and private/public, we can see how new frameworks emerge such as 'radical home-making' (coined by writer Shannon Hayes), that reframes domesticity in an era that has benefited from feminism, 'where the choice to stay home is no longer equated with mind-numbing drudgery, economic insecurity, or relentless servitude'.<sup>78</sup> Beyond a 'housewifery' that is shaped around an empowered feminist choice, this conscious domesticity encourages people to live more lightly on the earth, decommodify food provisioning and care, and contribute to a less consumerist, more sustainable future in what Valerie Padilla Carroll has termed 'an altermodernity project'.<sup>79</sup>

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76 Carolyn Merchant, *Earthcare Women and the Environment* (New York: Imprint Routledge, 1996), 139–209; Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993); Nancy Unger, 'Women and Gender: Useful Categories of Analysis in Environmental History', in Andrew C. Isenberg (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 600–643.

77 Sherilyn MacGregor, 'Making Matter Great Again? Ecofeminism, New Materialism and the Everyday Turn in Environmental Politics', *Environmental Politics* 30, no. 1–2 (2020): 42.

78 Shannon Hayes, *Radical Homemakers: Reclaiming Domesticity from a Consumer Culture* (Richmondville, NY: Left to Write Press, 2010), ix.

79 Carroll, 'The Radical Possibilities of New (Feminist, Environmentalist) Domesticity', 52.



**Figure 3** Morag Gamble and daughter Maia in front of their home under construction at Crystal Waters (date unknown), cited at PacificEdge [blog], 'Liberation Permaculture: a response to Nicole Vosper and Graham Burnett', <https://pacific-edge.info/2015/08/liberation-permaculture-a-response-to-nicole-vosper-and-graham-burnett/>. Photograph courtesy of Russ Grayson.

While Morag admits her lifestyle is not without concessions and inconsistencies, the decision to centre her work and home around self-sufficiency as distinct from campaigning for forest protection is more than home economics. Bringing the discussion back to how home-based activism can reflect broader understandings of ecological justice and preservation, Morag sees her move as a conscious choice to interweave her work, the building and running of her home, and the education of her children into one project:

By using sustainable technologies and natural buildings and by diminishing our footprint, [we were] helping to protect forests, by growing more of your own food you were helping to prevent more forest clearing, by helping to replant areas you were improving habitat, by diminishing your energy consumption you were lessening your need for more power stations, and by using solar ... it was changing everything but still talking about the same thing.<sup>80</sup>

Seeing her basic lifestyle choices as a catalyst for broader change, Morag encourages her community, and an expanding online following, to establish a relationship and

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<sup>80</sup> Morag Gamble, 27 June 2016.

duty to place, codified through a regular program of courses and workshops focused on food sovereignty, seasonal harvesting and homemaking skills that she sees as vital to engendering stronger resilience, and promote a more local, self-sufficient network and system of exchange.<sup>81</sup>

Oral history has proven critical to tease out these complex ideas, while providing a space to explore and discuss the deeper values and sentiments that transcend specific relationships to place or landscape – an approach seldom embarked upon by environmental or social historians. In this article, oral history has helped explore how understandings of place and connection to the land do not always have to happen through large-scale events, protests or campaigns. Connecting through memory, place and belonging has been cultivated through daily physical labour on the land and is expressed through a nostalgia for old-style customs, traditions and practices based around an ethic of frugality. Participants in this project have viewed their desire to live more simply and self-sufficiently as one lived in close proximity to nature, which could only be experienced away from the cities and urban environments. To them, living in a holistic relationship with nature through growing food, tending the garden, having independent utilities, self-building and making deliberate consumer choices carries a high degree of integrity and a vision for positive global outcomes. Living from the land, and within community, may include a multitude of meanings for each individual but can also serve as a way of connecting people to places they inhabit.

Through the interview process, Morag and the other women involved in this limited sample, have been able to reflect on and critique their individual life decisions in the context of contemporary cultural norms rather than ‘positioning themselves as passive objects of patriarchal structures and ideologies’.<sup>82</sup> Although Morag was the youngest woman to provide a testimony, and began her journey through the more neoliberal 1990s, her views were shared by others of her generation who expressed similar ideas regarding subverting male and female roles, and sharing of domestic and childcare duties in a way they didn’t see possible in their previous urban life, or

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81 See the range of programs and courses offered at *Our Permaculture Life*. Available at <https://ourpermaculturelife.com/permaculture-courses/>. Accessed 5 June 2021.

82 Abrams, ‘Heroes of Their Own Life Stories’, 220.



felt supported to do so by their family or community. For Linda, Jaki and Morag, the search for meaning and their desire to join in the environmental movement, albeit from home, was tied to a sense of duty and responsibility for both the properties they moved to and, by extension, the immediate and larger environment.

As a form of 'stay at home' environmentalism, self-sufficiency thus occupies a space between domination and extraction, and challenges the Edenic visions of untouched wilderness as small farms become a worked landscape that works for the environment. Revealing more than a personal dialogue with the local landscape, it provides a model for wider conversations concerning sustainable agriculture choices and consumer pathways where individual stewardship and personal responsibility become the basis for broader environmental and economic reforms. Feminist discourses and the normalisation of gender equality have, in many ways, enabled these women to speak to their experiences living and working from home, and crafted their narratives of independency, autonomy and self-sufficiency from a traditional vision and construct of yeomanry. These women have fashioned a narrative of equality, empowerment and choice that has defined a critical aspect of their life and given a critical insight into 'what people do, why they do it, and how it functions as an expression of their most deeply held values and beliefs about what the world should be like, and how they want to live in it'.<sup>83</sup>

## CONCLUSION

From the late 1970s, going back to the land, for both men and women, took on wider social, political and environmental objectives as its adherents began to question humankind's relationship to nature and a small but growing number of urbanites began to engage their concern for environmental destruction through small-scale self-sufficiency projects that were responsive to the environment and landscape where they were located. These people looked to simple living and self-sufficiency as a tangible yet universal reference point for a more collective, interdependent and sustainable future, seeking out solutions far beyond a detached rural idyll or isolated, imagined utopia. They are often acting out latent versions of cultural dissent in an attempt to live a good

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83 Gould, *At Home in Nature*, 3.

life; and it is their questioning that leads to a broad challenge for a civilisation geared toward continued growth and productions, while it slowly and tentatively re-evaluates the importance of strong communities, physical and mental wellbeing, and a flourishing natural environment for a happy and prosperous life.

Through this practice, the women in this article have found they can transcend systematic disadvantage and subordination within the labour market, family and dominant culture; a return to domestic life enabled a freedom from systems of control and dominance within both the masculine and capitalist spheres. In their quest for simplicity and ‘organic lifeways’, these women have engaged both a process and a relationship to place that has involved re-creating and reframing the domestic as a form of environmental awareness and rejecting the feminist doctrine prominent from the 1960s that sought separation from the home as a means of empowerment and social engagement. In line with trends increasingly prevalent internationally, in lieu of returning to a space of constriction, the home has in many cases come to represent a site of liberation, as a site of resistance, where values and practices that defy the competitive or exploitative norms of the public sphere can germinate and be nurtured.<sup>84</sup> Nested within broader constructs of environmental limits, stewardship and home-based activism, back-to-the-land self-sufficiency provides a model for ordinary people to connect to simple activities that embody an everyday sustainable materialism enacted through the domestic sphere. Moving beyond the walls of the home, it has also led to a desire to restore local habitats and live simply and harmoniously in the landscape as a tangible response to broader social, economic and environmental concerns and a destructive societal vision of progress and development.

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84 Genevieve Bell and Paul Dourish, ‘Back to the Shed: Gendered Visions of Technology and Domesticity’, *Personal and Ubiquitous Computing* 11, no. 5 (2007): 373–81; Andrew Wilbur, ‘Back-to-the-House? Gender, Domesticity and (Dis)empowerment Among Back-to-the-Land Migrants in Northern Italy’, *Journal of Rural Studies* 35 (2014), 1–10.

# Developing a Sense of Place and Empathy Through an Oral History Project: An Exploratory Study at a Bhutanese College of Education

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The application of oral history as a technique for history education is well documented and steadily expanding. As a community-centred approach to place-based education, the use of oral history has demonstrated effectiveness for increasing student engagement, learning outcomes, and developing students' connections with their communities. Despite its promise as a historical education approach, oral history is still limited in its application within the Bhutanese educational context. Only recently introduced into the nation's secondary school curriculum, educators and students alike face challenges to implement and understand this authentic approach to critical

historical investigation. In this article, we explore how pre-service teachers were able to develop their sense of place, increase feelings of attachment to place and develop empathy for people and place by completing a structured oral history project in local communities throughout the country of Bhutan. Results taken from closed and open-ended surveys demonstrate how critical applications of oral history can serve as conduits for values-based learning outcomes. We anticipate this project will be a starting point for future exploration into the application and study of oral history as an educational approach within Bhutanese and Himalayan contexts.

## INTRODUCTION

The path of history education and the incorporation of oral history practice in the Bhutanese education system has been a process of constant re-evaluation. The nation's traditional educational systems were grounded in monastic practice where the focus was more on religious indoctrination and the philosophy of Buddhism. This early educational period laid a foundation for language, arts, literature and philosophy in Bhutan. Historically, the institution of monastic education began with the arrival of clergy statesman from Tibet and the establishment of the first monastic assemblage (Dratshang-Sangha) in 1621. Most of these monastic education institutions were imparted in the *dzongs* (fortresses) built in strategic locations. Today, while monastic education continues to play an important role, people now have the choice to study either in secular or religious schools. The modern education system was initiated by His Majesty King Ugyen Wangchuck in 1914. However, the planned modern education system in Bhutan began only in the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Since this period of modernisation, the subject of history has been included as one of the core disciplines in Bhutan's education system.

The subject of history is considered to be a pathway to consolidating the timeless values and traditions that built Bhutan.<sup>2</sup> However, while history is now given more

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1 For information about the history of Bhutan's education system, see Brian D. Denman and Singye Namgyel, 'Convergence of Monastic and Modern Education in Bhutan?', *International Review of Education*, 54 (2008): 1. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40270045>.

2 See Mathew J. Schuelka and Tom Maxwell (eds), 'Education in Bhutan: Culture, Schooling, and Gross National Happiness', *Education in the Asia Pacific Region: Issues, Concerns (continued over page)*

attention in the school education system, it is not without challenges in curriculum and implementation. In the recent revisions to Bhutan's national curriculum structure, topics such as historiography, oral and local history were included. These concepts are novel to most Bhutanese history teachers. The Samtse College of Education, as the main teacher preparation institute of the nation, now carries the responsibility to prepare educators to teach these added themes. To this end, students completing their Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) in history and English are now required to complete an oral history project to fulfil their four-year course requirements. This study is a direct outcome of this oral history project and reports on the methodological experiences of B.Ed students.

To date, no empirical studies on student perceptions towards the subject of history in Bhutan have been conducted. Despite this lack of formal research, our personal experience of teaching and learning history in public schools and our interactions with tertiary students have revealed that history as a discipline is looked upon without much enthusiasm. Just as Demircioğlu learned through studying students' attitudes at the Fatih Faculty of Education at Karadeniz Technical University in Turkey, students of Bhutan have often found history boring and uninteresting because of its abstract nature of teaching concepts and the emphasis on rote memorisation as a learning method.<sup>3</sup> Such an approach presents history as a stagnant discipline and misses the opportunity of incorporating lived experiences into educational practice. To improve on these limitations of traditional historical education, educators should foster connections between their schools and the people in the local area.<sup>4</sup> Incorporating the study of oral history can be one of the powerful practices to build such connections. This is corroborated by Demircioğlu, who found that oral history can help make history lessons more interesting, enjoyable and understandable.<sup>5</sup>

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*and Prospects* 32 (Singapore: Springer Nature, 2016). Available at Education-in-Bhutan-Culture-Schooling-and-Gross-National-Happiness.pdf.

3 Ebru Demircioğlu, 'Teacher Candidates' Attitudes to Using Oral History in History Education', *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 4, no. 6 (2016): 184.

4 John F. Lyons, 'Integrating the Family and the Community into the History Classroom: An Oral History Project in Joliet, Illinois', *The History Teacher* 40, no. 4 (2016): 481.

5 Demircioğlu, 'Teacher Candidates' Attitudes', 184.

Since the introduction of the modernised education system in the 1960s, Bhutan's approach to history education has progressed through a series of evolutionary stages. The curriculum was nationalised and instructions were introduced with a strong emphasis on Bhutanese-ness in the early 1980s. The New National Education Policies (NEP) were also drafted, redrafted and improved over the years. One of the outcomes of the NEP was the so-called *Bhutanisation* of the curriculum including history. NEP implementation was an attempt to shift away from an original reliance on Indian and colonial British curricular influences. Educating for Gross National Happiness (GNH) program was the next big initiative of the Ministry of Education which aimed to prepare learners to develop values, ethics, skills and practices to build harmonious wellbeing in the early twenty-first century. One of the milestones in the education journey is the drafting and publication of Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024 (BEP). BEP pointed out that there had been no major curriculum reviews of history and geography throughout the history of modern education in the country.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, educational stakeholders within the country acknowledged the need to reform the history and geography curriculum, resulting in a rewriting of the national standard textbooks for these subjects. Additional recommendations emphasised the need to incorporate elements of Bhutanese values of GNH with twenty-first-century skills and pedagogy within the social sciences. The National School Curriculum Conference (NSCC) in 2016 articulated that the curriculum is relevant to the current national and global contexts to enable learners to be creative, communicative, collaborative, innovative and enterprising critical thinkers.

One of the outcomes of the curriculum reformation was the inclusion of the oral history component in the history curriculum framework. Oral history was never taught in Bhutanese schools before the curriculum revisions of 2016. A primary reason for the inclusion of oral history was to inculcate historical consciousness in learners and activate experiential learning in a subject that is otherwise perceived as dead and boring.

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<sup>6</sup> Ministry of Education, *Bhutan Education Blueprint 2014–2024* (Thimphu, Bhutan: Ministry of Education, Royal Government of Bhutan, 2014).



Numerous researchers have demonstrated how oral history can support active and experiential learning in students as envisaged in the Bhutanese history curriculum.<sup>7</sup>

Oral history can make history more interesting and counteract the traditional limitations of student engagement. Oral history is also apt in inculcating many soft skills that are required in the twenty-first century such as critical thinking, creativity, communication and problem-solving. In addition, educational research has demonstrated that when students learn in active, learner-centred, community-focused classrooms they meet and often exceed curricular standards.<sup>8</sup> Oral history provides self-exploration of history and through the exploration of their personal histories, students are better positioned to connect themselves, their families, and their community to the larger issues and places that comprise the world.<sup>9</sup> In the words of Llewellyn, Ng-A-Fook and Truong-White, 'The emerging move toward oral history as a potential pedagogy for doing history is part of a broader shift in history education that focuses on the development of historical thinking skills (rather than the memorization of historical facts)'.<sup>10</sup> The participatory and dialogical aspects of oral history education include engaging with the lived experiences of others and creating openings for different affective relations (such as empathy, humility and compassion to advance reconciliation). In addition, the use of oral history in education can engage students in understanding historical events as they are connected to community members' lived experiences. Personal narratives of oral history education can help students discover their indigenous traditions and cultural identity and develop a deeper understanding of the 'other' in their schools and communities. From interviewing community elders and leaders to creating and reading identity masks, oral history can be a process of self-recognition, through which students come to learn the historical contributions of indigenous communities to the nation, and build connections with students from different backgrounds.<sup>11</sup>

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7 See Demircioğlu, 'Teacher Candidates' Attitudes', 185.

8 Barry A. Lanman and Laura M. Wendling (eds), *Preparing the next Generation of Oral Historians: An Anthology of Oral History Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).

9 Larry E. Hudson and Ellen Durrigan Santora, 'Oral History: An Inclusive Highway to the Past', *The History Teacher* 36, no. 2 (2003): 208.

10 Kristina Llewellyn, Ng-a-Fook Nicholas and Hoa Truong-White, 'Introduction: Telling Tales in Schools', *Oral History Education*, (Winter 2016): 97. Available at <https://www.academia.edu/21599421>.

11 Llewellyn, Nicholas and Truong-White, 'Telling Tales in Schools'.



**Figure 1** Bhutanese pilgrims on the sacred lake site, Tang Mebar Tsho. Photograph by Sangay Choden.

Oral history assists in the development of historical skills, content knowledge and understanding historical contexts.<sup>12</sup> A study in the United States found that when oral history is taught in schools, it contributes to students' increased comprehension of content, helps develop a positive attitude towards oral history, motivates students to study oral history further, and provides an enhanced educational experience.<sup>13</sup> Other benefits included providing students with the opportunity to ask questions they are interested in, and for human interaction, learning new historical content and research skills, supporting writing skills, valuing critical thinking skills and increasing students' personal connection to the past and the life of their community.<sup>14</sup> Oral history enables people to learn the perspectives of those who might not

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12 Karen Horn, 'Oral History in the Classroom: Clarifying the Context Through Historical Understanding', *Yesterday and Today* 11 (2014): 78.

13 Lorie Roy, 'Incorporating Oral History into the Curriculum', (*Literacy: Traditional, Cultural, Technological*, 23rd Annual International Association of School Librarianship, 17–22 July 1994, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania), 122. Available at <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED399957.pdf>.

14 Kathryn Walbert, 'Oral History in the Classroom', 10. Available at [http://www.aughty.org/pdf/oralhist\\_classroom.pdf](http://www.aughty.org/pdf/oralhist_classroom.pdf).

appear in the historical records. It has the potential to create new knowledge and challenge mainstream viewpoints.

Thus, the benefits of including oral history as an educational approach are far-reaching – spanning academic, social-emotional and community connection. Collectively, these outcomes point towards a rewarding academic experience that is far richer than the limitations of traditional history education. By basing a student's experience directly within their local communities, such an approach falls within the realm of place-based education (PBE).

### **PLACE MEANING DEVELOPMENT WITH ORAL HISTORY AS PLACE-BASED PEDAGOGY**

At its heart, PBE is an approach that connects learning to communities to increase student and teacher engagement, educational outcomes (academic and social-emotional) and community impact.<sup>15</sup> In the long-term, intentional applications of place-based approaches can lead to an increase in student agency, community connections and equity – in that *all* students see themselves as possessing the necessary skills and resources to be valuable members of a thriving community.<sup>16</sup> PBE leverages active learner-centred inquiry by using a student's community as their classroom. By situating learning in relevant local phenomena and people, the place-based approach then facilitates students to contextualise their learning with a broader global understanding.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, this type of community-engaged learning requires students to acquire and practise critical twenty-first-century skills such as collaboration, self and social awareness, problem-solving and innovation, as well as cultivating and activating social networks in their community.

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15 Gregory A. Smith, 'Place-Based Education', in Robert B. Stevenson, Michael Brody, Justin Dillon and Arjen E.J. Walls (eds), *International Handbook of Research on Environmental Education* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 213–20.

16 Tom Ark Vander, Emily Liebttag and Nate McClennen, *The Power of Place: Authentic Learning through Place-Based Education* (Alexandria, VA: ASCD, 2020), 5–6.

17 Gregory A. Smith and David Sobel, 'Place- and Community-Based Education: Definitions and Antecedents', in Gregory A. Smith and David Sobel (eds), *Place and Community Based Education in Schools* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 21.

While PBE has recently been popularised in the context of the Western educational spheres, its roots cannot be traced to a single theoretical tradition.<sup>18</sup> Antecedents of PBE span across diverse pedagogies and narratives such as indigenous traditions, progressive, environmental and rural education movements alongside critical pedagogy and its derivative philosophies.<sup>19</sup> By engaging in locally rooted and globally conscious learning opportunities, individuals can begin to build a holistic and multi-dimensional understanding of the places they inhabit, thereby fostering a sense of connection to their surroundings.<sup>20</sup> This idea of connection to place, or sense of place, resides at the foundation of place-based education.

A sense of place ‘encapsulates the relationship of humans to places’.<sup>21</sup> This concept serves as a connector between places and people; it connects personal interests, motivations and stories to a physical location, adding meaning to otherwise undefined space. A sense of place can be further understood by unpacking two separate but related concepts: the components of place meaning and place attachment. Continued investigation into place allows students to make interdisciplinary and symbolic meaning of their local contexts.<sup>22</sup> Many diverse forms of *place meaning* can be associated with the same place by different individuals and communities.<sup>23</sup> Alongside this cognitive growth, engagement with a particular place will often present opportunities for emotional growth. Through active exploration and opportunity for critical reflection, learners can deepen their emotional bond with a locality. These personal, emotional, affirmative bonds constitute an individual’s

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18 David A. Gruenewald, ‘The Best of Both Worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of Place’, *Educational Researcher* 32, no. 4 (2003): 3.

19 Charles Joseph Elfer, ‘Place-Based Education: A Review of Historical Precedents in Theory & Practice’ (PhD thesis, University of Georgia, 2011). Available at <http://rgdoi.net/10.13140/RG.2.2.34731.64800>.

20 Steven Semken and Elizabeth Brandt, ‘Implications of Sense of Place and Place-Based Education for Ecological Integrity and Cultural Sustainability in Contested Places’, in D. Tippins, M. Mueller, M. van Eijck and J. Adams (eds), *Cultural Studies and Environmentalism: The Confluence of Ecojustice, Place-Based (Science) Education, and Indigenous Knowledge Systems* (New York: Springer, 2010), 287–302.

21 Semken and Brandt, ‘Implications of Sense of Place’, 287.

22 Alex Kudryavtsev, Richard C. Stedman and Marianne E. Krasny, ‘Sense of Place in Environmental Education’, *Environmental Education Research* 18, no. 2 (April 2012): 229–50.

23 Nicole M. Ardoin, ‘Toward an Interdisciplinary Understanding of Place: Lessons for Environmental Education’, *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education* 11, no. 1 (2006): 115.

*place attachment*.<sup>24</sup> This concept of place attachment has been framed through the lens of two components, that of place identity (emotional attachment) and place dependence (functional attachment). When observed in tandem, such identity and dependence associations provide a holistic measure of an individual's attachment. A sense of place, therefore, can essentially be described as the combination of these two overarching phenomena: an individual's collective consciousness of specific place meanings and place attachments.<sup>25</sup>

Research has shown that a strong sense of place can foster positive attitudes and behaviours across a range of disciplines.<sup>26</sup> Recently described as 'an authentic, teachable, and assessable learning outcome for PBE', deepening a student's sense of place can lead to social and emotional growth, and fostering of dispositions towards stewardship of both natural and human communities. Oral history provides unique contributions towards the goals and traditional outcomes of place-based learning, particularly in developing a student's sense of place. The use of an oral history project to anchor an educational experience offers a direct opportunity for students to engage with their local communities as classrooms. In doing so, members of the local community become recognised as the 'sources of knowledge' as opposed to a textbook or even document analysis.<sup>27</sup> Via this approach, the 'live stories' that students engage with 'have lessons to teach that the printed page cannot'.<sup>28</sup> Educators and researchers engaging in place-based oral history projects have noted not only increased engagement and academic success following oral history projects but also instances where students can develop 'powerful personal testimonies of their experiences'.<sup>29</sup> Through the development of authentic relationships between people

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24 Lynne Manzo and P. Devine-Wright (eds), *Place Attachment: Advances in Theory, Methods, and Applications* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

25 Steven Semken and Carol Butler Freeman, 'Sense of Place in the Practice and Assessment of Place-Based Science Teaching', *Science Education* 92, no. 6 (November 2008): 1042–57.

26 Jerry J. Vaske and Katherine C. Kobrin, 'Place Attachment and Environmentally Responsible Behavior', *The Journal of Environmental Education* 32, no. 4 (January 2001): 16–21.

27 Amy B. Demarest, *Place-Based Curriculum Design: Exceeding Standards Through Local Investigations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 109.

28 Demarest, *Place-Based Curriculum Design*, 110.

29 Francisco Guajardo, 'Teacher, Researcher, and Agent for Community Change: A South Texas High School Experience', *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspective* 2, no. 1 (2007): 26–42.



and within communities, students are able to deepen their sense of place while likewise growing in their capacity for social and emotional development. Opportunities to engage with those of different lived experiences provide authentic scenarios for students to practise and develop empathy.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Keeping in view the need for teacher preparation in teaching oral history to secondary school students, an oral history project was introduced as part of the assessment in the Samtse College of Education at the Royal University of Bhutan. This project is a part of a methodological approach to teaching transferable skills; it not only taught skills to conduct oral history interviews but also to bring attitudinal change and to develop historical consciousness. As scholars such as Davey, De Welde and Foote have opined:

Oral history as a method provides opportunities to transfer skills and become active creators of historical documents and help students advance their historical consciousness. It further gives experience into first-hand account of the creation of historical knowledge and contests the fragmentary nature of primary sources. These intellectual developments offer meaning and resonance beyond the classroom.<sup>30</sup>

Our study sought to investigate how (if at all) a Bhutanese ‘sense of place’ could be developed through the use of oral history and how to teach and learn within local contexts. Concurrently, we wanted to understand how a place-based educational approach to oral history could help preserve, celebrate and promote Bhutan’s shared history and culture. To evaluate our success in achieving these ends, we gathered the perspectives of students who completed the oral history project as part of their Bachelor of Education in history and English. Students undertaking the module ‘Developing a Historical Perspective’ were required to complete a small oral history

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30 Frances Davey, Kris De Welde and Nicola Foote, ‘Oral History as Inspiring Pedagogy for Undergraduate Education’, *Oral History Education* (Winter 2016): 110–17. Available at <https://www.academia.edu/21599421>.

project. They were introduced to basic theoretical knowledge on the conduct of oral history and required to apply the theoretical knowledge in an authentic setting by conducting an inquiry study at a location of their choice.

Because this project was initiated at the onset of the 2020 COVID-19 Pandemic, students were stationed within their home communities across Bhutan and they participated in the course remotely due to college closure. Each student selected a local project site from within their community or the place they resided at during the period of online teaching and learning which had a topical focus and which enabled students to apply an applied oral history methodology.



**Figure 2** Gari village in the southern foothills of Samtse. Photograph by Alexander Sivitskis.

Students chose the topic depending on their interest. They were encouraged to explore diverse topics before selecting a final one. Students' choices were wide-ranging and included deities, temples, festivals and rituals. Because students come from all over Bhutan, it was not possible to do an oral history project that focused on one common community or locality. Most students chose to work within the



community with which they identified. This experiential learning allowed students to critically investigate their locality in a historical sense and generate new knowledge about the place, culture, religion and community.

Students collected information by conducting a range of local interviews and each student interviewed at least two people. These formal interviews were recorded digitally. However, students also had informal conversations with their kith and kin. Interviews and conversations took place in the respective respondents' homes and communities. The COVID-19 pandemic caused disruptions to normal life, and students maintained social distancing protocols. Schools and institutes were closed but, in the local communities, normal activities continued, and students were able to interview friends and relatives. Students sought respondents' consent to record, reproduce and interpret their information in accord with the ethical requirements of the college. Since students studied the people and place of their home community or the place where they were currently residing, their familiarity with people and place was an advantage with regards to ethical concerns. However, students were provided online lessons on ethical considerations in accord with academic protocols. It is worth pointing out that in Bhutan cultural differences are often openly discussed, acknowledged and celebrated. Further, Bhutan (unlike Australia) has not historically had governmental policies that focus on the erasure or domination of minority groups or cultures. Studying diverse cultures in Bhutan did not pose a risk to our students or their interviewees because they shared cultural experiences. The process of conducting oral history interviews built insider knowledge and understanding of their own culture and the culture of others.

Students interviewed a range of people – including parents, relatives, family friends and community members – who possessed in-depth knowledge of local community life and historic change. Interviews were recorded on mobile devices and later transcribed. The transcriptions were analysed and information was organised based on thematic requirements. The records were documented and maintained by individual students.

Each student prepared and submitted a draft project report and tutors provided feedback and comments to enhance the quality of their final report. Upon completion of this assignment, our team worked to assess how (if at all) these students' sense of place might have been influenced by their experience with oral history.

Sense of place in the assessment of PBE has been completed across a range of grade levels and disciplines. Quantitative measures usually include pre-post survey instruments assessing change in participant perception of place meaning and place attachment.<sup>31</sup> Qualitative methods offer more descriptive approaches to investigating the subjective and relational components of the sense of place, particularly for place meaning. For this reason, a mixed-methods approach featuring limited quantitative data and an emphasis on qualitative data was adopted.

Quantitative data was collected through two survey tools designed to measure students' place attachment and place meaning. Out of the 34 enrolled students, 18 students opted to participate in this study. Due to academic complications emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, it was only possible to administer these survey instruments *after* the students completed their oral history projects. Thus, this study adopted a one-group post-test-only design. This weak experimental design significantly limits the interpretation of survey data. While survey questions were structured to enable students to reflect holistically on their experience with the oral history project, this design cannot replicate a paired pre-test post-test approach. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, these quantitative results are a means to provide deeper context and comparability with qualitative data.

A place attachment instrument survey contained 11 items with a two-dimensional response option.<sup>32</sup> Six items measured place identity or emotional attachment to place, and five items measured place dependence, or an individual's attachment

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31 Steven Semken, Emily Geraghty Ward, Sadredin Moosavi and Pauline W.U. Chinn, 'Place-based Education in Geoscience: Theory, Research, Practice, and Assessment', *Journal of Geoscience Education* 65, no. 4 (2017): 542–562.

32 The survey we adopted is the same as that outlined in Daniel Williams and Jerry Vaske in 'The Measurement of Place Attachment: Validity and Generalizability of a Psychometric Approach', *Forest Science* 49, no. 6 (2003): 830–840.

associated with the perceived potential of a place to conduct an activity (in this case, to complete oral history research). Initial applications of this survey instrument recorded promising measures of both item validity and generalisability, making this survey instrument a prime candidate to be adapted for this study. While a potential criticism is that these statements could be viewed as loaded questions, the positive nature of place-attachment response options improved the trustworthiness of potential responses. Survey participants ranked their agreement with each place identity and place dependence statement after reflecting on their project experience. Results from this survey are presented with simple descriptive statistics to summarise the overall class perceptions of respondents.

Place meaning was quantitatively measured through the adaptation of a survey instrument initially developed in Australia.<sup>33</sup> This instrument aims to measure the relative change in place meaning following place-based educational experiences. To complete the survey, respondents reflect on a series of place descriptors (adjectives or anecdotal conditions that people may regularly use to describe a place). To accommodate for limitations in post-test-only survey structure and administration, we requested respondents to simply identify the place descriptors that they thought best described their project sites both before and after completion of their oral history projects. Limitations in this reflective nature of data collection inhibit the direct attribution of descriptive causation towards the oral history project as its own. Nonetheless, we analysed the cumulative results from this survey to learn how descriptors reported as either cumulative increased, remained the same, or decreased via student responses after completion of their project.

Qualitative data was collected through 10 open-ended survey response items administered to participants separately from the quantitative data survey collection. As the ongoing COVID-19 situation prohibited in-person contact, participants were contacted to complete these questionnaires via telephone conversations with the option to respond independently through online submission. This qualitative data would have been

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33 See Martin Young, 'The Social Construction of Tourist Places', *Australian Geographer* 30, no. 3 (1999): 373–89, as cited in Semken and Freeman, 'Sense of Place', 1049.

collected face to face if not for the COVID-19 pandemic. Potential misinterpretations of interview questions and students' responses influence the data. As such, careful consideration was given to the questions to ensure clarity of ideas and responses as needed.

Five items were used to measure perceptions on students' place attachment to their project sites following their oral history work; of these, two items measured place dependence and three measured a perceived change in place identity. A subsequent four questions regarding place meaning and perceived change in place meaning were asked. A final question concerned student perceptions regarding the use of oral history within the educational approach. All responses were subjected to coding (with special attention documenting causal relationships) and subsequent thematic analysis. Results from these quantitative and qualitative surveys are presented below.

#### **DEEPENING A SENSE OF PLACE THROUGH ORAL HISTORY**

Student responses to both the quantitative and open-ended qualitative survey items indicate that their experience with the oral history project expanded their sense of place in relation to their project sites. Overall, students reported that their participation in oral history led to the generation of new knowledge spanning multiple thematic lines of investigation including religious, cultural and community historical knowledge. This new knowledge manifests itself in expressions of expanded place meaning and a deepened attachment to place. In particular, students frequently mentioned that their work led to an increased 'sense of belonging' in relation to their project sites. This thematic 'belonging' closely aligns with the dimension of 'place identity' and is supported by the limited quantitative data.

Responses to all survey questions reflect that the students gained new knowledge through this oral history project and that they view this new knowledge as meaningful and important. In the religious and cultural dimension, students vividly expressed their deep understanding of religious personalities, deities, rituals and festivals located at their project sites. The opportunity to build their knowledge helped students strengthen connections with the communities in which they completed their research. Importantly, investigations into these religious understandings provided a pathway for students to

consider the close relationship of nature, occult practices and belief systems that lie intertwined within the heart of Bhutanese culture.



**Figure 3** Sacred temple at the base of a cliff in Bumthang. Photograph by Tenzin.

Responding to an open-ended survey question, Devi, one of the students who is in her early twenties, shared an experience of studying a sacred tract of the jungle near her home. Devi hails from a mountainous district in the south-east of Bhutan and resides close to major drainage that originates in the nation's high alpine headwaters and flows southbound into the Indo-Gangetic plains. Located on the boundary between this swift-flowing mountain stream and a thick subtropical broadleaf forest, Devi described that her study site is believed to be the residence of an important and powerful local deity. Through interviews with village elders, Devi was able to parse together the sophisticated relationship shared between the local people and this sacred place. She



describes this phenomenon as the ‘worship of *San sari Mata*’ [local deity] practised for timely and enough rainfall throughout the year’. Devi detailed how this act of worship is completed both for the best yield at the end of the agricultural growing season and ‘for peoples’ protection’. In later reflections, she described how, through her experience of conducting oral history interviews, she uncovered the ‘untold tales and even traditions and practices of the local community’. This experience resulted in a deepening of her local place knowledge. Such interactions with the local community enabled Devi to ‘make connections with many things that [she] had heard and seen around’. The opportunity to expand her knowledge of the meaning of previously known traditions led this student towards a deeper connection to her homeland. Devi consciously recognised this relationship in a concluding remark which stated that ‘the oral history process is not only about talking and listening but ... connect[ing] us to the society we are living [in]’. Through her critical investigation of the reciprocal relationship between human and nature in her home community, Devi deepened her sense of place. Similar sentiments were shared by many student participants when reflecting on their oral history experience.

Quantitative data collected via a closed-ended survey may provide additional context to these reflections on place meaning. Table 1 presents the results of the survey used to investigate the change in students’ perceptions of place meaning in relation to their work with local oral history projects. The three columns of the table share a list of common place descriptors (adjectives or anecdotal conditions that people may regularly use to describe a place). Each column represents a different category of student responses concerning their perceptions of these place descriptors. The leftmost column, ‘Descriptors with a reported increase’, shares a list of descriptors that students indicate they would now use to describe their study place as a result of their oral history work. In contrast, the column on the far right, ‘Descriptors with reported decrease’, shares a list of descriptors that respondents would initially have used to describe their place, but would no longer use following their oral history work. The middle column, ‘Descriptors without reported change’, outlines descriptors that respondents indicate neither increased nor decreased. When reviewed collectively, these responses may help to place student reflections on place meaning into further context.



DESCRIPTORS WITH REPORTED INCREASE	DESCRIPTORS WITHOUT REPORTED CHANGE	DESCRIPTORS WITH REPORTED DECREASE
educational	beautiful	remote
important to preserve	threatened	fragile
historical	tranquil	authentic
comfortable	exotic	crowded
unique		adventurous
culturally important		underdeveloped
interesting		ancient
spiritual		tropical
important for Bhutanese culture		dangerous
fun		overdeveloped
a privilege to visit		
pristine		
scenic		
unusual		
relaxing		
historically valuable		

**Table 1** Place meaning descriptors used for student survey. Items in the left column depict responses that increased following the oral history project. Values in the right column show responses that decreased following the oral history project, while values in the middle column show no change.

The left column of Table 1, ‘Descriptors with reported increase’, may shed the most light on how student perceptions of place meaning evolved as a result of their oral history work. The individual descriptors within this column indicate that students developed a diversity of new meanings associated with the places studied. The selection of words such as ‘educational’, ‘historically valuable’ and ‘culturally important’ to describe the study locations point towards a deeper and more critical understanding of local place meaning. As the participants in this project were working towards a degree in education, it is understandable that such meaning would emerge from their experiences. However, the inclusion of other descriptors in this category demonstrates that change in place meaning extended beyond simple educational context. Words such as ‘comfortable’ and ‘relaxing’ indicate that a psychological shift may have occurred for some individuals. Furthermore, while ‘spiritual’ certainly relates to the religious focus of many student projects, the breadth of this place meaning descriptor may well expand beyond the traditional spiritual and religious realms and relate to non-secular spirituality. Of important significance for local educators is the respondents’ selection of phrases including ‘important for Bhutanese

culture’ and ‘a privilege to visit’. Such indicators thematically align with the fundamental principles of educating for GNH, where the preservation and promotion of culture serve as a grounding pillar to the nation’s development philosophy (see section ‘Cultivating values’ for further discussion). Though these results are limited in their reliability as they are administered solely as a retrospective post-test, student perceptions on place meaning appear to be supported by responses to the open-ended questioning strategies.

Further examination of the qualitative data reveals variation in how students perceived changes to their concept of place meaning following their oral history investigations. In some cases, place meaning dramatically expanded. Reflecting on a project that investigated local knowledge regarding a sacred lake, Langamo, a female student in her early twenties, described how her ‘understanding was changed because thinking [of my study site] as a mere lake would have caused me to not know its importance’. Langamo completed her project in Bumthang Dzongkhag, a district in central Bhutan situated amongst four wide glacially carved valleys. Bumthang is both nationally and internationally recognised as a region of importance in Bhutan, and it is home to a multitude of significant religious and cultural sites. High altitude lakes, like the one Langamo chose to investigate, are often regarded as spiritually important and serve as a central component within intricate local folklore and tradition. In her responses to the open-ended questions, Langamo reveals how her investigations led her to uncover some of the narrative richness and local understanding that typically surrounds these sacred lakes.

In contrast to Langamo’s experience, other respondents describe a more nuanced perception of changes in place meaning. Kanchi is a student also in her early twenties, and her experience involving ethnic identity added a new lens to her investigation. Kanchi focused her project on her local village in the south of Bhutan. Reflecting on her project site, Kanchi shared how this small village nestled into the southern Himalayan foothills was surrounded by coconut and *doma* trees (Areca palm, *Areca spp.*). Her primary objective was to interview the dominant ethnic group of the village which hails from the Chhetri people, a local ethnic caste. Importantly, Kanchi identifies with a different ethnic caste, that of the Gurungs. When asked about how

she would describe her project site, she reported that her ‘description of my project site didn’t change at all due to my work on my oral history because it was [the] same as what I mentioned [before] as well as after’. However, while her description might not have changed, Kanchi later stated that she gained new knowledge through the application of the ‘technique and strategy to conduct oral history’. As such, it appears that Kanchi perceives her new knowledge as separate from how she might describe her study area.

Though some students’ descriptions regarding their project sites may have changed little in regards to their oral history work, the new knowledge that they generated led to a deeper sense of meaning. This divergence between ‘description’ and ‘understanding’ could potentially indicate how Bhutanese students believe that they have a common and surficial knowledge regarding the core concepts and stories around their localities, and they recognise this level of understanding can be deepened with detail gained through oral history practice. Regardless of the change in the description, students recognised how a deepening of place meaning increased perceived attachment to the places where they completed their oral history investigation. Students’ increase in place attachment is supported by their responses to both quantitative and qualitative measures.

Table 2 shows the average responses to the closed-ended survey questions regarding the two components of place attachment – place identity and place dependence. Students were asked to respond to each item along a five-point Likert scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The students were asked to contextualise their responses in relation to how they felt about their project site after completing their investigation. The cumulative average of all items, reported with a score of 4.02, appears to indicate that students have a moderately high sense of place attachment following their oral history project. Consideration of the items along the themes of place identity and place dependence provides even further context to this result. On average, students reported that the dimension of ‘place identity’ (that is, how students identify and relate) to their study site was higher than their perception of ‘place dependence’ (how important their study site is for the practice of oral history). This finding is well articulated in response to the open-ended survey questions.

PLACE ATTACHMENT QUESTION	AVERAGE RESPONSE (FROM 0 TO 5)	STANDARD DEVIATION
1. I feel my project site is a part of me.	4.36	0.564
2. The site of my project is the best place for oral history.	4.17	0.850
3. My project site is very special to me.	4.17	0.850
4. No other place can compare with my project site.	3.58	0.091
5. I identify strongly with my project site.	4.17	0.746
6. I get more satisfaction out of visiting my project site than any other place.	3.75	1.051
7. I am very attached to my project site.	3.80	0.865
8. Doing oral history at my project site is more important to me than doing it in any other place.	3.88	1.130
9. Studying oral history at my project site says a lot about who I am.	4.17	0.799
10. My project site means a lot to me.	4.04	0.889
11. I would enjoy doing oral history at a similar site just as much as I do at my project site.	4.17	0.799
Cumulative average	4.02	0.860

**Table 2** Average and standard deviation for responses to place attachment questions. Odd number questions reflect place identity, even number questions reflect place dependence.

An increase in place identity, as spurred on by the expansion or deepening of place meaning, appeared to be the driving force of developing local connection for the students. These findings are directly supported by the wide array of experiences shared by students in the open-ended survey. An example of this phenomenon was well articulated by the student Tawmo. Tawmo, also in her twenties, comes from a close-knit rural community in the Pema Gatshel Dzongkhag (district) of eastern Bhutan. Many people in Bhutan remark that the members of Tawmo's locality share a particularly strong sense of community vitality. This relationship is evident through a variety of social, cultural, economic and spiritual welfare activities that occur regularly. However, a general perception within the community is that the younger generations are becoming increasingly disconnected from community life. Time spent in modern educational institutions and more frequent visits to towns and semi-urban places are recognised as exposing the younger generations to a (rapidly developing) economic and materialistic society, and are considered primary drivers of disassociation with their

local community. These trends are reflected across Bhutan where accelerated modernisation of the country and an increased Anglo-European influence is contributing to a perceived decline in community vitality. Tawmo mentions that doing a project on her community opened up her enduring connection to the community to which she belonged: ‘I feel connected to my community because it gives me a sense of belongingness ... The person I am right now is all because of the community I belong to’.



**Figure 4** A typical village in central Bhutan. Photograph by Alexander Sivitskis.

This sense of belonging relates directly to how Bhutanese students define their cultural, personal and familial origins. The intricate relationship speaks to a larger and more complex understanding. As one student shared, they came to know their project site as ‘the place where I belong ultimately showing my identity as an individual’. Equally important is how some students stated that their new understanding led to a deepened connection to the place from which they originate.

This phenomenon was well described by a student named Sumjay. Sumjay’s project was completed in his home village within the dzongkhag (district) of Trashiyangtse,

a region known for its handicrafts and believed to be one of the original locations of agricultural cultivation in Bhutan. Recently, Trashiyangtse has experienced atypical periods of decreased rainfall, resulting in a noticeable decline in vegetable production. Stable precipitation is undoubtedly important to the communities of Trashiyangtse, both now and in the past. Accordingly, Sumjay focused his investigation on a local ritual that is performed for rainfall and protection within their village. Reflecting on his experience of gathering oral histories concerning this ritual, Sumjay shared this concluding insight: ‘I belong to that community but I have failed to know and understand what it holds and why it is so important to me’.

There is ample evidence of an increased sense of place in all student reflections on this oral history experience. However, while this building of a sense of place is a noteworthy outcome, perhaps even more profound are the subsequent changes in personal belief and action that developing a sense of place may lead to. In the following section, we share evidence from student responses that point towards a new understanding which transcends mere historical knowledge and demonstrates how students consciously and intuitively developed lifelong values.

### **CULTIVATING VALUES – DEEPER IMPACTS OF ORAL HISTORY EDUCATION**

In addition to developing knowledge, skills and dispositions, history lessons can help develop lifelong values like empathy. The Educating for Gross National Happiness (EdGNH) initiative intends to build values in learners to cultivate the idea of collective happiness in general. Empathy can be defined as ‘one’s ability to put oneself in another person’s place even if the other is a stranger to him or even if he thinks differently than himself’.<sup>34</sup> Although empathy as a value is not explicitly decreed within the EdGNH guiding documents, it is often intuitively recognised and sought after for integration in all lessons across the curriculum. However, empathy is an elusive concept and can mean different things to teachers, examiners and pupils.<sup>35</sup>

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34 Elisabeth D. Lazarakou, ‘Empathy as a Tool for Historical Understanding: An Evaluative Approach of the Ancient Greek Primary History Curriculum’, *International Journal of Social Education* 23, no. 1 (2008): 27–50.

35 Ann Low-Beer, ‘Empathy and History’, *Teaching History*, no. 55 (April 1989): 8.



Although history education can build empathetic capacity in students, the outcome of empathy is often not explicitly included in the curriculum among the skills which are to be taught in the history class.<sup>36</sup> Recent research by Lazarakou indicates that ‘the cognitive and affective aspects of historical empathy may be realized in history classrooms through the use of primary sources, group work, discussions, and additional research’.<sup>37</sup> Our research indicates that student engagement in oral history projects also assists in the development of empathy.

As shared in the previous section, Kanchi’s story revolved around her investigation into a local village populated by an ethnic group different from her own. Kanchi’s description of her project site didn’t change as a result of her oral history work, however, her understanding and connection to the site increased. Kanchi provided the following elaboration:

While working on my project site I came to know [people from the Chettri caste] more through their culture, language, life, and style and many more where I could understand and feel them in deeper level resulting to a strong bond.

When asked how her connection to her project site may have changed as a result of this oral history work, Kanchi stated:

After my oral history to my project site, I could feel more connected and feel like one of them [i.e. people from a different ethnic caste]. Through listening to and discussing their community, it created a familial relationship among us.

Kanchi explicitly went beyond describing historical content to expressing an authentic sense of empathy and connection to a community different from her own. Another student, Khawjay, who investigated the people and culture of a small community in south-western Bhutan had a similar experience.

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<sup>36</sup> Lazarakou, ‘Empathy as a Tool’.

<sup>37</sup> Lazarakou, ‘Empathy as a Tool’.

Khawjay completed his project in an ethnically diverse community located in Samtse Dzongkhag. This region in south-western Bhutan is diversely populated with a mixture of communities claiming both indigenous and/or longstanding traditional origins alongside other recent migratory populations of varying ethnic backgrounds. Recent resettlement patterns have substantially increased this community diversity. While the diversity is generally acknowledged, many residents of Samtse often claim to lack a holistic comprehension of the scale and expanse of the evolving cultural integration. Khawjay's experience indicates that his oral history work not only expanded his understanding of this local complexity but also helped forge an empathetic relationship with people and place. Khawjay focused on learning more about the Subba people, another ethnic caste. While Khawjay does not identify with the Subba caste, his investigation into their unique 'language, dresses, culture, festivals and traditions' resulted in him feeling 'very much connected to the history project site'. Reflecting on the personal impact this oral history project had for him, Khawjay stated:

During this project, I got lots of information on culture and tradition. I also got information on the living standard of the people living in that particular place. I feel very much connected to my project site community. While doing this project I could interact with many people which gave me feelings of brotherhood. After this project, I felt that we all are connected having the same culture. My level of connection changed due to my work on oral history because while working on my project site I came to know many people through their culture [and] their living standard, as a result I could understand them better and deeper.

Unprompted, students such as Kanchi and Khawjay expressed a deeper level of empathy that critical historical education attempts to attain. According to Lazarakou, students identify themselves with historical persons and observe history through the eyes of those who lived it.<sup>38</sup> Students also 'understand the thoughts and motives of historical persons, realize their circumstances, appreciate their impediments

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38 Lazarakou, 'Empathy as a Tool', 28.

and assess the consequences of their actions’.<sup>39</sup> These sentiments are supported by Petersen and Edmunson-Morton, who found that conducting oral history classes ‘built students’ historical empathy and stimulated their curiosity about the past, and raised their appreciation for historical sources and historical actors’.<sup>40</sup> These findings are applicable within a Bhutanese context; our student responses demonstrate that undertaking an oral history project, particularly in diverse communities, helped develop students’ sense of place in relation to their home, while subsequently fostering the development of empathy. Such learning, we contend, embodies what many Bhutanese educators strive towards when they aim to educate for Gross National Happiness.

### ATTITUDES ON ORAL HISTORY EDUCATION

Oral history needs to be emphasised in the Bhutanese history education system due to the emerging need to preserve historical knowledge to mitigate the potential loss of profound wisdom and information. As a result of their experience, our students perceived the grave danger of losing historical knowledge. Many respondents reflected that doing an oral history project has connected them to people in the community and may help preserve information, develop a sense of belonging, and preserve culture and tradition. This sense of belonging and attitudes towards preserving culture aligns with one of the pillars of Gross National Happiness which is the preservation and promotion of culture and tradition. As a student named Chungkila, who comes from a mountainous region of south-central Bhutan, put it,

Oral history education is interesting where we can hear different stories and know how important it is to know our community tales. I feel it is important to preserve oral history in writing form for a coming generation

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39 Lazarakou, ‘Empathy as a Tool’, 28.

40 Chris Petersen and Tiah Edmunson-Morton, ‘Fostering Historical Empathy in Unusual Times: A Case Study of the Course “OSU, Women and Oral History: An Exploration of 150 Years”’, *Society of American Archivists*, Case Studies on Teaching with Primary Sources (2018): 1–25. Available at [TWPSCase\\_3\\_Fostering\\_Historical\\_Empathy.pdf](#).

because narration changes every generation and information gets substrate and adding new thoughts of their own.

Another participant Sumjay (introduced previously), from far-east Bhutan, also shared a similar thought:

Oral history is very important. It is like a wholesome education that every citizen of the country must know about their past, present and preserve for the future. If [we fail] to recognize the importance, it is already on the verge of extinction and my speculation says it won't last much [longer].

These responses demonstrate how oral history education can thus augment the preservation and promotion of historical Bhutanese consciousness.

Further, students undertaking the project identified oral history as a precise pedagogy in imparting local historical knowledge and a powerful teaching tool. This understanding is significant for trainee teachers because, if transferred to future practice, it would have an immense impact on their teaching in real classroom settings which requires attention to differentiated learning. The relevance and effectiveness of oral history as a pedagogical approach is evident in student reflections. For example, one respondent, Langamo, reflected 'I find oral history education an interesting aspect of covering a wide range of information just through verbal words. Hearing the oral histories has a different essence of enjoying the content'.

Students' responses indicate that the oral history project increased their engagement with the course beyond traditional methods. The change in attitudes and their increased levels of commitment towards cultural preservation were a result of their immersion and in-depth knowledge gained through their projects. As Sonam, who was based near a small community in Chukha Dzongkhag adjacent to the national highway, said: 'I feel belonging but after the project, I felt dedicated and committed to the community because now I know more than before'. An increase in his disposition towards civic engagement followed Sonam's critical interaction with his home community. Sentiments like these were common among student responses and were a primary reason students gave for the desirability of oral history education being emphasised in

school and university curricula. Importantly, students likewise recognised that more engagement in oral history is required to prevent the permanent loss of important generational knowledge. Pedagogically, this project has demonstrated how student work with authentic oral history can have a lasting impact on local Bhutanese communities by preserving stories and knowledge about a place for future generations. A central philosophy that permeates the Bhutanese approach to educating Gross National Happiness is that the preparation for ‘right livelihood’ is inherently tied with strengthening community vitality. Through applications of place-based oral history, it appears that students within this project took one step closer to this goal.

## CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that oral history as a place-based pedagogy successfully supported Bhutanese students in their historical investigations of local places. Responses to survey items indicate that students gained a multidimensional and critical understanding of their project sites. These responses also demonstrated that students deepened their sense of place by expanding their concepts of place meaning and strengthening emotional connection through place attachment. The development of a sense of place and an increase in historical knowledge are mutually supportive learning outcomes. Expressions of empathy evident in student responses demonstrate that this approach resulted in values-based learning. Further, these oral history projects provided an opportunity for students to develop historical skills that would cascade into the classrooms of these future teacher participants. These results indicate that oral history projects can help actualise the Bhutanese GNH principles for wellbeing and happiness. Due to limitations in the survey conditions for this study caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for deeper research in contextualising GNH through classroom lessons via oral history and other academic activities.

# Memory in Threatened Places: Oral History and the Fiction of Lee Smith

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SCOTT HICKS

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This essay explores the capacity of memory and oral history to memorialise places threatened by environmental devastation and alteration. Juxtaposing US author Lee Smith's oral history *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* (2000) and novels *Oral History* (1983), *Family Linen* (1985) and *Saving Grace* (1995), the essay reveals the complexities of memory- and meaning-making in the face of the relocation and reconstruction of a town threatened by perennial and devastating flooding. Interrogating the role of place in stimulating and sustaining collective memory, the essay argues that oral history and fiction illuminate each other; the opportunity to memorialise place shapes the narratives they tell and problematises the future spaces they imagine. The essay demonstrates how Smith's oral historiography and fiction remembers a threatened landscape and compels readers of both sorts of texts to rethink the relationship of memory and place. Oral history illustrates the communal and social value of the process of telling stories about places that were, while stories and novels permit the writer to shed further light on cultural, social and geographical spaces and help make sense of the places that will be and the human communities who inhabit them.



## INTRODUCTION

This article explores the relationships between oral history and place through the example of a coalmining community in the Appalachian Mountains of the United States, where worsening flooding of the town's civic and commercial centre by the river that bisected it threatened the town's survival. While a cyclical occurrence, such flooding has been worsening due to erosion exacerbated by the devastation of surrounding mountainsides by coalmining and human development in the river's floodplain and, in recent decades, intensified precipitation events, likely aggravated by climate change. In the face of such repeated environmental catastrophe, federal and state governments collaborated to relocate the town centre and rechannel the river. In this transition, community members turned to oral history to document residents' memories of the existing community and place. This decision offers the opportunity to explore the capacity of oral history to attend to the ways in which people remember and narrate their relationships to environments, in particular under the stress of disaster and restoration. To that end, this essay explores the following questions. Why might environmental catastrophe, re-engineering, and alteration spur the production and consumption of oral history? As the practice and product of oral history depend on place, what can neuroscience and psychology tell us about the efficacy of memory to remember places – in particular, those places no longer habitable or differently inhabited? Given the complexities and challenges of remembering places, even and despite engaging in and disseminating oral history, how might literature fill the gap?

As a scholar of literary studies, I consider these questions by bringing into conversation oral history and literature as a means of assessing further how place and memory interact, collide and unfold. I will analyse the collaboratively produced *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* alongside Lee Smith's prolific fiction set in the US Appalachian Mountains.<sup>1</sup> The oral history project *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* served the purposes of engaging a community in oral historiography, midwifing a transition to a new environment and preserving a community's

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1 Lee Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench: An Oral History of Grundy, Virginia* (Chapel Hill, NC: Tryon Publishing Company Inc., 2000).

memory. By comparison, Smith's novels surface repressed voices and stories, memorialise and re-memorialise the places that define their Appalachian settings, and, ultimately, offer an imagination of place and environment that grapples with ongoing change and transformation. Smith's work – in the realms of oral history as well as fiction, for which she is more commonly celebrated – offers a unique opportunity for considering the profound emplacement of human beings. Through an analysis of these varied sources, this article examines human attachment to places, an attachment that is sometimes so profound that separation from them lays us low with homesickness. In so doing, it raises questions of the sufficiency of relocation or recreation to quell the solastalgia – or distress caused by environmental change – that is set to increase as our planet continues to suffer the effects of anthropogenic climate change.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 1** Aerial view of flooding on the Levisa Fork River in Grundy, Virginia, in 1984. Photograph courtesy of US Army Corps of Engineers. Available at [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grundy\\_Virginia\\_flood\\_1984.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Grundy_Virginia_flood_1984.jpg).

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, see <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/18027145/>.

**'WE'RE BUILDING A NEW TOWN'**

In the once vibrant US coalmining town of Grundy, Virginia, people calibrated personal memories against the almost clockwork regularity of the flooding of the Levisa Fork River, a 'natural disaster' that happened about every 20 years. Since 1929, the Levisa Fork has inundated the town nine times, with the worst floods in 1957 and 1977. The 1977 flood, for example, killed three people and caused US\$15 million in damage. Residents lived in fear of continued and devastating flooding: 'This is the 20th year', a resident told *The Washington Post* in 1997. 'If we don't have one this year, doesn't mean we won't have one next year. If it's as bad as '77, Grundy will be gone'.<sup>3</sup> Residents today, however, can frame their individual remembrance in terms of the completion of one of the United States' most intricate flood control projects, in which the town's commercial district was razed, the steep mountain 'benched', and the river rechannelled.<sup>4</sup> The town's fateful future thus occasioned, in the mid-1990s, a confrontation with their collective memory of the place in advance of the space that would be. Part of this reckoning took the form of a collaboration between US author and Grundy expatriate Lee Smith, Grundy High School teacher Debbie Raines and 28 of her students, and Buchanan County Public Library librarian Pat Hatfield.

*Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* consists of interviews of 40 Grundy residents, selected due to their residing in the part of town soon to be relocated. In pairs assigned by Raines, 28 high school students conducted the interviews from 1998 to 2000,

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3 Ellen Nakashima, 'In Grundy, VA., a Debate Ebbs and Flows; Some Residents Want to Move Flood-Prone Town to Higher Ground; Others Are Wary, and Funding Is Uncertain', *The Washington Post*, 6 May 1997, B1.

4 Beginning in 1998 (the same year Raines' students began interviewing Grundy residents), the US Army Corps of Engineers and the Virginia Department of Transportation flattened the top of a nearby mountain on which it constructed a 'new' Grundy (anchored by a Walmart atop a two-storey parking garage, surrounded by a Verizon, Taco Bell and gas station, among a handful of other retailers), using the earth displaced from the mountaintop to construct an eight-foot levee along the river and to raise some surrounding land, concluding with the construction of a federally mandated four-lane highway atop the levee. Bridges across the Levisa Fork connect the 'new' Grundy atop the flattened mountainside to the former downtown, where the Buchanan County Courthouse and some prominent churches remain. According to Francis X. Clines in *The New York Times* (2001), 'The Army Corps of Engineers ... says that in 65 years of flood control projects, this is the first time something so elaborate has been attempted by carving fresh space to save a town in such a tight turn of steep mountains and narrow hollows'. Upon completion, in 2008, the project cost more than \$250 million dollars – 'about \$250,000 for every man, woman, and child in Grundy,' Debra McCown noted in *The Bristol Herald-Courier* in 2008 as construction concluded.





**Figure 2** A view of Grundy, circa 2005. Photograph courtesy of US Army Corps of Engineers. Available at <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Grundy2005.jpg>.

typically in interviewees' homes. In an appendix, Smith and Raines provide a sample letter for interviewers, tips for conducting the interview (such as becoming knowledgeable about the interviewee, practising the questions they will ask, practising how to use the tape recorder, and notetaking), instructions on transcribing the interviews (such as 'writ[ing] down their actual words', ignoring grammatical errors or incomplete sentences, and cutting repeated phrases or irrelevant digressions), and a sample release form. Raines and Smith instruct student interviewers to compose 30 to 40 questions to ask their interviewees, providing sample questions such as name, birthplace and date, parents' names and occupations, number of siblings, amusements, school and work history, hobbies and interests, and perceptions of childhood, with additional questions 'related specifically to our subjects' lives and experiences in Grundy over the years'. After further editing, the interviews appear in the book in a consistent form: the interviewee's name, then an epigraph taken from the interview, a brief preface introducing the interviewee and the setting in which the interview took place, followed by interviewers' questions and the interviewee's responses.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 248, 250.

The majority of interviewees were male, a majority of interviewers and interviewees were white, and the majority of the collection's images feature the built environment. Tables 1 and 2 describe the gender and racial or ethnic demographics of participants, and Table 3 suggests the extent to which the oral history's imagery focuses on built environments (such as streets and buildings) and people instead of natural places.<sup>6</sup>

	MEN	WOMEN
Interviewees	24	16
Interviewers	7	21

**Table 1** Gender

	WHITE	NON-WHITE OR INDETERMINATE
Interviewees	38	2
Interviewers	26	2

**Table 2** Race

SUBJECT MATTER OF THE IMAGE	NUMBER
The image's primary subject is the built environment.	70
The image's primary subject is people.	41
The image's primary subject is nature, without indication of the presence of people.	1
The image's primary subject is unclear.	6

**Table 3** Images

The 'unusual plan' of terraforming and relocation that motivated the oral historiography and its publication had both supporters and detractors. The former said the plan would save Grundy and give people a reason to live there: 'The trick all along has been how to do this without killing the town you're trying to save', Grundy town manager Chuck Crabtree said. 'This is survival. We have to make it happen'. Opponents, however, held that the project was too risky; the town, they said, would not

<sup>6</sup> Whereas the collection's racial demographics reflect those of Buchanan County, Virginia, the county in which Grundy is located, its gender demographics do not, as Buchanan County is approximately evenly split, with 51 per cent of residents men and 49 per cent women (US Census Bureau, QuickFacts: Buchanan County, Virginia [n.d.]. Available at <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/buchanan-countyvirginia/IPE120219>. Accessed 3 June 2021). The collection's privileging of the built environment also is striking and suggests its impetus to record for posterity environments set for demolition.

be able to depend on the state legislature to fund the project years down the road, and they doubted that people would fill the new homes and offices promised to be built. Michael (Mickey) McGlothlin, a member of a prominent coalmining family, lamented the project's impact on the community's landscape: 'This project will leave this place looking like a rock quarry', he said. 'God did a fine job making this valley. The part of Grundy that doesn't look so good is because of man's work'.<sup>7</sup>

As these sentiments suggest, people on both sides saw the project as a critical juncture in the town's collective memory as well as sense of place. Smith's work in spurring *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* offers a compromise between the two positions: it creates a means of preserving the community's memory at the same time that it attempts to forge a new collective memory, in the form of a stronger kinship with each other in an altered place. As Smith illustrates, both projects – flood control as well as oral history – reiterate that memory and place are intransient:

'The only thing you can count on in this world', my granddaddy used to say, 'is death and taxes'. But that couldn't be true, I felt, looking around at the rugged contours of the place where I was born. This was my geography. It *would* be like this forever. Now it looks like my granddaddy was right after all. For Grundy is about to change, and change so dramatically that it will never again be the town we have all known, the town where we grew up and went to school and came to pay our taxes, where we got a marriage license or bought our son a bike for Christmas. That town will be gone forever. The only thing left of it will be our memories.<sup>8</sup>

The oral histories that Smith's remembrance prefaces emerge from the compulsion she and others felt to save for posterity the landscape that created them. Whether those memories of the places they encoded can persevere in the face of wholesale

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7 Francis X. Clines, 'Past Floods Push Town to Stake Its Future on Higher Ground', *The New York Times*, 7 August 2001; Louis Jacobson, 'Flood-Prone Appalachian Town to Move Mountain, Then Downtown', *Planning* 68, no. 4 (2002): 30.

8 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 17.



reconstruction of the human-built environment and the ecosystems in which it existed remains another question entirely.

## ORAL HISTORY AND THE MEMORY OF PLACE

In large measure, the practice and product of oral history hinge on place: interviewers often ask participants to recall where they grew up, where they went to school, where they worked and where they worshiped, the very questions Smith and Raines instruct their interviewers to ask. They ask their interviewees to talk specifically about those places, from home and school to work and church, and then to generalise outwards: to recall and reconstruct the phenomena and contexts occasioned and instantiated by and within those places. In their list of sample questions, Smith and Raines suggest asking questions such as, ‘Where did you go to school’, followed by, ‘What was it like going to school there?’ Like most other oral history projects, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* instructs interviewers to ‘always ask *very* specific questions. For instance: “Where did you live when you were real little? Describe the house ... Did you go to church? Where?”’ Oral history work accedes that place holds special significance in the brain, a rank that makes it easier to recall and retrieve than other memories, such as those of events, dates or customs. Much to its credit, oral history embraces the social and relational context of memory of place:

From the moment we enter the world, we are engaged in spatial cognition, in interacting with the world around us and in constructing mental representations of that world and our own place in it. Yet we do not conceive of the world as a geometer might, as space with three extrinsic orthogonal coordinates that specify the locations of points, objects, or regions. Rather, we adopt different frames of reference and incorporate different elements in constructing mental spaces for the real spaces important in our lives.<sup>9</sup>

In seeming contrast to the way that the brain in fact processes memories of place, oral history work, by emphasising the recollection and retrieval of place, aims in

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9 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 247; Barbara Tversky, ‘Remembering Spaces’, in Endel Tulving and Fergus I.M. Craik (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Memory* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2000), 363.

large part for the quantifiable and measurable, as if the ostensible facticity and infallibility of memory of place – of rooms, hallways, layouts, facades, etc. – stands beyond reproach and somehow will make ‘true’ or ‘real’ that which the interviewer seeks and which the interviewee offers.

Place – threatened by natural disaster on the one side and radical human-engineered relocation on the other – becomes the thread that sews together *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*. As Smith and Raines explain, ‘Our aim is to create an oral history of the town of Grundy before it is forever changed by relocation’; for Smith, such a record of ‘recollections’ will provide ‘something concrete to pin [her] memories onto’. For scholars who consider how a transformed planet can or will be remembered, however, this project’s success depends on the accuracy, precision, attention and nuance with which its speakers can recall and articulate the place that is Grundy, even as we grant that the accuracy of memories of place is not central to all research on oral history and place. Sometimes, inaccurate memories can more clearly illuminate subjective attachments to or perceptions of place – a verity Smith likewise imagines, stating, ‘These oral histories give us a sense of who we have been, and who we are ... perhaps they may help us imagine who we might become’, just as she asserts the potential of the project not just to preserve but celebrate the community’s ‘rich culture’.<sup>10</sup>

The connection between place and memory and any correlation between ease of recall and retrieval and place remains a subject of exploration for psychologists and neuroscientists, with significant implications for the practice of oral history in an era of environmental alteration due to climate change. For this essay, psychological and neuroscientific accounts of the ability of the brain to recall accurate memories of place is crucial, as *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* aims to record an accurate memory of Grundy as a place prior to its relocation. As multiple studies demonstrate, the materiality of place seems to enhance human beings’ capacity to retrieve memories of certain locations and environments: ‘Places serve as landmarks, important in memory for space. And it appears that memory for places has special qualities not shared by memory for other, even other visual, stimuli ... Although remembering

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10 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 246, 27, 18.

of locations of places may not be completely effortless or perfect, it is certainly relatively easy'. Moreover, much research points to a neurological basis for the brain's supposed facility in retrieving memory of place: 'The special status of places is reinforced by evidence implicating a region of the parahippocampal cortex dedicated to recognition of them'.<sup>11</sup>

These explanations might seem to point to wholly uncontextualised reasons for remembering place – that is, something about the placeness of a place makes it easier to remember, insofar as 'the operations that encode the frequencies, spatial locations, and time of events' are 'automatic processes' for which 'there appear to be no comparable data concerning disruptions in the processing of frequency, spatial location, or temporal order information'.<sup>12</sup> Yet many people seem to be able to recall 'place' more readily insofar as it functions as a space of constant and consistent social interaction. For example, in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, many interviewees recall the town's Ben Franklin Five and Dime store. Roberta Ratliff, the store's accountant and bookkeeper, seems to remember the store's precise layout: 'every Christmas ... we would re-lay the whole store, because we would have to, say, take all the men's hosiery and underwear up and put it over against the wall where the fabrics were in order to lay out the Christmas decorations'. But more than the actual layout of the store, Ratliff's remembering emphasises the people who inhabit the place and the spaces with which they are associated:

Ellen Clevinger, who had the baby goods counter, and also she worked with a lot of fabrics ... Della Turner, and she had the hosiery counter ... there was Myrtle Rife, who had glassware, Goldie Matney had hosiery, and Mildred Cook was our candy girl. And Clovis – Clovis was not there when I first started working because he was in the army, but he came back. Then after me, Ruby Sweeton came along. Ruby was into everything. Her main interest was toiletry counters, health and beauty aids.<sup>13</sup>

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11 Tversky, 'Remembering Spaces', 365.

12 Lynn Hasher and Rose T. Zacks, 'Automatic and Effortful Processes in Memory', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 108, no. 3 (1979): 360.

13 Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 57, 55.

As the store's primary financial authority, who would have overseen pay cheques for dozens of employees over her career at the store, Ratliff would have no excuse for failing to remember the names of the store's employees. But it is significant that her recollection of the store as a place depends largely on her recollection of the individuals who peopled the store, using their roles and duties – and the spaces in the store allocated to those duties – as a sort of mnemonic device for the spatial arrangement of the store.

Much research on such connections between memory and place focuses on individuals' ability to recall sets of cues in locations other than the ones in which they received them. An early experiment to probe possible links between memory and spatial context entailed the testing of memory retention in skin divers. Researchers gave one set of divers a list of words while they were in the water and another set of divers a list of words while they were on land. The divers then were asked to recall the words, either on land or in the water. Those who were asked to recall the words where they had been told them (whether on land or underwater) were more likely to be able to remember all of them: 'Recall is better if the environment of original learning is reinstated'. Referring to subsequent studies that demonstrated 'striking specificity of matching encoding and retrieval contexts', Norman E. Spear and David C. Riccio asserted 'two principal effects of context on memory':

(1) if the context in which the memory must be retrieved differs from that in which the memory was acquired, it is likely that accuracy of retention will be impaired; and (2) if the context of both memory retrieval and memory acquisition are the same and also quite distinctive, retention might be more accurate than if these contexts were the same but fairly common.<sup>14</sup>

These generalities vacillate between place as specific and unique as opposed to general and categorical – that is, 'Beverly Hills High School' versus 'high school'.

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14 D.R. Godden and A.D. Baddeley, 'Context-dependent Memory in Two Natural Environments: On Land and Underwater', *British Journal of Psychology* 66, no. 3 (1975): 330. Accessed 15 November 2020, Business Source Ultimate (5699298); Norman E. Spear and David C. Riccio, *Memory: Phenomena and Principles* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1994), 55.

A provocative counterfactual might ask of Smith, Raines and the Grundy residents interviewed in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*: If this oral history project were completed after the destruction of the town and subsequent rebuilding, how might individuals' memories of specific places differ? Would, for instance, one's recollection of the Five and Dime – the store Smith's father owned, and where Smith, Ratliff and others worked and shopped – be refracted (nostalgically or otherwise) by the construction of its replacement (a Walmart) in the 'new' Grundy? The potential responses to these queries complicate the work of oral history on a changing planet. The slippage between actual, original spaces and spaces reconstructed (or rendered uninhabitable by climate change), both in memory and in fact, produces a palpable unease in the project of transcribing and transmitting memory, for the interviewee, interviewer and audience alike.

Subsequent experiments have both corroborated and failed to replicate correlation between the environment in which memory is encoded and the environment in which memory is retrieved. In a meta-analysis of incidental environmental context-dependent memory in humans, Steven M. Smith and Edward Vela assert that 'in spite of some failed attempts to find environmental context-dependent memory effects, it is clear ... that ... the effects are reliably found'. They state:

Memories of experiences may vary in how much they are affected by environmental surroundings, both when events are originally experienced and when events are remembered. In some cases, learning and remembering appear to be greatly affected by background environments, and in other circumstances, incidental surroundings influence learning and remembering much less.

Attentive to 'local versus global contexts', in which 'local contexts surround only the to-be-learned stimulus and can change quickly, [and] global contexts include a wider range of the surrounding environment, often contain[ing] contextual clues in multiple modalities and change very slowly', Michel Juhani Wälti, Daniel Graham Woolley and Nicole Wenderoth confirm that 'the process of memorizing information in everyday situations represents an overlap of coherent events, where context is usually closely related to the information and consists of a variety of sensory,

cognitive and emotional features’ – so much so that contemporary innovations in virtual reality are not sufficient to eliciting context-dependent memory.<sup>15</sup>

In replicating as well as failing to replicate environmental context-dependent memory, such findings nonetheless suggest the validity of memories of place evoked through oral history, as Henry L. Roediger III and Melissa J. Guynn imply in their assessment of the research:

Many researchers use only very short retention intervals between study and test of material, whereas the most compelling examples from our lives occur when the retention interval is very great (when we return to a place from which we have been absent for years). In addition, the type of materials, conditions of learning, and many other factors differ between the naturally occurring cases and the laboratory experiments.<sup>16</sup>

The significance of a certain place – the place where one was educated or worked, for example, or the place where one proposed to one’s spouse – compel an individual’s initial and ongoing attention, just as a longer interval between being in a place and the instance of its remembrance might strengthen the memory of the setting thanks to the individual’s special effort to encode and re-encode it, as a means of assuring that it is never lost. Such might be the case in recollections garnered by oral historians: idealised or otherwise, memories of significant places might remain as accurate and fulsome as if they had just been made. Indeed, participants in a project like *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* – where the importance of securing a fixed memory of a place becomes especially urgent – must be diligent and painstaking in re-creating the places of the past, in order to preserve those environs in perpetuity.

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15 Steven M. Smith and Edward Vela, ‘Environmental Context-Dependent Memory: A Review and Meta-analysis’, *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review* 8, no. 2 (2002): 215, 203; Michel Juhani Wälti, Daniel Graham Woolley and Nicole Wenderoth, ‘Reinstating Verbal Memories with Virtual Contexts: Myth of Reality?’ *PLOS ONE* 14, no. 3 (2019): 2, 17. Available at <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0214540>. Accessed 15 November 2020.

16 Henry L. Roediger III and Melissa J. Guynn, ‘Accessing Information in Long-Term Memory,’ in Elizabeth Ligon Bjork and Robert A. Bjork (eds), *Memory* (San Diego: Academic Press Inc., 1996), 211.



The artefacts they produce – the volume that contains the interviews – thus become an aid to memory, fodder for the (re)imagination of the (old) Grundy. As psychologists Mary M. Smyth et al. state, ‘It is not necessary for the physical context to be reinstated if the subjects can imagine it’.<sup>17</sup> The implication, then, is that the people of Grundy or we readers of *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* do not in actuality ‘need’ the ‘original’ Grundy so long as we have the oral history. In a literary critic’s paradise, as it were, we have the text, and it reigns supreme in the construction and articulation of meaning and memory. (Like the author, the setting too is dead!) But the liability then becomes the gaps or silences – or, perhaps, in a remembrance of a place destroyed or yet to be destroyed, the mistaken resonances or hyperarticulations – inherent in any text, especially in a text that strives toward ‘fact’ and ‘objective remembrance’. *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, for example, elides the presences and contributions of racial, ethnic and sexual minorities. While it presents the remembrances of a range of people from a wide range of socioeconomic classes, it fails to acknowledge or report class conflicts, socioeconomic inequalities and socioeconomic stratification. Finally, it does not represent women on an equal footing with men. Such omission and expungement have the effect of privileging certain places: the text mentions what goes on in the radio station, insurance office, or newspaper bureau – not what goes on in homes, blue-collar workplaces and other settings of the disempowered.

Moreover, such elisions have real consequences for the creation, perpetuation and management of memory. In psychological terms, the creation of memory is continuous, reverberatory and self-fulfilling: ‘In effect a new entry is made when an old memory is recalled since the system will make a new record of the use to which the memory is put’. In other words, the telling of a memory makes a new memory; the retelling or re-remembering of that re-memory makes yet another memory, *ad infinitum*:

Retrieving something from memory increases the likelihood that it will be remembered again in the future. The act of retrieval is itself a processing

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<sup>17</sup> Mary M. Smyth, Alan F. Collins, Peter E. Morris and Philip Levy, *Cognition in Action*, 2nd ed. (Hove, England: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994), 268.

event and the result will be to alter the ease with which the item can be recalled again ... After a memory has been activated it is likely that the amount of input necessary to reactivate the memory in the future is lowered. In the future less specific information will be required before the memory is made available.<sup>18</sup>

The act of articulating memories for an oral history project reinforces the strength and stability of those memories; reading or hearing of those memories again, after the publication of the oral history project, reinforces the memory of the memory – thus solidifying the vigour of the secondary memory, perhaps at the expense of the first. The consequences of elided memory are grave: not only do the memories contained in an oral history project perpetuate the elision; the process of memory-gathering and memory-managing, as exemplified by the oral historians, archivists, publishers, and others, instantiates (and re-instantiates) such exclusion.

Enter the work of fiction. In many ways, fiction functions in much the same way as an oral history project like *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* in memorialising a certain place. Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, for example, inks the Mississippi River permanently onto the US consciousness, whereas William Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha County stands in for the rural, backward US South in many people's minds.<sup>19</sup> Smyth's literary output does the same for the Appalachian Mountains: since *Black Mountain Breakdown*, she has returned to her roots in the Blue Ridge and Great Smokies. Her perspicacious and meticulous attention to the ridges and hollers (a word for 'hollows', or small valleys, in regional US dialect) that set the stage for her life brings the region as much to life in a reader's mind as any oral history project, even *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*. Their narrative structure – alternating between individuals' stories and histories – grant each character a space in which to speak, enacting fictionally precisely the aims of oral history and collective memory

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<sup>18</sup> Smyth et al., 270–1.

<sup>19</sup> Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* depicts the adventures of a teenaged Huckleberry ("Huck") Finn and Jim, an enslaved person, who travel the Mississippi River in search of freedom from "civilization" and slavery, respectively; Faulkner's Nobel Prize-winning fiction traces the transition of the US South from a plantation-based slave society to a mercantile economy ensconced in a context of racial apartheid.

work: the social and communal quality of personal, psychological experience and reality. Moreover, her attention to place allocates critical attention to women: in her fiction, Smith privileges space that privileges women. In this way, therefore, Smith's fictional corpus offers us a frame through which to examine oral history. Moreover, her fiction provides a lens into the intersections of place, memory and modernity – especially what counts as modernity in the Anthropocene. Through her focus on the alteration and reinscription of place and environment in *Oral History* (1983), *Family Linen* (1985) and *Saving Grace* (1995), Smith explores how changes in place provoke and redirect changes in memory, both personal and collective.<sup>20</sup> Fiction, especially Smith's, plays a critical role in the formation, articulation and reconceptualisation of collective memory rooted in place. For the purposes of this essay, Smith's work makes good on Karen E. Till's admonition that memory studies scholars 'have much to gain by paying attention to works by artists ... and activists who also acknowledge the way that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds' and 'involve themselves with artistic and activist place-based memory practice'. Thus I join Till in a 'memory studies agenda that remains sensitive to the ways individuals and groups understand their pasts and possible futures through the relationships they and others have with place' – with the added burden that Grundy, its memorialisation in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, and the Appalachians as the setting of Smith's most acclaimed fiction serve as an exemplary locus for what climate change might look like for millions of people who inhabit re-engineered places or are displaced forever from places that no longer exist.<sup>21</sup>

#### PLACE AND MEMORY IN LITERATURE: LEE SMITH'S *ORAL HISTORY*, *FAMILY LINEN* AND *SAVING GRACE*

As *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* and Smith's novels *Oral History*, *Family Linen* and *Saving Grace* show, memory is yoked to place. Place – the physical structures and locations accessed through sight, movement and touch, stored in the mind as

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20 Lee Smith, *Family Linen* (New York: Putnam, 1985), *Oral History* (New York: Putnam, 1983) and *Saving Grace* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995).

21 Karen E. Till, 'Artistic and Activist Memory-work: Approaching Place-Based Practice', *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 101.

the settings in, on and through which formative life experiences occur – provides a foundation, a touchstone, for memory. Place provides a setting for the social interaction that creates and sustains memory; it makes memory ‘collective’ in that it makes social and relational memory and its encoding, the process by which a mental representation is formed in memory. It signifies certain aspects of memory and history, and thus it becomes and serves as a medium on which memory is debated and contested. Fiction and oral history are compatible, symbiotic and mutually inclusive: both perform as documents of collective memory, with one exposing or completing the gaps of the other and vice versa. The challenge to memorialise place that these disparate texts confront shapes the narratives they tell and problematises the future spaces they imagine.



**Figure 3** Author Lee Smith [n.d].  
Available at <https://www.lee-smith.com/images/lee20202.jpg>.

Smith is a leading figure in US literature, in particular US Southern literature. She is the author of 17 novels and collections of short stories, contributor to or editor of three works concerned with the Appalachian Mountains and experiences of women, and a memoirist. Compared to Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor and Eudora Welty, Smith is recognised for her generous and empathetic rendering of Appalachian culture, refusal to stereotype, and investment in the full (even if messy) humanity of her characters. This essay focuses on three novels of Smith's for their interweaving of memory and place. *Oral History* tells the story of the Cantrell family of western Virginia through various characters' perspectives as captured by a college student completing an oral history assignment. *Family Linen*, also set in western Virginia, narrates the unravelling of a buried family secret after repressed memories are surfaced during hypnosis. Finally, *Saving Grace*, set in the North Carolina and Tennessee mountains, focuses on a woman who escapes her fundamentalist family and strikes out on her own, without ever freeing herself from the pull of memory and the past. In this essay, I focus on the intersection of memory and place at the core of each novel. Indeed, in the relocation of the Dutys' store in *Saving Grace*, the

construction of the theme park Ghostland in *Oral History*, and the construction of a swimming pool in *Family Linen*, the civil engineering that relocates the town of Grundy has, in Smith's fiction, imagined antecedents.

Each instance hinges on the role of memory before and after the alteration of physical space. *Saving Grace* positions a Food Lion grocery store as a bastard interloper. Florida Grace Shepherd, the novel's protagonist, wanders, is lost, and in the end is found – but with the significant change that the home that she remembers is no longer literally, physically there. Where her father's church, annual revival and neighbours' store were originally located is now a modern supermarket. *Oral History* concludes with the devastation of a mountain valley for the construction of an amusement park. The novel, which fixates on recording and archiving (in writing) the folkways, dialects, stories and sociologies of a region, ends with the decimation via commercialisation of the very ground on which those epistemologies are founded and rooted. Similarly, the construction of a swimming pool in *Family Linen* simultaneously constructs yet destroys 'memory': the characters must accept a memory they would rather forget, the memory of their father by their mother. Like *Oral History*, *Family Linen* operates by illustrating the ways individuals must come to terms with collective histories, memories and genealogies.

More than any other character in the novels discussed here, Florida Grace Shepherd epitomises the uneasy, unsettling confrontation with memory. The novel – a sort of bildungsroman that traces Grace's life from youth through two marriages and divorces – ingests and interiorises the constant commerce with memory of place:

But I was still not prepared for the sight that met my eyes when I came around the bend. There sat a huge Food Lion supermarket, right where the Dutys' grocery used to be. An enormous paved parking lot full of cars completely covered the place where we'd held the Homecoming, the place where I'd had my vision, the place where Daddy's church had stood.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Lee Smith, *Saving Grace*, 254.

Much like the interviewees in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, Grace yokes memory to place: the site of the new, modern grocery is the same site as crucial moments in her history and memory. On grounds now paved over, Grace once had prophesied that the church would suffer; a serpent subsequently bit Ruth Duty. Grace perceives the parking lot as paving over, covering and hiding that which she remembered; thus she risks losing memories, as they are buried and hidden. Moreover, the erasure of the Dutys' community grocery symbolises the erasure of community: rather than creating and sustaining memory in tales and stories told, retold and reformatted around the counter in a small-town market, there now exists only a big-box, impersonal supermarket. Belief in the divine has been replaced by belief in mammon: the cars metonymise the people who now shop instead of worship and speak in tongues. Big box retail, that is, has supplanted the church.

For Grace, the alteration to memory – and the need to make new memory – is too much for simple faith.

I couldn't believe it. I pulled into a parking space to get a better look. Clearly this was a brand-new Food Lion, very modern, with drive-thru pick-up and everything. It was open and doing great business. People streamed out of the automatic doors, their carts piled high with paper Food Lion bags. Kids ran all around. Violet arc lights shone over the parking lot where – four spaces over – a long-haired teenage boy and a girl were back up against a truck, kissing like crazy. Their legs were pressed tight together. I sat there in my car for almost fifteen minutes and watched the crowd without seeing a soul I knew. I couldn't take it all in.<sup>23</sup>

That Grace cannot believe change symbolises the disjunction between memory and rationality, for she must begin to re-remember her past and reconcile it with the reconstructed space in which she now sits. She pulls into the parking lot 'to get a better look': for it to become lodged in her memory, she must commit it to visual memory. It becomes too much: she cannot 'take it all in', because the change is too

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23 Smith, *Saving Grace*, 254.



great. In many ways, the unresolved ending of the novel points to the failure of memory to survive radical environmental and geographical relocation. Grace does not fit in this world anymore; her memories cannot sustain and surmount the radical alteration of her surroundings. The novel's irresolution mirrors this disjunction and ostracism: the novel has no definitive ending, gesturing only toward Grace's rejection of the world she thought she knew and to which she returned, in favour of some as yet unstated and undefined place.

*Oral History* epitomises yet problematises the very practice its title interpellates. The story of a college student who takes a tape recorder deep into the mountains of southwest Virginia in order to record her family's stories for a class requirement, the novel uses the construct of oral history to trace the various relations of the Cantrells over several generations. Smith reconstructs the topographical and temporal spaces of the novel to give voice to strong women characters; in Dorothy Combs Hill's words, she 'create[s] an altered world that unleashes the female imagination from its bonds, psychic and societal, and out of those fertile waters arise the red and the golden goddesses'.<sup>24</sup> But the novel's epilogue seems to undermine those very spaces, as Almarine Wade (named after the charismatic patriarch of the family) destroys the mountains to build

Ghostland, the wildly successful theme park and recreation area (camp-ground, motel, Olympic-sized pool, waterslide, and gift shop) in Hoot Owl Holler. Ghostland, designed by a Nashville architect, will be the prettiest theme park east of Opryland itself, its rides and amusements terraced up and down the steep holler, its skylift zooming up and down from the burial ground where the cafeteria is. And the old homeplace still stands, smack in the middle of Ghostland, untouched. Vines grow up through the porch where the rocking chair sits, and the south wall of the house has fallen in. It's surrounded by a chain link fence, fronted by the observation deck with redwood benches which fill up every summer night with those who have paid the extra \$4.50 to be here, to sit in this cool misty hush while the

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<sup>24</sup> Dorothy Combs Hill, *Lee Smith* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 80.

shadows lengthen from the three mountains – Hoot Owl, Snowman, and Hurricane – while the night settles in, to be here when the dark comes and the wind and the laughter start, to see it with their own eyes when that rocking chair starts rocking and rocks like crazy the whole night long.<sup>25</sup>

While a natural phenomenon spurs the destruction of the ‘old’ Grundy in *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, mercenary concerns effect the destruction of the mountains in *Oral History*. Ghostland seems to conflate Opryland – the (now defunct, replaced by an outlet mall) country-music-based theme park in Nashville – and Dollywood, the highly successful (and still expanding) amusement park in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, owned and operated by Dolly Parton. Ghostland tramples on the very structures hallowed and sanctified by the novel: the burial ground, home and front porch. It turns those signifiers of heritage into moneymaking ventures, charging an extra \$4.50 a person to see and hear the ghosts that inhabit the old homeplace. But subverting this undermining of the old and sacred is the suggestion that nature is reclaiming what humankind has usurped – where the south wall of the old house has collapsed, vines are beginning to recuperate the space.

Thus Ghostland represents the commercialisation and commodification of memory: Al’s enterprise succeeds because it offers its paying visitors a chance to relive the past. Much as Dollywood reels in visitors because of its ‘authentic’ yet domesticated mountain culture, Ghostland packages the past into a product with mass appeal. Indeed, it reflects the effect of oral history itself: it allows the dilettante to imbibe another time and place without dirtying their hands or clothes, simultaneously replicating yet creating memory. The memory it replicates is a stereotype of ‘mountain’ culture; the memory it creates is the shadow in the Platonic cave.

In *Family Linen*, the discovery of a body during the construction of a swimming pool functions as both a confirmation and complication of memory. It confirms memory in that the discovery of Jewell Rife’s body proves Sybill Hess correct. She is undergoing hypnosis because of a repressed memory in which she saw the mutilation of Jewell’s

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25 Lee Smith, *Oral History*, 285–6 (original in italics).

body, and she believes that her mother is the murderer. But the body's discovery complicates the accuracy and precision of memory in that it is not her mother, but her mother's sister, who has killed him. Nonetheless, the physical evidence of the body – hidden in the earth and revealed only in its alteration – serves as a decoy to the operation of memory. Moreover, the physical presence of the pool functions as a perpetual site of memory and the instability of meaning. Though the close of the novel attempts to reconcile the swimming pool to the people whose memories it refracts and unites, baptising them in its water – 'Tomorrow nobody will remember exactly who was the first one in the pool, but soon it's full of churning bodies, pale flashing flesh beneath the water'<sup>26</sup> – the pool remains an unsettling space, a space that hopes to purify a family's collective memory while keeping them from fully coming to terms with it.

Like *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, these novels formulate a response to radical change. To be sure, that response is anything but 'easy' or 'simple' – rather, memory is contested, constructed and reconstructed. In *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, for example, interviewees debate the wisdom of the massive relocation plan, while in her novels Smith constructs and reconstructs a memory that makes space for strong women and women's lives. Perhaps more so than *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* – an oral history of a tiny mountain hamlet, published by a small North Carolina press to limited release – Smith's novels disseminate Appalachian culture, folkways and memory, informing the collective memory of those both inside and outside the Appalachians. First, Smith's stature as a renowned writer allows her the legitimacy and the authority to transform an oral history project focused on an ordinary, geographically isolated community into an extraordinary record of a compelling place. Second, Smith's efforts corroborate the validity of works of fiction as legitimate artefacts in creating a culture's larger collective memory of its significant places. Reading oral history and collective memory in tandem with fiction (and vice versa) is a rich, rewarding experience, as one informs the other in illuminating and thought-provoking ways.

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26 Lee Smith, *Family Linen*, 272.

## CONCLUSION

Each of these novels aims to memorialise a ‘place’, be it a coalmining town in economic decline, the Cantrell homeplace in Hoot Owl Holler, the Scrabble Creek of Florida Grace Shepherd’s youth, or the backyard of a family matriarch. Inadequate though they might seem, they seek to articulate for all posterity a geography and topography. As Smith’s fiction reveals, the process of memory- and place-making is one of confrontation and conflict. Smith’s commitment to creating *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* thus seeks a compromise: it aims to preserve collective memory at the same time that it invents and forges a new, textually consolidated and sanctioned collective memory. Throughout, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* makes good on preserving the public spaces of the community: the general store, the courthouse, the theatre and the main street, historicised by the Levisa Fork’s extreme floods; at the same time, the stories of human lives it contains are both mundane and extraordinary. Its narratives endow dignity to lives lived in place, where personal and communal history coalesce; they celebrate the tendons that link personal narratives to the narratives of neighbours, family and friends, whose worldview, whose own personal relationship to these share spaces, understands and validates the significance of these stories. In the words of James Swiney, ‘The mountain people are a spectacular people’.<sup>27</sup>

Yet perhaps most important, these stories elicit and foster a collective consciousness for the new places of the future. High school teacher Raines writes that

over the course of the project, I have come to realize that oral history ... is vitally important for the youth of our postmodern culture ... it gives students a sense of identity ... bridges the generational gap [and] ... gives students

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27 Eduardo Porter, ‘Can a Coal Town Reinvent Itself?’, *The New York Times*, 6 December 2019, accessed 15 November 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/06/business/economy/coal-future-virginia.html>; Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 55, 140, 165. For further discussion of memory in Smith’s fiction, see William Teem, ‘Memory as New Beginning in Smith’s *News of the Spirit*’; Debra Druesedow, ‘Place and Memory in Lee Smith’s *Saving Grace*’; and Tanya Long Bennett, ‘“It Was Like I Was Right There”: Primary Experience and the Role of Memory in Lee Smith’s *The Devil’s Dream*’, articles in a special issue of *Pembroke Magazine*, vol. 33 (2001).

their own rich legacies ... When Lee and I first discussed this project two years ago, I never dreamed how deeply these young people would be affected.

As student Nathan Endicott prefaces one man's oral history, 'As we left, I realized that there actually were some interesting people in Grundy!'<sup>28</sup> Interviewees such as Gaynell Fowler look to the future without nostalgia: 'The old buildings are rotting. They're rat infested. They need to be torn down. They are fire hazards ... It's just the fact that it's not going to be like it used to be, and everybody misses that. It's a mental thing'. A 'mental thing' indeed, as the vision she expresses privileges the creation of a new place. Whatever that new place is and becomes, oral history as well as fiction illuminates and extends the other, as Smith's acclaimed novels and *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench* underscore. Oral history illustrates the communal and social value of the process of telling stories about places that were, while stories and novels permit the writer to shed further light on cultural, social and geographical spaces and help make sense of the places that will be and the human communities who inhabit them.

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28 Debbie Raines, 'Preface', in Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, x–xi; Smith, *Sitting on the Courthouse Bench*, 33.

# Photos in the Field: Reflecting on Environmental Change Through Photo-elicited Oral Histories

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This paper presents research located at the intersection of oral history, photography and environmental history to contribute to the growing role of the humanities in ecological fields. It explores the possibilities at the relationship between oral narrative, image and place. Research with the Wilkinson family of ‘Montreal’ in the Monaro region of New South Wales is used to demonstrate methodology that brings forward local place and environmental change that is often present, though backgrounded, in oral history research. Family photographs act as windows to insight and reflection on changing ecologies and relationships with place. A technique of conducting interviews in the field, and revisiting historic photography points, provides opportunities for the local place – through the presence and absence of species, the warped wire of old fences, the sights, sounds, textures and smells – to participate in historical understanding and future reimagining. Oral history work is central to assisting land managers to make sense of environmental change and degradation. It also facilitates place-based opportunities for healing. The work is framed around a desire to understand the past to inform restorative activities and wider cultural recuperations in a settler-colonial context.



## INTRODUCTION

Studies that combine oral and environmental history have been surprisingly few and far between.<sup>1</sup> Some of the leading examples of their shared enrolment in research have been conducted by Australian scholars.<sup>2</sup> Existing works demonstrate that the capacity for oral and environmental histories to work together is strong, and indeed, critical, amidst the current ecological and climate crisis. Historian Karen Twigg argues that oral history is central to ‘illuminating the attitudes and perceptions, feelings and emotions that shape our responses to environment’.<sup>3</sup> An important shared task of the two sub-fields of history is their capacity to challenge and rewrite hegemonic historical narratives and to document the experience of the past to inform more just and inclusive futures.

Yet research methods at the intersection of oral and environmental history are still being developed. In their work with Aboriginal people, graziers and immigrant American cotton farmers, Heather Goodall and Damian Lucas ‘grappled with’ ‘how to encourage people to speak about the environment of their memories’.<sup>4</sup> They found ‘it was far more productive with all three groups to talk about what they did on land and rivers – camping, planting, mustering, fishing – and then to ask what it was like when they did it’.<sup>5</sup> Twigg outlines a ‘loose life history frame-work, encouraging interviewees to speak of key events in their own life and that of their farm while remaining particularly attentive to the way in which the environment appeared in

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1 Karen Twigg, “‘Another Weed Will Come Along’: Attitudes to Weeds, Land and Community in the Victorian Mallee”, in Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall (eds), *Telling Environmental Histories* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 213–40. As Twigg explains, the fields of historical geography and ecology have often been more active in turning to oral history to understand human/environment interactions.

2 For example see Tom Griffiths and Christine Hansen, *Living with Fire: People, Nature and History in Steels Creek* (Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 2012); Deb Anderson, *Endurance: Australian Stories of Drought* (Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 2014); Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall (eds), *Telling Environmental Histories*; Richard Broome, Charles Fahey, Andrea Gaynor and Katie Holmes, *Mallee Country: Land, People, History* (Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2019). Environmental history scholarship in Australian has had to be innovative and creative, as it is ‘brought into being by a settler culture’s slow and fitful adaptation to a unique ecology and a profoundly Aboriginal place’ (Tom Griffiths, ‘Environmental History, Australian Style’, *Australian Historical Studies* 46, no. 2 (2015): 167).

3 Twigg, “‘Another Weed Will Come Along’”, 228.

4 Heather Goodall, ‘Rivers, Memory and Migrancy: Everyday Place-Making in Changing Environments’, in *Telling Environmental Histories*, 31.

5 Goodall, ‘Rivers, Memory and Migrancy’, 32.

such narratives'.<sup>6</sup> This paper expands on such methods through the use of photographs and field work. The recognised sensorial capacities of photographs are heightened by conducting oral histories in the land, engaging multi-species stories that bring past and present into vivid conversation.<sup>7</sup> It does not seek to articulate comprehensive life stories of individuals, rather, it seeks to combine the techniques and strengths of oral history, photo-elicited interviewing and field work to help in understanding and negotiating past, present and future environmental relationships.<sup>8</sup>

The research is situated in the context of a private family farm in the Monaro, New South Wales. To understand the ongoing legacies of local environmental histories and opportunities for place-based adaptation to change we need to turn to 'personal experience and oral tradition'.<sup>9</sup> Management decisions are complicated, personal and emotional.<sup>10</sup> 'The whole context of a person's life', writes historian Rebecca Jones on drought, 'their family, environment, economic situation, community, personality and gender, as well as the period in which they farmed, creates circumstances for adaptation';<sup>11</sup> as Deb Anderson explains, 'Oral history lends an appreciation of both how events affected people then and how the recollection affects them now'.<sup>12</sup>

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6 Twigg, "Another Weed Will Come Along", 216.

7 For the sensory role of photographs, see Lynda Mannik, 'Remembering, Forgetting, and Feeling with Photographs', in Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (eds), *Oral History and Photography* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 77–95. Recent developments in oral history in conversation with place are found in Debbie Lee and Kathryn Newfont (eds), *The Land Speaks: New Voices at the Intersection of Oral and Environmental History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). As Thom van Dooren explains, it is within 'multispecies entanglements that learning and development take place, that social practices and cultures are formed'. Thom van Dooren, *Flight Ways: Life and Loss at the Edge of Extinction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 4.

8 As a participant in this work, my interpretation of these images and contextualisation of environmental change is very much present in the research. It is a combination of, as Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson write, 'what is depicted in the picture, but also in how the producer depicted it, and how the interviewee as well as the interviewer use it' (Freund and Thomson, 'Introduction: Oral History and Photography', *Oral History and Photography*, 3).

9 Libby Robin, 'Radical Ecology and Conservation Science: An Australian Perspective', *Environment and History* 4, no. 2 (1998): 89. See also W.K. Hancock, *Discovering Monaro: A Study of Man's Impact on His Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 59.

10 Rebecca Jones, *Slow Catastrophes: Living with Drought in Australia* (Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2017), xvi. See also Katie Holmes, Andrea Gaynor and Ruth Morgan, 'Doing Environmental History in Urgent Times', *History Australia* 17, no. 2 (2020): 239.

11 Jones, *Slow Catastrophes*, xxiii.

12 Anderson, *Endurance*, 59.

Understanding personal experiences is ever-more necessary given the significance of private family farms to the future of Australian ecosystems. While oral history is well versed in private lives, the interest in conservation in private land was largely overlooked in Australia until the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> A study in 2010 by prominent Australian ecologists demonstrated that 80 per cent of threatened species occur outside Australia's national reserve system and 12 per cent occur in areas with no protection status.<sup>14</sup> Agricultural land accounts for approximately 60 per cent of the Australian continent.<sup>15</sup> As Jones points out, 90 per cent of Australian farming properties are still run by family-owner operators. With 410 million hectares of Australia occupied by agricultural practices, farmers, their practices, memories, knowledge and affection for place remain essential for the natural and social environment.<sup>16</sup>

## PHOTOGRAPHY IN ORAL HISTORY AND ECOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Photographs convey much about the people, places and perspectives captured and are popular primary research tools in historical studies, as 'documents of social history and as mnemonic devices'.<sup>17</sup> Personal photographs widen classical data sets and broaden histories. They provide opportunities for reflections on ecological change, farming practices and ideas of settler belonging because they are framed, captured and revisited from a particular viewpoint in time and space. As Ruth Ford writes,

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13 Libby Robin, Chris Dickman and Mandy Martin (eds), *Desert Channels: The Impulse to Conserve* (Melbourne: CSIRO Publishing, 2010), 80. The inclusion of both recognised Indigenous land and private (non-Indigenous owner) land has only come into the formal conservation picture in more recent history, as the matrix between crown reserves became valued for biodiversity conservation. Private land is increasingly brought into the conservation space, as is the trend in much of Europe and the United States. See also Stefan Hajkowicz, 'The Evolution of Australia's Natural Resource Management Programs: Towards Improved Targeting and Evaluation of Investments', *Land Use Policy* 26, no. 2 (April 2009): 471–8.

14 James E.M. Watson, Megan C. Evans, Josie Carwardine, Richard A. Fuller, Liana N. Joseph, Daniel B. Segan, Martin F.J. Taylor, R.J. Fensham and Hugh P. Possingham, 'The Capacity of Australia's Protected-area System to Represent Threatened Species', *Conservation Biology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 324–32.

15 Hajkowicz, 'The Evolution of Australia's Natural Resource Management Programs', 471.

16 Jones, *Slow Catastrophes*.

17 Freund and Thomson, 'Introduction: Oral History and Photography', 3; Mannik, 'Remembering, Forgetting, and Feeling with Photographs'; Donald A. Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). In *Oral History and Photography*, Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson explore the 'photographic turn' in oral history research: through the use of photographs in historians' research in the 1960s, its popularity in the 1970s, and its critical evaluation through which photographs in oral history have since become a category of analysis in themselves (Freund and Thomson, 'Introduction: Oral History and Photography').

family photo albums of land settlement can be read as ‘both evidence of environmental change and a form of storytelling about the transformation of the land’.<sup>18</sup>

Recent scholarship in oral history methodology examines the use of photographs as prompts for memory, positing that photographs are not uncomplicated windows into the past, rather, they are images that hold within them multiple meanings, contexts and exclusions.<sup>19</sup> Of course, photographic albums have ‘notable absences’ and ‘silences’.<sup>20</sup> The use of family albums has been charged with being an incomplete representation of the past as they curate, construct and omit images, making interpretation difficult.<sup>21</sup> However, the focus of the photograph in this research is the environment and relationships with it; that which at the time was often the unintended backdrop, meaning greater representation of the ‘hard times’ may remain present.

In family photographs the boundaries between professional and personal, between people and nature, are softened. The subjectivity of oral histories and photographs here is a strength. Photographs are employed in this research with the understanding that they are not analogues of reality, rather they are a rich archive through which the environmental relationships of a particular time and place can be made visible, and through which multiple possible pasts, presents and futures can be imagined.<sup>22</sup>

Photography has also long been employed in long-term ecological research as a tool to document change over time.<sup>23</sup> Ecologists have been conducting formal long-term

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18 Ruth Ford, ‘Mallee Residues: A Family Photograph Album from Southern Australia’, *Rachel Carson Centre Perspectives*, no. 2 (2017): 102.

19 Alexander Freund and Angela Thiessen, ‘Mary Brockmeyer’s Wedding Picture: Exploring the Intersection of Photographs and Oral History Interviews’, in Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (eds), *Oral History and Photography*, 27–44; Mannik, ‘Remembering, Forgetting, and Feeling with Photographs’; Freund and Thomson, ‘Introduction: Oral History and Photography’.

20 Ford, ‘Mallee Residues’, 105. See also Ana Maria Mauad, ‘Committed Eye: Photographs, Oral Sources, and Historical Narrative’, *Oral History and Photography*, 223–38.

21 Marjorie L. McLellan, *Six Generations Here: A Farm Family Remembers* (Madison, Wisconsin: Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1997).

22 For a strong example of the study exploring the intersection of photographs and environmental history see Joan M. Schwartz, ‘On Photographic Reflections: Nature, Landscape, and Environment’, *Environmental History* 12, no. 4 (October 2007): 752–79.

23 See Jon M. Skovlin, Gerald S. Strickler, Jesse L. Peterson and Arthur W. Sampson, ‘Interpreting Landscape Change in High Mountains of Northeastern Oregon from Long-Term Repeat Photography’, *General Technical Report PNW-GTR* (Portland, OR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest (continued over page)

ecological research projects since their inception in the USA in 1980.<sup>24</sup> Because, as American ecologist Timothy Kratz and others have written, ‘understanding long-term ecological interaction at multiple spatial and temporal scales is difficult or, in some cases, impossible without a foundation of long-term observations’.<sup>25</sup> This is of particular importance in Australia, where ecologies are typified by variation that requires a long-term perspective for ecological understanding. Australia has a developing network of long-term ecological research projects, though has much further to come in both activities and funding to support research.<sup>26</sup> As ecologist Andrew Trant and others explain, ‘historical images have value for ecologists who wish to understand past landscape patterns, ecological and human legacies, and changes in abiotic, biotic, and cultural processes over time’.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, as Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson write, ‘personal photographs, hitherto stored away in albums and shoe boxes’, may be a wealth of ‘historical evidence’.<sup>28</sup>

Yet ecological change and species migration ask something else of historical studies. The role of history in environmental management is changing, demanding a wider engagement with the cultures and causes of degradation, and opportunities for

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Service, Pacific Northwest Research Station, 2001), iii, 78; K.N. Youngentob, G.E. Likens, J.E. Williams and D.B. Lindenmayer, ‘A Survey of Long-Term Terrestrial Ecology Studies in Australia’, *Austral Ecology* 38, no. 4 (2013): 365–73. A powerful Australian example is Darrell Lewis, *Slower than the Eye Can See: Environmental Change in Northern Australia’s Cattle Lands, a Case Study from the Victoria River District, Northern Territory* (Darwin: Tropical Savannas CRC, 2002).

24 J.T. Callahan, ‘Long-Term Ecological Research’, *BioScience* 34, no. 6 (1984): 363–7.

25 Timothy K. Kratz, Linda A. Deegan, Mark E. Harmon and William K. Lauenroth, ‘Ecological Variability in Space and Time: Insights Gained from the US LTER Program’, *BioScience* 53, no. 1 (2003): 57.

26 In 2004, Charles Redman and others published a paper in the journal *Ecosystems* calling for the integration of social science into the long-term ecological research network. They highlighted the role of social factors in environmental change and the importance of cross-disciplinary participation in painting a complex long-term social-ecological understanding. See Charles L. Redman, J. Morgan Grove and Lauren H. Kuby, ‘Integrating Social Science into the Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) Network: Social Dimensions of Ecological Change and Ecological Dimensions of Social Change’, *Ecosystems* 7, no. 2 (2004): 161–71. A political ecology gaze prompts acknowledgement that the act of photographing is in itself one embroiled with territory, rights and ownership; what is *missing* from historical ‘databases’ also contributes important knowledge about values and power.

27 Andrew J. Trant, Brian M. Starzomski and Eric Higgs, ‘A Publicly Available Database for Studying Ecological Change in Mountain Ecosystems’, *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 13, no. 4 (2015): 187.

28 Freund and Thomson, ‘Introduction: Oral History and Photography’, 13.

reparations beyond aspiring to recreate fixed historic states.<sup>29</sup> The present paper conveys how oral histories, photographs and environmental history can work not to articulate historical truths or ecological baselines alone, but rather, to facilitate critical reflections on the past and inspire future possibilities.

## INTRODUCING THE MONARO

This work is situated in an agricultural region with significant grassland and grassy-woodland communities in the Monaro, NSW. The high-country grasslands have a rich cultural history. The Monaro is home to many Aboriginal peoples, primarily the Ngarigo (tablelands) and the Wogul or Wolgalu (high country), but also the Gundawahl, Djillamtong, Berrengobugge, Yaimatong, Croatingalong and Yuin peoples.<sup>30</sup> The land's abundance has been cultivated through farming practices highly attuned to place, where starch-rich yam fields awaited harvest, native grasses were milled for flour and succulent chocolate lilies wafted sweet aroma across fields.<sup>31</sup> Each summer, people ascended to the ridges to feast on the nutrient and protein-rich food source of migratory Bogong moths (*Agrotis infusa*).<sup>32</sup> This is a peopled place, both in ancient history and in contemporary practice – a worked, 'productive' landscape. Like much of the continent, although it is now mostly 'freehold title' under settler law, it remains unceded Aboriginal land.

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29 For example, a recent critical cultural turn in ecological restoration has been driven both by climate change and the recognition of Indigenous peoples' role in ecological change. See Eric Higgs, Donald A. Falk, Anita Guerrini, Marcus Hall, Jim Harris, Richard J. Hobbs, Stephen T. Jackson, Jeanine M. Rhemtulla and William Throop, 'The Changing Role of History in Restoration Ecology', *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 12, no. 9 (2014): 499–506; Lilian M. Pearce, 'Critical Histories for Ecological Restoration' (PhD Thesis, Australian National University, 2019).

30 Snowy Monaro Regional Council, 'Aboriginal People of Monaro', ACT Government, 2001, 1. Available at <https://www.snowymonaro.nsw.gov.au/DocumentCenter/Home/View/4547>.

31 Nicholas S.G. Williams, Adrian Marshall and John W. Morgan (eds), *Land of Sweeping Plains: Managing and Restoring the Native Grasslands of South-Eastern Australia* (Clayton South: CSIRO Publishing, 2015).

32 The cultural migration driven by moth harvest served a deeper purpose of intercultural meetings, initiation rites, corroborees, trade and friendship. See Josephine M. Flood, *The Moth Hunters: Aboriginal Prehistory of the Australian Alps* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1980); Josephine M. Flood, *Moth Hunters of the Australian Capital Territory* (Lewisham, NSW: Clarendon, 1996). For details about the Bogong moth see Eric Warrant, Barrie Frost, Ken Green, Henrik Mouritsen, David Dreyer, Andrea Adden, Kristina Brauburger and Stanley Heinze, 'The Australian Bogong Moth *Agrotis Infusa*: A Long-Distance Nocturnal Navigator', *Frontiers in Behavioural Neuroscience* 10, no. April (2016): 1–17. In recent years the Bogong moth numbers are rapidly declining, threatening contemporary ecological processes and cultural practices. See Jo Khan, 'Decline in Bogong Moth Numbers Could Have Catastrophic Effects in the Australian Alps', *ABC News*, 27 February 2019.

Contemporary ecological and social relationships are impacted by over two hundred years of settler-colonial interventions, some of them violent, in a complex cultural landscape. Stories from this region are woven into the dominant Australian human-environment imaginary. This is the land of pioneering fables of stoic frontier labour, and the bushranger-led Man-from-Snowy-River horseback adventure with cattle dogs and fleece of eighteenth-century oil paintings.<sup>33</sup>

In the Monaro, people have been both spoilers and improvers of the land.<sup>34</sup> The impacts of agricultural policies and ‘progress’ in the Monaro and other Australian ecosystems are considered elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> They include those of invasion, settlement, violence to Indigenous peoples and culture, clearing, and increasingly industrialised agriculture. Mechanisation of labour and farming in Australia has increased rapidly since the 1950s.<sup>36</sup> So too have dreams of productivity unbound by biophysical realities as industrial technologies have accelerated land change and furthered ecologically inappropriate imaginaries. Yet on certain properties, there is growing resistance to this type of relationship with the land. One such property is Montreal.

### VISITING ‘MONTREAL’

In March 2017, I met with Dunbar Wilkinson and his parents, June and Bob Wilkinson.<sup>37</sup> Bob’s great-great-grandfather came from England in 1852 and his great-grandfather

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33 This imaginary was widely popularised by Banjo Paterson’s famous poem, later turned into film *The Man from Snowy River*. See Andrew Barton Paterson, *The Man From Snowy River and Other Verses* (Sydney: University of Sydney Library, 1997). Available at <http://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/data-2/v00001.pdf>.

34 Hancock, *Discovering Monaro*. The depiction of British settlers as ‘spoilers’ of land through manipulation of the environment for economic purposes was later made popular by Geoffrey Bolton: Geoffrey Bolton, *Spoils and Spoilers*, 2nd ed. (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1992).

35 Hancock, *Discovering Monaro*; John Merritt, *Losing Ground: Grazing in the Snowy Mountains 1944–1969* (Dickson, ACT: Turalla Press, 2007); Tom Connors, ‘Closer Settlement Schemes’, *The Australian Quarterly* 42, no. 1 (1970): 72–85. The impact of these schemes is considered in great detail in Broome et al., *Mallee Country*.

36 Anderson, *Endurance*; Broome et al., *Mallee Country*.

37 Oral sources include the following: Dunbar Wilkinson, June Wilkinson and Bob Wilkinson, interviewed by author, ‘Montreal’ Monaro, NSW, 18 March 2017, tape and transcript held by author; Dunbar Wilkinson, June Wilkinson and Bob Wilkinson, interviewed by author, ‘Montreal’ Monaro, NSW, 20 March 2017, tape and transcript held by author; Dunbar Wilkinson, interviewed by author, ‘Montreal’ Monaro, NSW, 18 March 2017, tape and transcript held by author; Dunbar Wilkinson, interviewed by author, ‘Montreal’ Monaro, NSW, 20 March 2017, tape and transcript held by author.



purchased the original family property that lies just south-west of Cooma, New South Wales. Though still marginal grazing land, it isn't the harshest of the treeless-plains country. The farm is made up of treeless open basalt plains, some lighter shadier country with snowgum (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*) and mixed shrubs, and open rolling granite plains. Since the family took ownership, the land has mostly been managed with a mix of sheep and a small proportion of cattle. Through the 1950s to 1970s, Bob carried out some pasture improvement of introduced species and a small amount of cropping for fodder. Before then, the main alteration to the land came from hard hooves, changing of water-courses, and the cessation of local burning regimes that accompanied European invasion continent-wide. Today, Dunbar and his brother Sinclair each run 3,000 of the original 6,000 acres of land; Dunbar manages 'Montreal'.

I invited the Wilkinson family to participate in my postdoctoral research on histories and cultures of ecological restoration because they had high-quality native grasslands patches and were managing their property in innovative ways that had changed over time in response to place-based lessons.<sup>38</sup> They have been involved in some ecological restoration programs and research. Montreal is a multi-generation farm that is able to speak to the experience of changes over time influencing their management practices and relationships with place.

In March 2017 I conducted two interviews with Dunbar, June and Bob around the family dining table. The first, on 18 March, was guided by a loose life history framework. Photo albums and diaries were considered together only after inviting the family history and establishing a convivial research-participant relationship. For the second, on 20 March, photo albums were open from the beginning and held the discussion, which involved a lot of movement as photos were passed around. Each interview ran for approximately one and a half hours, after which, Dunbar and I

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38 I had an existing relationship with the Wilkinson family through previous research on native grassland conservation as an ecologist and social researcher. The family's conservation activities were well understood and documented through their involvement in programs such as Greening Australia's 'Whole of Paddock Restoration' initiative. This research formed part of my PhD dissertation. See Pearce, 'Critical Histories for Ecological Restoration'.

headed out for property field visits that ran approximately two hours in length.<sup>39</sup> This work was literally grounded in place; we explored properties in boots and utes with working dogs by our sides. We jumped fences, scaled rocks and scanned horizons.

## PHOTOGRAPHIC REFLECTIONS

Family photographs were objects that came to life: as a guide for storytelling, and as windows into new interpretations and reflections on the past. Importantly for this research, the content in the background – the soil cover or the extent of the tree line – became a rich archive of environmental history and of stimulus for reflective discussion about changing land-use practices and wider shifts in cultural attitudes. Examples of four photographs produced between 1950 and 1994 (Figures 1 to 4) and the discussions that they triggered are presented herein. I chose to include these four photographs in this paper as they each work to tell a unique relationship that the family has with the past and with the farm over time.<sup>40</sup>

## BOB'S FIRST TRACTOR



**Figure 1** Bob Wilkinson's first tractor in 1951; one of the first in the Monaro. Photograph courtesy of the Wilkinson family.

39 With permission, discussions were audio recorded using a hand-held recording device and partially transcribed by the author. Photographs were digitally photographed and archived. I took extensive field notes and photographs during visits. Transcribed material was reviewed and thematically coded within a wider project framework and the family were given the opportunity to review all in-press material. For details see Pearce, 'Critical Histories for Ecological Restoration'.

40 While individual pictures held the discussions for a time, they often acted as links to new topics. Content is reported here as was discussed against the individual photograph as best possible.

A black and white image of a tractor on the back of a truck stands out against the rolling hills in the family album (Figure 1). Bob Wilkinson bought his first tractor in 1950. This photograph captures a moment when the machine, the first in the district, was on its way to the 1951 Cooma show for promotion. As Dunbar explained, they were still a ‘novelty’ in the district. At the time this photograph was captured it was a proud moment representing the family’s embrace of industrial progress and farm mechanisation in Australia in the 1950s. It was a natural progression from masculinised narratives from the Monaro of hard-working men from the high country. Today, it is read from a position of understanding the impact that mechanisation went on to have on local ecologies. This photograph triggered reflections about local ploughing history, land-use history on their property, and a trend for expanding technological ‘progress’ in the region.<sup>41</sup>

Cultural norms and industrial promises of unchecked growth are powerful. Dunbar laments that still for a majority of the sector, the message is one of bigger investments, bigger money and bigger change; a culture where ‘the next generation always has to do bigger than Dad’ with ‘round-up (Glysophate), bigger tractors, and bigger gear’. He attributed this to a cultural condition:

I just think it was poor Australia, discovered at the industrial time, which was a tragic time, and that’s why its extinction rate is the biggest in the world ... I think whitefellas find it hard to put anything in reverse, or even put it in neutral ... we just couldn’t believe what [our neighbours] were doing when they were so big anyway, you know, did they need to be clearing and spraying out another paddock of native country, and my brother said ... ‘they’re just like a ratchet – stuck on one direction – they only know one way to go and that’s more production, more production, more production ... I just think in our white culture it just runs pretty deep that you can never have too much and always feeling that insecurity.

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41 In the post-war period tractor numbers were exploding across the globe, propelling agriculture into a mechanised and industrial era. See Meredith McKittrick, ‘Industrial Agriculture’, in Erin Stewart Mauldin and John Robert McNeill (eds), *A Companion to Global Environmental History* (Chichester, England: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

Conversations turned to the resilience of unploughed country and the significance of ploughing for its capacity for regeneration: Histories of ploughed land determine ecological quality and restoration potential. But ‘it’s amazing’, said June, ‘how forgiving and tough native country can be if it hasn’t been poisoned or deeply ploughed’.

Remaining un-ploughed and ‘un-improved’ areas hold critical value for the future of native grasslands. Devices like the stump-jump plough are celebrated as a ‘symbol of Australia’ but remain one of the most significant desecration devices in Australia’s history of soil.<sup>42</sup> These days, while ecological knowledge of damage inflicted by ploughing is present, it is not necessarily reaching the farmers or affecting practice. Dunbar blames ignorance more than ill-will. He said ‘People don’t sort of get up in the morning and say, “I’m going to stuff the environment today” or “I’m going to give stock a hard time”’. The problem is that this ignorance leads to such drastic and irreversible change. ‘That’s the tragedy of the plough’, lamented June, ‘that any old farmer can just hook on a plough and change that land forever, with no scientific knowledge’. June explained that there has been more destruction of native grasslands in the last five years because of the ability to get to places where the plough wasn’t able to get before. Those remaining unploughed areas in the region are now at risk.

Today, the photograph is related to differently: stimulating a wider critique of the cultures of technological intervention in Australia and how these are linked to colonisation. Today, the photograph marks a foreboding of something bigger, out of control and unchecked, that for a time the family embraced.

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<sup>42</sup> See George Main, *Heartland: The Regeneration of Rural Place* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2005); George Main, ‘Object in View: A Stump-Jump Plough: Reframing a National Icon’, in Jennifer Newell, Libby Robin and Kirsten Wehner (eds), *Curating the Future: Museums, Communities and Climate Change* (London: Routledge, 2016); Williams, Marshall and Morgan (eds), *Land of Sweeping Plains*.

## JUNE ON THE LAKE



**Figure 2** June Wilkinson on her horse after rain circa 1994. Photograph courtesy of the Wilkinson family.

‘Oh, that’s what the lakes do in better years, Lilian. From bone dry and nothing ... it takes a lot of rain’. Dunbar removed the faded photograph of June on her horse in the middle of a shallow lake (Figure 2). In contrast to the reflections brought up by the picture of the new tractor, the way that June is on horseback inside the water evokes something so much gentler.

This photograph helped to articulate the change in bird species and populations and weather patterns over time. Migratory birds including Japanese snipe (*Gallinago hardwickii*), sea eagles (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*), and a range of gulls, cranes and other waterbirds have visited the property. June said that in the past ‘if you closed your eyes and listen you’d swear you were somewhere in the Coorong’. ‘When we were kids in the ’70s’, said Dunbar, ‘we used to count 70 black swans up there, but [now]; a couple, but they haven’t come back in a big way’. ‘I used to ride home on my horse in the moonlight and you’d hear those mmm, mmm, mmm little swan sounds, little frog sounds, all doing their thing in the moonlight at night’, says June. We also talked about Omeo Storksbill (*Pelargonium striatellum*), an endangered local native



herb that has withstood grazing and still remains, and the fact that the extent of what has been lost is unknown.

Dunbar asked his parents if the lake was ever ploughed when it was dry. During the interview and through the conversation triggered by revisiting his photograph, he learnt about the history of the property himself. Discussion turned to contemporary management of this area; the cattle love a special grass that grows in it, but Dunbar would like to see them kept off certain sections of wet areas. They talked about the use of a hot wire ‘to keep the cattle out of the nesting bird habitat’.

On my way out of the property, I pulled over to observe the lake. Today it is a dry indentation in the landscape; the boom-and-bust cycles of its ecology are unpredictable and will become ever more so with predicted climate scenarios.

### DRYING WILDFLOWERS



**Figure 3** June and Bob Wilkinson with a local ecologist monitoring wildflowers, circa 1990. Photograph courtesy of the Wilkinson family.

We were all drawn to a faded image of June and Bob with a local ecologist (Figure 3). The botanical diversity here has been studied and celebrated throughout the years.

The family has developed strong relationships with universities and research scientists to support different species that thrive on their property. As well as a record of what lives on this land at that particular point in time, this and similar photographs

are an artefact of appreciation of nature. This image captures the tenderness with which June lays down a local daisy as the three consider the floral diversity on their property. The image triggered reflections on biodiversity, a love for wildflowers and a caring ethic. She alerted ecologists to the endangered Monaro golden daisy (*Rutidosia leiolepis*) that she came across in a little knoll in a grazed paddock. They fenced this area, which June describes as full of ‘beautiful’ ‘little things’ that ‘smell like heaven’.

June explained that she inherited this culture of loving nature. She remembers her grandmother Emily Mary Barton, Australian poet Banjo Paterson’s first cousin, calling the clearing of native vegetation ‘a massacre of the innocent’. A poem titled *Wildflowers* (dated 1840) appears in a collection of family diary materials collated by June’s cousin. It reads:

Long, long are the hours my love is away

[...]

But I’ve made myself friends of the flowers of the field

There are none here to seek them or love them but me

And for me all their sweetest perfumes they will yield

And display their rich hues for their mistress to see

They peep at me smiling wherever I go

Thro’ the grass and the boughs in the meadow and grove

And the breezes that over the far mountains blow

Bring me all their kind whispers & breathings of love.



Family archives like this help to understand what may have been lost from the system. Ecological histories are present in photographs, in diaries, and in descriptions of the ‘sweetest perfumes’, ‘rich hues’, ‘grass ... boughs ... meadow and grove’. More recently, photography has been enlisted to document spring wildflowers. June unravelled a roll at least two metres long of coloured photographs of different species taken in a ‘good year’ by a professional photographer. These images, and those yet untaken continue to build stories and relationships with species diversity on the farm, forming critical archives of the future.

The depiction of love of local ecology also narrates another side to stories of desperation to ‘improve’ the Australian land. It reveals local species as ‘friends’, mitigating the isolation of people on farms. With few women in the region, women on farms turned to the natural world for kinship (‘I’ve made myself friends of the flowers of the fields’). The beauty that drove the development of a caring land ethic is embedded within.<sup>43</sup> This story suggests a significant role of gender in shaping environmental responses and pluralising the region’s dominant environmental history of hard-working men transforming the environment.<sup>44</sup>

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43 For examples of literature that explore the role of women in conservation and kinship being found in the natural world see Margaret Somerville, *Wildflowering: The Life and Places of Kathleen McArthur* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2004); Katie Holmes, Susan K. Martin and Kylie Mirmohamadi, *Green Pens: A Collection of Garden Writing* (Melbourne: The Miegunyah Press, 2004); Ruth Ford, “‘The Wattles Are in Bloom ... Crops Are Looking Wonderfully Well’ Settler Women in the Victorian Mallee, 1920s–30s”, in Alan Mayne and Stephen Atkinson (eds), *Outside Country: Histories of Inland Australia* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2011), 63–94; Karen Twigg, ‘Along Tyrrell Creek: An Environmental History of a Mallee Community’ (PhD thesis, La Trobe University, 2020).

44 A discussion of the importance and complexity of woman and gender as categories in environmental history analysis is provided by N. Unger, ‘Women and Gender: Useful Categories of Analysis in Environmental History’, in A. Isenberg (ed.), *Oxford Handbook of Environmental History* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 600–43. Critical development of the field of gender analysis in environmental history is provided in Katie Holmes and Ruth Morgan (eds), ‘Placing Gender [Special Issue]’, in *Environment and History*, vol. 27, 2021.

## BABES IN A PRAM



**Figure 4** Baby Sinclair Wilkinson and a friend in pram circa 1967. Photograph courtesy of the Wilkinson family.

June broke out into laughter before I saw the next picture: ‘But look how bare it is! And look at the English pram!’ Two young babes under a year old are bundled up in their pram in the foreground (Figure 4). They are the timekeepers for this moment. The background quickly came into focus and June and Bob reflected on the state of the earth at that time: dry, exposed, hot. In this case, the place between photograph and oral narrative is literally

the ground underneath them. It is not clear how much the intention behind this photograph was to document the children or the state of the environment, which, for farmers, is always both home and livelihood, but the happy foreground does not hide the reality of struggle.<sup>45</sup>

For the Wilkinsons, after years of living with close to bare ground and soil loss, the precipitation of a different approach to management finally came about during the ’81 drought when, June said, ‘the seasons became a lot more unpredictable’. No traditional cropping or pasture improvement has occurred at Montreal since. The family has come to understand that exaggerated drought and soil erosion were local responses to inappropriate land management. June explained:

The problem isn’t drought. It’s living on country that isn’t designed to be carrying set stocking. You know, a certain amount of animals ... if we could just put them on ice while there is no rain and then put them back. There are periods where the country is exposed and the animals are still on it, it’s shockingly destructive.

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<sup>45</sup> See Freund and Thiessen, ‘Mary Brockmeyer’s Wedding Picture’; Freund and Thomson, ‘Introduction: Oral History and Photography’.

Bob's reaction was to periodically send away or sell stock in order to conserve soil. As a result, said June, 'our taxation would say that we'd had a very good year so we would have to pay extra tax'. In this way, the system actively penalised farmers for protecting soil.

The main message elicited from this photograph for June was disappointment in how little things have changed, despite time and trying. She conveyed her dismay at the impact of settler history on the land:

It's the blindness, all that we're talking about, is all what the Aboriginals [sic] knew what not to do and they would have lived for another however many 60,000 years doing what they were doing. I mean it is such an old continent, it wasn't meant to be ploughed and have hard hooved animals and all the rest.

Dunbar described the changes to the country as being 'whiteman-ified'. He said that despite some ideas, 'We just don't know what was here'. In this way, reflections on ecological changes enable an approachable confrontation of Australia's bleak history. Earlier in the day June stated:

I feel utterly ashamed to be quite honest, don't you? About our pioneers, earlier days, Aboriginal and pasture wise, everything. I cannot feel proud; I can't feel proud of being Australian.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The Australian cultural experience of shame at the violence to Indigenous peoples in the name of colonisation is becoming more articulated. In the last five years there has been a flurry of public conversation and publications about Australia's violent history. For example, Nicholas Clements' popular book on Tasmania's Black War (Nicholas Clements, *The Black War: Fear, Sex and Resistance in Tasmania* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2014) and, the University of Newcastle's project to collate data and map massacres of Indigenous peoples, which has since been redesigned into a more public interactive map through publication in *The Guardian* (see Lyndall Ryan et al., 'Colonial Frontier Massacres in Central and Eastern Australia 1788–1930: Bibliography', *The Centre for 21st Century Humanities* (Newcastle, 2018), [https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/ColonialMassacres\\_2\\_0\\_Bibliography.pdf](https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/ColonialMassacres_2_0_Bibliography.pdf); 'The Killing Times', *The Guardian*, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/ng-interactive/2019/mar/04/massacre-map-australia-the-killing-times-frontier-wars>). The relationships between shame and ecological restoration activities has also been explored in detail by William Jordan, see William R. (III) Jordan, *The Sunflower Forest: Ecological Restoration and the New Communion with Nature* (London: University of California Press, 2003).

Evidence in the land of historical change reminded the family that they are not innocent in their involvement in soil loss, nor immune to it. The Wilkinsons' intensely emotional response to eroded soil and all it represents shifted their behaviour.<sup>47</sup> Today, soil exposure and erosion are things Dunbar avidly avoids. He runs mostly beef cattle and some Merino sheep in quick rotation, leaving a longer recovery time for the land. His shift from largely grazing sheep to cattle was because he 'couldn't stand seeing what the sheep were doing to the country', and because he 'always felt if you have to pour chemical on something constantly for it to survive ... it was the wrong animal to be running in that environment'.

This photograph made visible the environmental relationships of a particular time and place, as well as those which preceded it. More so, it brought into conversation the enduring impacts of imported settler-colonial farming practices and their consequences that, as a society, Australia is yet to grapple with. Looking through the photographs for change, Dunbar told June that 'most of it is negative' but June comforted 'but it would *all* be gone probably'. 'Yeah, but there are a lot of places where there *were* trees and we haven't fenced and the trees have gone, there's nothing there now', he said.

Writing on extinction, Thom van Dooren considers how the experience of mourning can make us more conscious of our relationships with other species and instil a caring responsibility. He advocates that 'taking it seriously, not rushing to overcome it – might be the more important political and ethical work of our time'.<sup>48</sup> Photo albums can help to bring people to a place of recognition, which is where such reflection can occur.

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<sup>47</sup> For the powerful role of emotions in living with drought see Rebecca Jones, 'Uncertainty and the Emotional Landscape of Drought', *International Review of Environmental History* 4, no. 2 (2018): 13–26.

<sup>48</sup> van Dooren, *Flight Ways*, 4.

## BRINGING PHOTOS INTO THE PRESENT

Dunbar and I returned to sites of past photos, significant restoration activities and areas of rich ecological diversity on the farm (Figures 5, 6 and 7).<sup>49</sup> The method of bringing the past and present into conversation through the aid of photographs was designed prior to field work but took direction from the archive in question and interest and capacity of the family. The photo points were selected by the family, with Dunbar directing the ultimate decisions as he was the tour guide. I was conscious to step back as these discussions took place.

While making our way across paddocks and through farm gates to historic photo points we spoke about what has been, what is, and what might become. Mnemonics were everywhere; stories erupted as we encountered different triggers, the continuing past and present alive in the land and transcending limits of time and space. We drove to the top edge of the property, seeking the spot where a particular photo was taken over 20 years ago. We parked the ute in the shade of an old gnarled gum and walked about 20 metres to the precise location – likely the same path Dunbar took when he took the original photograph. ‘The whole reason I took that was a bit more of a novelty seeing ’roos back then, and there they are in the sun’, he said, pointing to the tiny specks in the faded picture.<sup>50</sup> Looking over the landscape he compared it with the old photograph to consider change (Figure 5). As Joan Schwartz writes, ‘the meaning of photographs, like the meaning of the landscapes they record, change from viewer to viewer, and across time and space’.<sup>51</sup>

The neighbour whose property is in the image (Figure 5) has always stocked in a very conservative way, and the condition of his land is something that Dunbar uses to check his own. He pointed to individual trees and the slope of the hill, connecting the missing life and the new ones in the jigsaw pieces of the image. At other points discussions turned to what was, is, and might be: threads of family farming history

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49 The number of sites visited was limited by time, but this was a practice that Dunbar continued over the following weeks.

50 Today an overpopulation of kangaroos is challenging for farmers in the region.

51 Schwartz, ‘On Photographic Reflections: Nature, Landscape, and Environment’, 773.

intertwined with the politics of agricultural policies; shame at lost Indigenous knowledge, and specific stories of family land-use history that can still be read and felt in the landscape today.



**Figure 5.** Dunbar Wilkinson comparing then and now, 2017. Photograph by Lilian M. Pearce.



**Figure 6.** Revisiting the edge of a fenced regeneration plot at Montreal, 2017. Photograph by Lilian M. Pearce.

We crossed over a clear land-use history boundary between ploughed and unploughed land as we headed higher up the hill. We got in and out of the ute, moving at a pace attuned to gestures and storytelling; a shotgun tucked at the bottom of the windscreen. We compared the past and present of the ploughed and unploughed paddocks (Figure 7). Here, on our knees, we observed the intricacies of the species that make up this unploughed grassland. The colour palette increased, and the ground felt different underfoot: a diverse desiccated soil crust awaiting the next rain. Dunbar explained: ‘Wherever it’s like this you never get a heap of those invasives. Wherever it’s been able to keep its integrity it’s always so



much more resilient to the outsiders'. Looking over the paddocks Dunbar pointed out areas that have not been ploughed or chemically altered, which he said, 'still have a bit of the old spirit left in them'.



**Figure 7.** Comparing the past and present of a ploughed and unploughed paddock at Montreal, 2017. Photograph by Lilian M. Pearce.

Squat down, face to the earth; it smelt different here, tired and worn, holding on to an ancient wisdom of tiny petals and lichen crust. We crouched down to inspect various rock ferns and gruggly bush (*Melicytus dentatus*) that thrive in the cracks in the granite and I tasted the tart purple berry. Grasslands persist here as resilient vegetation with tenacious roots, symbolic of local character amongst agricultural landscapes and challenging ecological conditions. Their endurance provides hope. It is this essence of spirit – in the feeling of a flourishing sacred system – that drives much of their behaviour change and restoration efforts, and that keeps me drawn to research such as this.

Dunbar worries that predicted climate extremes will tip this marginal country over the edge, and he is right to worry. Extreme weather, ecological decline and market pressures all have the potential to wreak havoc on farms.<sup>52</sup> He said that shade might

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<sup>52</sup> For a thorough study of pressures to rural farming communities in Australia see: Neil Barr, *The House on the Hill: The Transformation of Australia's Farming Communities* (Canberra, ACT: Land & Water Australia, 2009). The IPCC Fourth Assessment Report concludes that Australian agriculture and the natural-resource



be ‘the difference between being viable and not’ so is focusing on getting larger trees into the landscape for ecological function. Deeply sensitive knowledge of the property has allowed him to develop his own strategies for successful tree planting in the boulders, where there is increased thermal mass, moisture, shelter and rainfall. The photographs that I took with Dunbar in the field included trees that he planted that are now mature and thriving; of the edges of fenced regeneration plots that demonstrate how well the land can recover if rested. They are images taken from the perspective of a different time, with different measures of ‘success’.

As the afternoon light hit the pale trunk of gums Dunbar reflected on his childhood and what he loves about living here; something that, for all its challenges, continually pulls him back and holds him and his family on the property. ‘I don’t feel complacent about it ... there is not one part of the day when it’s not constantly changing. I love it’.

The affection for place and deep connection to this land is paramount, supporting Jones’ claim that:

Acknowledging the role of sentiment in managing the land is not anachronistic romanticism but part of a mature acceptance that sustainably producing food in our biophysical environment requires caring strongly for the land and its future.<sup>53</sup>

Taking oral histories and photographs into the field invites the agency of the natural world into conversation. As Katie Holmes writes:

A core tenet of environmental history is the agency of the ‘natural’ world: it is not just something on which humans have acted – often in highly

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base on which it depends has significant vulnerability to the changes in temperature and rainfall projected over the next decades to 100 years. See Chris Stokes and Mark Howden (eds), *Adapting Agriculture to Climate Change: Preparing Australian Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries for the Future* (Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Jones, *Slow Catastrophes*, 330.

destructive ways – it has its own agency, its own cycles, and is as capable of shaping humans and human behaviour as vice versa.<sup>54</sup>

In *The Land Speaks: New Voices at the Intersection of Oral and Environmental History*, the opportunity for the participation of the non-human world in oral history work is presented.<sup>55</sup> This edited collection follows a more-than-human trend in geography and the environmental humanities to break down the human/nature divide.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, ‘in the present context of ecological destruction’, argues Val Plumwood, ‘we desperately need ways to increase our sensitivity to and communicativity with others of the earth’.<sup>57</sup> This task is critical for reframing futures.

## CONCLUSION

Family archives and oral histories bring the past vividly into conversation with the present; history is reinterpreted and reimagined through encounters in the land. Grazing in the Monaro is a practice that asks one to confront both ecological realities and colonial legacies. As illustrated through this research, processes of recognition, reflection and redress underpin local knowledge and changes in practices. For the Wilkinson family, the disjuncture between farming expectations and physical land capacities grows clearer by the day. Their aggregated knowledge draws on experience, story and memory that together influence their management decisions and daily experiences, motivating activities more in accordance with local limitations and

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54 Holmes, Gaynor and Morgan, ‘Doing Environmental History in Urgent Times’, 230.

55 Lee and Newfont, *The Land Speaks*, 4.

56 Key examples of this work include the following: Sarah Whatmore, *Hybrid Geographies: Natures, Cultures, Spaces* (London: Sage, 2002); Deborah Bird Rose, ‘Val Plumwood’s Philosophical Animism: Attentive Interactions in the Sentient World’, *Environmental Humanities* 3, no. 1 (2007, 2013): 93–109; Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Sarah Wright, Kate Lloyd and Laklak Burarrwanga, ‘Caring as Country: Towards an Ontology of Co-Becoming in Natural Resource Management’, *Asia Pacific Viewpoint* 54, no. 2 (2013): 185–97. Such work often centres Anglo-European perspectives and is not innovative for many Indigenous peoples. It is important to acknowledge the need for post-humanist geographies to be decolonised. See Val Plumwood, ‘Decolonising Relationships with Nature’, *PAN: Philosophy Activism Nature*, no. 2 (2002): 7–30; Juanita Sundberg, ‘Decolonizing Posthumanist Geographies’, *Cultural Geographies* 21, no. 1 (2014): 33–47; Sarah Wright, Kate Lloyd, Sandie Suchet-Pearson, Laklak Burarrwanga, Matalena Tofa and Bawaka Country, ‘Telling Stories in, through and with Country: Engaging with Indigenous and More-than-Human Methodologies at Bawaka, NE Australia’, *Journal of Cultural Geography* 29, no. 1 (2012): 39–60.

57 Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 61.

opportunities.<sup>58</sup> In the contemporary scenario, learning is taking place within a context of unprecedented change, making the role of history complicated, and more urgent than ever.<sup>59</sup>

This work conveys a way to invite photographs into oral and environmental history that approaches them as wayfinding tools through which interviewees can reflect, critique and think with new understandings of the past. Using a combination of photographs, interviews and field work enabled the land itself, as well as the practical place-based histories and the wider historical, social and cultural context to be foregrounded. Four strengths of this approach came to light that illustrate the capacity for its contribution to environmental change research and adaptation.

First, the opportunity to reflect and revisit photographs, stories and places wove together past and present. This temporal recoupling of past activities and ecological decline, and current opportunities with future possibilities, is critical in a time when, as Holmes writes, ‘we are confronting the environmental impact of past actions at the same time as projecting forward to the future the impact of present actions’.<sup>60</sup> It became clear that making space for history was meaningful for the family; in follow-up communication they shared that they continued to revisit historic photo points to think about change and compare past and present.

Second, the use of photographs and revisiting photo points held space for intense emotions and reflections. This concurs with writing that posits that the use of photographs in interviews alleviates feelings of interrogation, creates a shared point of reference between interviewer and interviewee, and allows interviewees to

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58 This work supports findings of a study by Australian geographers Nicole Graham and Robyn Bartel of innovative private landholders. Graham and Bartel suggest that ‘narratives of landholders who have worked to align their land use practices with the land itself offer important lessons for the future of treating biodiversity conservation not only as the province of public property management’: Nicole Graham and Robyn Bartel, ‘Farmscapes: Property, Ecological Restoration and the Reconciliation of Human and Nature in Australian Agriculture’, *Griffith Law Review* 26, no. 2 (2017): 242.

59 For more on this see Holmes, Gaynor and Morgan, ‘Doing Environmental History in Urgent Times.’

60 Holmes, Gaynor and Morgan, 233.

guide enquiry and discussion.<sup>61</sup> The current practice seemed to externalise personal responsibility and shame often involved in both oral histories and environmental management work, while bringing connection and sense of place to the foreground.<sup>62</sup> Through this technique, discussions of changing management decisions and farming practices, and of ecological restoration successes and failures, were narrated and understood within a wider historical-cultural context. The photographs invited wider contemplations about uncomfortable aspects of the settler-colonial violence to people and place and inappropriate farming methods. Such frank discussions expanded conversations about what was in need of care and restoration beyond individual species and ecosystems. Family photographs may play an important role in allowing often difficult conversations about environmental degradation, climate change and wider impacts of settler-colonial histories to be discussed in a safe and convivial way.

Third, this study demonstrates the capacity for oral history and photography to contribute to place-based knowledge elicitation and transfer. Multi-generational knowledge and memories are critical to informing place-based environmental management, yet local knowledge and memories in farming communities are poorly documented and are at risk of being lost. There is a need for the celebration, and possible transfer of local knowledge.<sup>63</sup> Oral histories may become more crucial to processes of property succession, especially where succession is outside the family

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61 John Collier and Malcolm Collier, *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1986); Mannik, 'Remembering, Forgetting, and Feeling with Photographs'; Freund and Thiessen, 'Mary Brockmeyer's Wedding Picture'. As well as the significance of this for emotion, photographs prompted content that I could not have predicted or enquired about.

62 For valuable discussion about the centrality of emotions, and particularly shame, in oral history, see: Alistair Thomson, 'Indexing and Interpreting Emotion: Joy and Shame in Oral History', *Oral History Australia Journal*, no. 41 (2019): 1–11. For writing on the significance of shame in ecological restoration, see: Jordan, *The Sunflower Forest*; Lilian M. Pearce and Ella Furness, 'Restoring for an Uncertain Future: Cultivating Reciprocal Relationships in the Face of Global Change', *SER News* 30, no. 4 (2016): 10–13.

63 Lilian M. Pearce and Josh Dorrough, 'Understanding the Place of Native Grasslands on Productive Land in NSW: Results from Social Research with Private Landholders' (Draft report, South East Local Land Services, NSW, 2016). Relevant considerations of documentation and transfer of traditional ecological knowledge is beyond the scope of this paper, but on this important work see Erik Gómez-Baggethun and Victoria Reyes-García, 'Reinterpreting Change in Traditional Ecological Knowledge', *Human Ecology* 41, no. 4 (2013): 643–7; Leanne R. Simpson, 'Anticolonial Strategies for the Recovery and Maintenance of Indigenous Knowledge', *American Indian Quarterly: Special Issue: The Recovery of Indigenous Knowledge* 28, no. 3/4 (2004): 373–84.

unit. Photographs have the capacity to convey more than detailed management notes, acting as way finders into place-based memories; as June says, ‘helpful from one generation to the next’.

Fourth and finally, photography and oral history can contribute to the ongoing documentation of changing ecologies and changing relationships with place. This work suggests that taking and revisiting photographs helps to reconceive the past, present and future. Private land managers have the potential to be enlisted in long-term repeat photography on their properties that, as with the growing body of citizen science projects, can assist in ecological noticing in a committed place-based practice. Funding is a key reason for long-term ecological studies to fail, but private landholders who are on the land daily and documenting practice may be enrolled for this kind of place-based attention.<sup>64</sup> It would be a different kind of photography, one that perhaps takes more direct aim at ecological condition, but as evident in the family album, this is never something that can be clearly separated from family decisions and farming activities. A future long-term oral and environmental history study that includes long-term ecological research would reveal the strengths (in environmental, cultural and management spheres) of combining these approaches.

Histories and futures grow from the ground up, in relationship with local places. Private land and private land managers are essential to ecological futures. Personal histories help to challenge ecologically inappropriate ideas about the productive capacity of marginal landscapes. Revisiting of family photographs both in and out of situ has great potential in accessing these histories and cultivating new ways of understanding the past and present. This work demonstrates a way to enlist photographs in oral history work as windows to personal environmental histories of place, and as wayfinding tools in the field to reflect, critique and reimagine past, present and future relationships with the land.

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<sup>64</sup> Youngentob et al., ‘A Survey of Long-Term Terrestrial Ecology Studies in Australia’.

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# Reports

# Talking Country with Reg Dodd at Finniss Springs

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MALCOLM MCKINNON

*Malcolm McKinnon is an Australian artist, filmmaker, curator and ghost-wrangler working mainly in the realms of social history and digital media. He has an abiding interest in the surprising labyrinths of living memory and the peculiar beauty of local vernacular. His films include The Farmer's Cinematheque, Making Dust and Seriously Singing.*

This story comes from Finniss Springs, a 2,000-square-kilometre patch of desert country bordering Lake Eyre, in South Australia's far north. For the Arabana and for many other First Nations people, Finniss Springs has been, at different times and in various ways, a homeland, a refuge, a battlefield, a university and a museum. For Reg Dodd (born in 1940), Finniss Springs is the cattle and sheep station taken up by his Scottish grandfather and his Arabana grandmother in 1918. It's the site of the Aboriginal mission where he went to school, but also the place where he learned Arabana lore and traditional bush skills from older members of his extended family – a place of 'growing up two ways'. And like many people of his generation at Finniss Springs, he can take you to the tree in the dry, sandy creek bed beneath which he was born.

For me, Finniss Springs is a place I've been visiting regularly for over 30 years. It's also where I learned to keep my mouth shut and to listen deeply and patiently. This wasn't an ability I developed quickly or easily, and it required me to unlearn several unhelpful habits; the habit of asking too many questions, of hurrying to a conclusion, of feeling obliged to offer up an opinion. Eventually, over many years, I learned to listen for and give consideration to the prominent silences that characterise the telling of stories about this place; to appreciate the implicit meanings in the things deliberately unsaid. I learned to be patient enough to allow different parts of a story to accrue and coalesce over time. And I came to appreciate that many of the

stories about this place are never fixed – that there are multiple, coexisting versions of a given story, perceived through many different lenses. Perhaps a little like the complex artesian aquifers that sit beneath its surface, the stories of this place are characteristically multilayered and not easily mapped.

I've worked with Reg Dodd and others from his mob on a series of projects over these past few decades, recording and interpreting first-voice stories about the history of this place, as well as stories about Country itself. We've made short films, exhibitions and audio programs.<sup>1</sup> Most recently we worked together over several years to write a book, *Talking Sideways*.<sup>2</sup> It feels like this work with Reg has effectively been a long, episodic conversation, based on friendship and mutual trust, as well as a shared (but respectively distinct) connection to the Country where the work is rooted.



**Figure 1** Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, Finnis Springs, 2018. Photograph by Malcolm McKinnon.

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- 1 These collaborative projects include a travelling exhibition *Working Together – Stories of Aboriginal involvement in the Overland Telegraph & the Old Ghan Railway* (Tandanya Aboriginal Cultural Institute, 2001), an audio tour *The Living Oodnadatta Track* (Northern Regional Development Board & South Australian Tourism Commission, 2007) and a series of short films *Growing Up Two Ways* (Reckless Eye Productions & Marree Arabunna Peoples' Committee, 2008 – a sample film from that collection can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/254437077>).
  - 2 Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, *Talking Sideways* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Publishing, 2019).

My work with Reg has always happened on Country. This has been vital because Country itself is always central to the narrative. Country is more than a backdrop, and often more than merely a prompt for the telling of stories. Rather, Reg's stories involve Country as an intrinsic element, as an active agent. Quite often the distinction between people and Country appears insignificant. It's as Kim Mahood has observed: '(For some Aboriginal people) place is lodged in the body, as essential to its proper functioning as the circulation of blood and the apprehension of thoughts'.<sup>3</sup> And also Ross Gibson: '(Country) is shaped by persistent obligations, memories and patterns of growth and regrowth. Governed by this system of physical and metaphysical interdependence, *the country lives like something with a memory*, a force of the past prevailing in the landscape still'.<sup>4</sup> And so a fundamental thing to understand about this kind of storytelling is that history is embedded in Country, rather than being a matter of abstract chronology. Reg Dodd's manner of storytelling frequently and effortlessly collapses or juxtaposes events from deep Aboriginal time with events from more immediate living memory or from his own lived experience. Historian Ingereth Macfarlane describes this collapsing of chronological time as 'a heterogeneous now' – a simultaneous privileging of events and experiences from all different times. For Macfarlane, Reg's kind of storytelling conjures the metaphor of a marble cake, encompassing 'disparate elements combined through no rigid technique'.<sup>5</sup> There's a fundamentally different temporal logic evident here, at odds with the linear conception to which many of us are habitually attuned, and there's a significant cognitive shift required to accommodate it.

At Alberrie Creek, once the site of the railway siding on the old Ghan line closest to Finnis Springs mission, Reg walks around and points off in various directions, unspooling a string of stories from a dense web of memory:

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3 Kim Mahood, *Position Doubtful: Mapping Landscapes and Memories* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2016), 168.

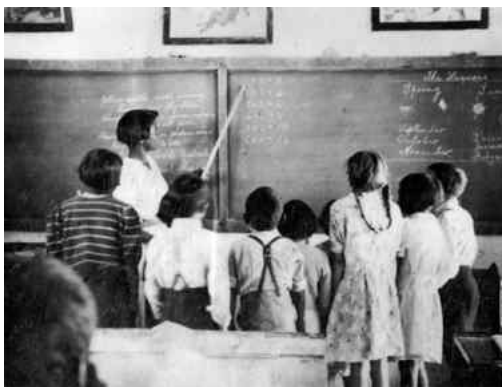
4 Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2002), 63, emphasis added.

5 Ingereth Macfarlane, 'Entangled Places: Interactive Histories in the Western Simpson Desert, Central Australia' (PhD thesis, Australian National University, 2010), 71–72.

That hill over there – when I was a little fella, that’s where I killed my first *kadni* [bearded dragon] ... I used to walk along the railway line here, picking up cigarette butts that I’d take home to the old man so he could get the tobacco for his pipe ... When the first diesel train came through we all came up from the mission. We stood here and waved these little British flags as the loco came by.

And at Jersey Springs, a little further north up the Oodnadatta Track:

These two hills: our people used to dig *yalka* [bush onion] in that area, then they’d peel them and throw that brown onion skin away. So on one side there was a heap of those brown skins, and on the other there was a heap of the little white *yalka*. So that little brown hill that’s there at Jersey Springs now, we call that place Yalka-nyuri. And the little white hill, just beside the brown one, we call it Yalka-parlu. All of these places in our Country have stories attached to them, and they extend on and on ... The stories give us an identity and allow us to see the land in a different way, as a living being which is really a part of us, because our ancestors’ spirits are within that land and they’re very real ... The land is a living thing that you can relate to, just like you relate to a person.<sup>6</sup>



**Figure 2** School class at Finnis Springs, 1947, with Esther Dodd at the blackboard. Photograph courtesy of Marree Arabunna Community Centre collection.

Reg Dodd has spent all his life living and working in this part of the Country, and he knows it several overlapping ways. He has deep connections and inherited cultural knowledge through his mother’s Arabana lineage and also through storylines relating to his father’s Arrente heritage. But he’s also connected through several generations of European

<sup>6</sup> All quoted material by Reg Dodd is from Reg Dodd and Malcolm McKinnon, *Talking Sideways* (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 2019).

pastoralists, extending back to the 1860s. The experiences of his working life in the pastoral industry and in the railways, provide additional levels of knowledge and connection, as do the more recent decades of his working life in conservation and natural resource management and in cultural tourism. Perhaps most strikingly, the depth and intensity of his connection to this Country is the product of his constant presence. Reg makes me understand how ‘looking after Country’ may be most acutely a matter of being physically present, of monitoring with one’s own eyes, skin, hands and feet.

To me, if you care about this Country and you want to look after it, you can’t do that from Port Augusta or Adelaide or somewhere else. You have to be here, then you can talk to anyone who might come along. It’s your Country and you can speak for it. You’re part and parcel of this land, and that gives you a position of strength and authority that you can work from.

This perspective might seem problematic or challenging for many other Arabana people who, for various reasons, have spent much of their lives away from their traditional country. Many were compelled to relocate in search of employment when the pastoral industry shed much of its Aboriginal workforce in the late 1960s and ’70s and when the old Ghan railway closed down in the early 1980s. Alternatively, they may have left in order to access improved educational opportunities or better health services in a bigger town or city. People continue to claim a deep connection, despite their physical absence. But Reg contends that:

There’s a thin line, like a cord that connects you with this land. Once you’ve severed that cord and lost that continuity, then you might come back to visit but you don’t really have that same connection anymore. I can come out here and talk with that bush or that hill because I’m a part of this place ... It’s got to be a hands-on, practical thing that you have to immerse yourself in and feel in your heart.

Reg Dodd’s seeing Country is a discipline that he’s forever practising. For people unfamiliar with this place it might seem that he has extrasensory capabilities – his vision seems kaleidoscopic. He’s always noticing things from the corner of his eye,

spotting small movements and tiny elements within a large space. Of course, this is the kind of vision that you'd need for hunting animals and harvesting plants.

When you follow the tracks of an animal or a bird or an insect, you're looking at what that creature is doing, and in a sense you actually *become* that animal or that bird or lizard or insect. The track is telling you a story about what the creature is doing, and in following the track you're living that story. I follow a track and I find out what he's eating and where he camps, what he's hunting or what he's running away from. And a lot of the old people that I've known, that's how they used to hunt. They might have only had a spear or a tomahawk, but they could kill a kangaroo because they understood exactly how that kangaroo would behave.

It's a vision that renders Country as something infinitely rich and dynamic. Sitting one day out at Frome Creek, just north of Marree, Reg tells me about tracking a grasshopper in the sandy creek bed, close to where we're boiling the billy. Sometimes on all fours, sometimes lying flat on his belly, Reg had watched the grasshopper for a long time. Eventually, he witnessed a miraculous thing – the grasshopper defecated, ejecting a neat turd, which it then propelled away in mid-air with a perfectly timed kick from one of its powerful hind legs. Reg even tried to find the turd, just to see how far it had travelled, but without success. But this, we have to acknowledge, is real attention to detail.

Reg takes photographs of his Country. I've heard people claim that the only effective way to picture this country is to adopt an aerial perspective, creating a type of mud map or sand painting. But for Reg, a depiction of Country has never involved that kind of perspective. Rather, he tends to make intimate pictures of the tracks made by mammals, reptiles and birds, pictures of flowering and fruiting plants, of particular sites of significance within the story of his family and Aboriginal mob. He focuses on the detail – perhaps the pattern of scales on a lizard's leg – not just for its own sake but to evoke a sense of the bigger country and the bigger story. Reg's photography, like his storytelling, is quite literally made from the ground up. These photographs are characterised as much by their *resolution* as by the perspective framed through



the lens. They convey a quite visceral sense of the living environment, revealing the erratic pulse of life in response to a highly variable climate.<sup>7</sup>

Coming to this particular Country on a regular basis and listening to people connected with it, I've developed an appreciation of its complexities. In particular, my ongoing conversations with Reg Dodd have given me intimations of a much deeper understanding, beyond my own instinctive grasp of this place. I've assimilated stories and knowledge existing on several different levels: aesthetic, ecological, historical, political and mythological, imparted through showing as much as through telling. Really, it's an ongoing education, focused within an expansive, shimmering horizon.

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7 Reg Dodd's photographs have featured in several prominent exhibitions, including shows at the South Australian Museum and Tandanya National Aboriginal Cultural Institute. Several of these exhibitions have been staged in collaboration with the painter Lyn Hovey.

# Gobernadora as a Site of Memory: Ecological Oral History on the US–Mexico Border

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LIGIA A. ARGUILEZ

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My work is set in the hot, arid desert region that straddles both sides of the US–Mexico border, from Texas to California and from Chihuahua to Baja California. It is a complex, layered place with a long history of human movement and cultural hybridity, of conquest and violence imprinted into the landscape. For many of us *fronterizo/a/es* (borderlands people) the border wall/scar is a constant reminder of the imposition of power from above. But, if we turn our gaze to the natural environment, we can see beyond geopolitics and borders to illuminate the ways place is made and nurtured as part of a shared history between human and non-human nature.

This is a story about a common desert shrub and the ways it has shaped the people and deserts of the region. Known as the creosote bush in English and *gobernadora* or *guámis* in Spanish, I treat *Larrea tridentata* as a site of memory, like a sacred landmark of a million little points spread out over the arid lands of the US–Mexico borderlands. It is a borderlands plant both because it grows along the US–Mexican border, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because it lives at the physical and metaphorical ‘edges’ of modern cultural knowledge and landscapes. It has been displaced in waves over centuries, pushed to the outskirts, yet it persists.

Despite the oft-repeated perception of the desert as a ‘wasteland’, seemingly devoid of water and life, the deserts here have nourished and nurtured human life for millennia. The creosote bush’s foremost identity has been that of medicine: it is arguably the desert plant with more historical medicinal uses than any other in North America. Additionally, and relatedly, there is a salient eco-sensorial identity to the plant that has further embedded it in place – its distinct smell.



**Figure 1** Range map of Creosote Bush, 20 May 2003. This dataset was uploaded to Data Basin and is available with additional information at: <https://databasin.org/datasets/a259c898644440c596e5d58d93e9eccc/>. Data provided by Kenneth L. Cole, George Ferguson, James Henrickson, Barry Prigge, Richard Spellenberg, Samantha Arundel, Tim Lowrey, W. Geoffrey Spaulding, Esteban Muldavin, Tom Huggins and John Cannella.

Sonoran Desert naturalist and ethnobiologist, Gary Paul Nabhan, famously asked a Tohono O’odham teen what the desert smelled like to him and the young man responded, ‘the desert smells like rain’.<sup>1</sup> This counterintuitive statement makes sense in the context of the creosote bush–filled deserts. Humidity in the air acts as a sort of activator for the many chemicals on the plant’s leaves. With exposure to water, these compounds are released into the air and produce a very distinct smell which communicates the coming of rain – life – to living things around it. This smell is often referred to as the scent of desert rain, something that people from the desert experience in very nostalgic ways that often ties them to home. Illogical as it may seem, ‘the desert smells like rain’, with all its associated meanings, is a specific place-based knowledge which is, like the identification of medicinal plants, born of lived and living, rather than abstracted, histories. In this way, memory and the senses, particularly the olfactory sense, bridge the ecological and the cultural, creating place.

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1 Gary Paul Nabhan, *The Desert Smells Like Rain: A Naturalist in Papago Indian Country* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1982), 5.



**Figure 2** Image of creosote bush in Chihuahuan desert near Sierra Blanca, Texas. Photograph by Ligia A. Arguilez.

My PhD research explores the environmental and cultural history of this borderlands desert plant. As such, it intersects with histories of colonisation, development and urbanisation of these desert spaces, as well as with memory and place. Written historical sources often describe the creosote bush as a despised plant, harbinger of the worst possible land; called useless, foul-smelling and invasive (although it is a native plant). But oral history presents alternative perspectives. In its ability to highlight cultural specificity, oral history is essential in documenting

local, place-based knowledge about nature. I adopt a personalised ecological, or environmental, oral history approach that utilises the olfactory sense – I start by asking the interviewees to smell a sprig of creosote bush. This often elicits very strong memories that speak to *emplacement*. Ecological oral histories reveal stories, memories and knowledges that are often not found in written documents.<sup>2</sup> They are invaluable perspectives that afford a more complete historical picture of the plant.

The following section features excerpts from three oral histories that help flesh out the ways that people and the creosote bush have intersected and connected in the US–Mexico desert regions.

Carolina Sandoval Máñez, a Mexican woman from Chihuahua remembered:

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2 See A. Nightingale, 'Oral History, Ecological', in Rob Kitchin and Nigel Thrift (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Elsevier Science, 2009); also Kathryn Newfont and Debbie Lee, *The Land Speaks: New Voices at the Intersection of Oral and Environmental History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).



**Figure 3** Portrait of a creosote bush with a hand, Franklin Mountains State Park, Texas May 2020. Photograph by Ingrid Leyva, [ingridleyva.com](http://ingridleyva.com).

We would put the little flowers in our ears, as if they were earrings. Then, at night, we would catch fireflies and put them on our foreheads. And, we loved it, we loved playing and we also really enjoyed watching how the birds would arrive, and rest on that plant, that later we learned it was called *gobernadora*. We were little, we just watched over the plant, because we liked to see the birds arrive, the swallows, and they would nest there ... And my grandmother would tell us that ... the *gobernadora* – that ugly little plant – was very warm and they could use it as a little home, a nest. So we loved seeing it, and the village *curandera* [a Mexican traditional/spiritual healer] would come and would always ask permission to forage some of the plant on our land ... and that plant was very, very important to her because it was what she healed with ... Everything they learn is inherited from their grandparents, their ancestors and ... my grandmother, when she started talking with her, well she taught her what it was used for.

Well, at the end of the day, I believe I have faith in all plants. But, the *governadora* is ‘the *governadora*’. It is called ‘the governess’ for a reason, after all. And, that is how I came to know it, and, to this day, something happens and you call my grandmother, you call my mother, or my cousins, or sisters: ‘Listen, do you have any *governadora*? Because ...’ I don’t know, whatever ailment, a scrape, a cut, a pain, rheumatism, and, well, you learn about all this stuff in your childhood, and so you keep growing that way.<sup>3</sup>

Guadalupe Hall, a Mexican woman from Chihuahua and Durango, recalled that,

My mother was a person who believed strongly in nature. And she utilised everything there was available around us ... We moved to the outskirts of Juarez ... and obviously there is a lot of this plant [*la guámis*] – but an extraordinarily exaggerated amount! You cannot walk a couple of steps without finding another one of these plants. So then, we started to hear about its medicinal benefits.

And it has an aroma that’s, well, peculiar, right? So, yes, I remember that my mother, she would boil it as if for tea, and she would drink it to cleanse her digestive system ... She would make a tea with the herb [*guámis*] and she made her cures that way.

The solutions that we arrive at with herbs or herbalism also have to do with the environment where we are developing, growing. For example, for us, it [*la guámis*] was part of our ‘environment’. We breathed it – you *smelled* it all around you. The scent would come when the wind blew and everything, ‘oh, it smells like *governadora*’. We burned it to make little fires, and, we utilised it all these ways, so that it was, it was part of us, *ours*, of what affected our life, of what made up our own existence ... it helped to form us as people.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Carolina Sandoval Máñez, interviewed by Alejandra Zavala, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, 14 November 2012, recording and transcript held at Institute of Oral History, University of Texas, El Paso.

4 Guadalupe Concepción Hall, interviewed by Ligia A. Arguilez, El Paso, Texas, 17 July 2018, recording and transcript held by author.





**Figure 4** Image of creosote bush in Chihuahuan Desert near Sunland Park, New Mexico. Photograph by Ligia A. Arguilez.

Rosemary Martínez, a Yaqui/Mexican woman from El Paso, Texas, remembered,

Being a little girl and having nightmares, or just being afraid. And my grandmother always wetting the branches of the *gobernadora* and she would spray me with the water. And that was one of the first memories, cause I knew that that was gonna take care of everything. [During a health crisis with rheumatoid arthritis] ... we had been taking a drive out in the country. And I said, I wanna stop and get some that bush. And – cause I remembered the smell.

And I said, at least, I just wanna feel better. You know? ... [healing from her rheumatoid arthritis crisis] wouldn't have been possible without the memory of my grandmother and the medicine behind it, there would be no way ... you know, *peyote* [a sacred medicinal cactus of the Chihuahuan Desert] grows underneath the shade of the *gobernadora*. It grows under the shade, so it's protecting other medicine. So, she's like the mother to these other medicines, too. And, that is a very sacred medicine now, that we hold also.

This is a part of us, what makes us *us*, what's in our DNA, what is in our memories, what – we hold our grandmothers' memories, of course we do. How else would we know these things?

It doesn't work if it's not connected to your ancestors and if it's not honoured in that way and I think that's such an important part of that ingredient is to be respected and honoured that way because that plant is an entity. To me



it's an entity of good health, it's a knowledge, it's so much rolled up into that little plant. And, it's attached to our history.<sup>5</sup>

Methods of ecological oral history help reveal the way place is created – through what Keith Basso referred to as the enigmatic nature of human attachments.<sup>6</sup> Carolina, Guadalupe and Rosemary all speak to some extent about landscapes of healing, of the senses, of childhood, family and shared knowledge. Those memories in turn speak to themes of self-formation that show the ways that the environment seeps into our identities. As Guadalupe explained, 'it was part of us, *ours* ... of what made up our own existence'. The creosote bush – deeply rooted in the landscape of the desert – also then becomes rooted in the people who come to know it, facilitating a profound attachment to place, like a vegetal 'placemaker'.

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5 Rosemary Martínez, interviewed by Ligia A. Arguilez, El Paso, Texas, 9 December 2017, recording and transcript held by author.

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

# Experiences of Environmental Change: An Intergenerational Approach

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SIOBHAN WARRINGTON

*Siobhan Warrington is a senior research associate with Newcastle University's Oral History Unit and Collective, currently working on the Living Deltas Research Hub. She has over 25 years' experience of collaborating with civil society across the globe to record and communicate the expertise and experiences of those living with poverty, environmental change and displacement.*

The Living Deltas Hub (2019–2024) seeks to deliver research and related activities that will contribute towards sustainable and equitable futures for those living in the delta regions of the Mekong and the Red River in Vietnam and the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) river system (including the Sundarbans)<sup>1</sup>. Coordinated by Newcastle University, it is a partnership of academic institutes from Vietnam, India, Bangladesh and beyond, consisting of over 100 researchers.

Graham Smith and Siobhan Warrington from the Newcastle University Oral History Unit and Collective (NUOHUC) in the UK, are working with colleagues in Vietnam, India and Bangladesh to design and implement participatory oral history work in each of the delta regions to document older people's experiences of and responses to environmental change over time and their hopes and concerns for the future. We are initiating this work in the Mekong Delta and currently working with colleagues from across the Hub to design a program of intergenerational participatory research with two rural communities that will combine oral history, photography and mapping.

The Mekong Delta of Vietnam is facing multiple threats and challenges including sea-level rise, land salination, seasonal flooding and drought, and significant sediment loss, brought about by multiple hydropower projects upstream and the sand-mining industry. In the extensive body of literature concerned with changing socio-ecological systems in the Mekong Delta, there is little recognition of older people; much

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see <https://www.livingdeltas.org/>.



**Figure 1** View of Bin Thien Lake in An Phu district, An Giang Province. Members of the community who live alongside the lake will take part in the research. Photograph by Thuy Mai, An Giang University, Vietnam.

of the literature fails to take gender or age differences into account when discussing vulnerability and risk, or livelihoods and resilience. Vietnam has a rapidly ageing population due to significant reductions in the birthrate and mortality alongside increased life expectancy and most older people live in rural areas. An understanding of the relationship between older people and environmental change is, however, missing from the research and policy documents relating to ageing. Our oral history work will contribute to a greater understanding of older people's relationship to a changing delta environment. As we enter the UN's Decade of Healthy Ageing (2021–2030), we hope that our work will contribute to an increased awareness of the rights and capacities of older women and men in programs and policies that relate to responding to and adapting to environmental degradation and climate change.

We do however recognise the value of an intergenerational approach and our combined oral history and visual methods will involve younger and older generations exchanging knowledge, experience and ideas about their relationship with the environment, environmental change, and their response to that change. We hope to

explore rural women's and men's relationship with their changing environment in terms of their knowledge, agency and priorities, and to provide varied and in-depth accounts of delta lives, past, present and future. The research takes a 'beyond livelihoods' approach, recognising systemic challenges and opportunities, as well as exploring cultural and emotional relationships with natural resources. It will also explore the potential for younger and older generations to co-create inclusive and sustainable imagined futures, drawing on their distinct and shared knowledges and aspirations.



**Figure 2** Research coordinators from An Giang University meeting community researchers in Lieu Tu commune, Soc Trang province. Photograph by Lan Nguyen, Center of Monitoring and Technology Environmental Resource An Giang Province, Vietnam.

Between April and July 2021, we will be working closely with our colleagues at An Giang University to implement a learning and research program that will engage a group of 12 student and community-based researchers. This program consists of several cycles of workshop sessions, individual learning, and site visits to the selected two communities. Key sessions will be

delivered remotely but will aim to retain a strong practical and participatory ethos. Reflective practice will also be critical for everyone involved, both learners and those supporting the process. We are very aware of the numerous challenges (and opportunities) presented by remote teaching and learning, and the cultural, geographic and linguistic differences at play between some of us involved. This challenging process provides an additional 'site' of research, our experiences of this process, which will not only inform our subsequent work in the other three deltas, but should also add to the body of literature on oral history pedagogy and participatory approaches.

We also hope this work will contribute to the wider field of oral history and the environment. In addition to Living Deltas, NUOHUC is also engaged in *Wastes and Strays* – an interdisciplinary study of urban commons.<sup>2</sup> We take inspiration from Sue

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2 For more information see <https://research.ncl.ac.uk/wastesandstrays/>.

Bradley's recent article, 'Hobday's hands', which calls for a more inclusive vision that recognises the interconnectedness of human and non-human animal lives.<sup>3</sup> As our engagement with this theme builds, we are actively participating in the Oral History Society Special Interest Group on Environment and Climate Change, and also value what we learn from others who are engaged in oral history and environmental change across the globe.<sup>4</sup>

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3 Sue Bradley, 'Hobday's Hands: Recollections of Touch in Veterinary Oral Histories', *Oral History* 49, no. 1 (2021), 35–46.

4 For more information see <https://www.ohs.org.uk/information-for/environment-and-climate-change/>.

# Window in Time, a Community Oral History Project: Its Challenges, Shortcomings and Lessons Learnt

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BIANKA VIDONJA BALANZATEGUI

*Bianka Vidonja Balanzategui is an adjunct lecturer at James Cook University, a historian and historical consultant. Her research fields are the Australian sugar industry and migration history.*

Ingham in the Hinchinbrook Shire, North Queensland, is a small country town whose economy depends on the cultivation of sugar cane. Due to waves of Italian migration, it is referred to as 'Little Italy'. In 1995 the first Australian Italian Festival (AIF) was held to celebrate the cultural diversity of the Hinchinbrook Shire. The festival has been held annually since, excepting 2020 due to COVID-19. While the festival's focus is on the Italian culture, it recognises that there is a rich tradition of shared cultures including other immigrant nationalities and the traditional owners, the Warrgamay, Bandjin and Nywaigi peoples. In that spirit, the project, Window in Time, was instigated by the AIF in 1998 to capture the memories of elderly people who had a long connection with the district. The project was also designed to add to festival visitors' experience. The story of this evolving project highlights the challenges faced by small communities seeking to record oral histories but lacking professional resources and funds. It also emphasises the need for amateur oral history initiatives to consider how these oral histories will be preserved for perpetuity.

The Window in Time oral history project came about because of individual initiative and passion, Regional Arts Development Fund (RADF) grants and voluntary input. A RADF grant was secured in 1998, and an interviewer and photographer were commissioned to work on the project. Unfortunately, the interviewer dropped out and local professional photographer, Dr Ann Vardanega, took on both tasks. This was the days before digital formatting and when the photographs, both originals and copies of old photographs, were taken on 35mm film and the interview

transcripts were typed up with word processor software. Short versions of the interview transcripts together with photographs were mounted and framed for display.

The 19 people who were interviewed were selected for the longevity of their residence in the district. The average age was mid-eighties to mid-nineties. Countries of origin included China, Finland and the British Isles, though the majority were from Italy and Sicily. The subjects were from all walks of life, many from very humble origins who came to Australia with nothing. Their remarkable stories told of back-breaking work, hard-won success, sacrifice and loss.



**Figure 1** Ann Vardanega and interviewee May Keys, 1998, with exhibition piece created by Ann. Photograph courtesy of Australian Italian Festival Committee.

This first Window in Time project came none too late as within 12 months a good number of those interviewed had died. This was sobering, and impressed on those involved in the project the fragility of oral history sources and the urgency to continue the project. After being exhibited at the AIF, the display went on to be exhibited at the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery, Townsville.

In 2000 another four interviews were conducted by Dr Vardanega on a voluntary basis. They were produced using the same analogue tools and methods. Once again, the oral histories featured in a historical display at the AIF. In 2009 another 11 interviews were completed.

These interviews were conducted by Dr Vardanega and funded by a RADF grant. Those interviewed included immigrants from Sri Lanka, Germany, Malta and Spain, though again most were from Italy. Some earlier interviews were refreshed and reformatted. By this time, digital tools were employed with a much more professional result.



In 2011 the Herbert River Museum Gallery (HRMG) in nearby Halifax, instigated another oral history project. This project was again funded by RADF, and the 12 interviews were conducted by a HRMG member assisted by Dr Vardanega as photographer. Because of a lack of coordinated curatorship of this and the Window in Time project, some of the subjects were those who had been previously interviewed by Dr Vardanega. Also, several of the narratives were not first-person accounts but compilations of the stories of early plantation families with oral accounts supplied by descendants. Nevertheless, this project now comes under the umbrella of the Window in Time series.

By 2020, Dr Vardanega was employed as festival director and applied for a RADF grant to employ a historian to conduct another five interviews; 20 years on she is still driven by the urgency to capture the stories of elderly residents which otherwise would be lost. The interviewees included an Italian woman married to a Serbian displaced person and a Nywaigi man. This time the interviews were digitally recorded.

The format traditionally used to preserve and display these oral histories highlights a critical impermanence of this method. The AIF committee is a voluntary body overseen by a paid festival director whose role is a part-time one. The careful curation of this oral history collection has, understandably, not been a priority of this committee, with the result that for a number of years some display items went missing. The quandary was always what to do with the display items after the AIF wrapped up for the year. Some were displayed on the walls of a historic hotel, but the idea to install the rest in local businesses came to nothing. Rather, they were stored in boxes at the festival office. Later they were moved to the HRMG, where some suffered water damage.

Compounding these issues was the fact that the earlier interviews were conducted using an analogue dictation recorder. Those tapes have since been misplaced, while the transcripts had not been meaningfully collated and stored securely. Also, the quality of the solicited accounts was inconsistent, varying from the very detailed ones recorded by Dr Vardanega to the brief ones recorded by the HRMG interviewer.

The current Window in Time project has addressed some of these issues. Firstly, Dr Vardanega has updated, reformatted and remounted the original interview narratives. All the transcripts are stored digitally and backed up, and the interviewees will be provided with copies of the narratives and the digital recordings. Most importantly, copies of all of the narratives and their accompanying photographs will be forwarded to the Queensland State Library for safekeeping.

All the interviewees have, either directly or indirectly, been associated with the sugar industry with many of them – both women and men – having laboured in the cane fields. The latest Window in Time project will feature at the 2021 AIF in an exhibition titled *Seasons of Change* dedicated to the labour of sugar cane cultivation upon which the district's economic prosperity has been founded.

# **‘I Don’t Want to Live in a Gas Field’: Creating and Using Environmental Oral Histories in the GLAM Sector**

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ANNI TURNBULL WITH JOHANNA KIJAS

*Anni Turnbull is a social history curator currently employed by the Powerhouse Museum.*

*Johanna Kijas is a consultant historian in environmental and community history, specialising in oral history practice and methodology.*

This paper is a version of a talk given by Anni Turnbull at the Australian Oral History Conference October 2019. It examines the creation and use of oral interviews in the Galleries, Libraries, Archives and Museums (GLAM) sector, using a case study from an oral history project about Coal Seam Gas commissioned by the State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW). Anni was a curator at the SLNSW when the interviews were commissioned. They were conducted by Jo Kijas in 2017.

## **BACKGROUND**

Artists are the canaries at the edge of the coal mine, and oral historians are the ones to record those canaries and play their voices in exhibitions. Telling stories in galleries, libraries and museum exhibitions has come a long way in the past 20 years. There has been a shift from the passive to the active, creating a place for community dialogue and social engagement. There is an understanding in the GLAM sector that one can get a broader sense of society by hearing the multiple voices from within it, whether covering social or environmental history.

Traditional ways of display within GLAM have included material culture such as costume, art, objects, labels, quotes on the wall, interactives and videos of documentaries. Sometimes they included oral histories. At the State Library of NSW, one recent example is the five-part web and podcasts series *The Bridge: The Arch that Cut the Sky*, using oral histories conducted in the 1980s with men who built the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

One of the environmental themes of our time is global warming and climate change, where the use of art is likely to engage people on an emotional level. International art exhibitions are increasingly focusing on environmental themes. A recent exhibition is *Equilibrium*, an art-science exhibition in Venice in June 2019. The Australian Museum in 2009 presented an exhibition called *Climate Change: Our Future, Our Choice*. As part of their renewed focus on climate change, a new display, *Surviving Australia*, was installed within the permanent exhibition in 2020 with a series of video interviews. *Inside the Murray Darling Basin* at the S.H. Ervin Gallery, Sydney (2019), was an exhibition where artists explored the impact of climate change, government policy and overuse on the river through prints, photographs and painting. Curated by Gavin Wilson, this show was aimed at raising consciousness and was a lament for a damaged and at-risk landscape. As the focus on the environment increases, how many curators use interviews or oral histories as part of their interpretation tool kit?



**Figure 1** Showcase highlighting environmental protest in *Ecologic: Creating a Sustainable Future* exhibition. Photograph by Jean Francois Lanzarone, Powerhouse Museum, 2001.

### THE CASE STUDY: THE FIGHT AGAINST CSG

Jo and I worked together at the State Library of NSW in 2017 on an oral history project collecting interviews from those involved in challenging the state's Coal Seam Gas industry. Twenty people told their stories in 14 interviews. Interviewees were chosen to provide a cross-section across geographic location, political affiliation,

gender, age and type of participation. Individuals, collaborations and separate locations produced various reasons for people's active challenge to Coal Seam Gas (CSG) and unconventional gas. For example, threats to the Great Artesian Basin (GAB) galvanised action across the North West region of the state, while in the Northern Rivers region the threat to productive agricultural land and the landscape itself helped rally 87 per cent of voters to say 'no' to CSG. In Sydney, climate change and opposition to coal have been central to people's activism, while the Illawarra people's activities centred on the threat to the water supply. In Gloucester, the specificities of the geology and evidence that the mining company, AGL, could not safely dispose of the wastewater from its drilling focused locals' attention.

However, there were common themes across all these locations that united disparate individuals and communities with their different family backgrounds, education, generations, political alignments, philosophies, gender and race. They include environmental concerns around fresh and wastewater, land degradation, toxic chemical contamination and climate change; the potential to destroy or compromise farmland and the food bowl; the failure of politicians to support local communities, particularly in rural regions and instead their support of the mining industry; the place of scientific evidence; and residents who argued that they did not want to live in a gas field.

### A SAMPLE STORY

Anne and Neil Kennedy are farmers on black soil country 18 kilometres outside Coonamble in the North West region of NSW. (While the interviews were conducted in 2017, their situation remained the same in 2020). Neil is a fifth-generation farmer in the region. Anne grew up in Melbourne and then Sydney before meeting Neil and marrying at the age of 20. They bought 'Yuma' from Neil's parents where they run organically raised cattle and sheep and farm some crops. Their son owns his own farm close by with his wife and three children, running this and the other family properties with his father. He will inherit the properties once Neil retires. One of Anne and Neil's many concerns if CSG mining proceeds is that the farms will become worthless and therefore leave their son with an impediment rather than an asset. At the time of the interviews, Anne was 70 and Neil was 75. For the previous

10 years, their fight against CSG and unconventional gas mining in the Pilliga State Forest had overtaken their lives.

It was Anne, in particular, who put her life ‘on hold’ in fighting CSG and safeguarding the water of the GAB. She is regarded across the region as one of the key organisers in the North West Alliance fighting CSG.

Both Anne and Neil described themselves as coming from conservative, apolitical backgrounds where, 10 years before, they would never have discussed politics around the kitchen table. Anne described how, since arriving in the region, she has worked to conserve groundwater, including with GABSI – the Great Artesian Basin Sustainability Initiative and various committees that has resulted in capping and piping of the GAB’s free-flowing bores. This billion-dollar program has resulted in the rise of the bore pressure and saving of vast amounts of water. Her research and passion to conserve the GAB water led to her incredulity that CSG mining could be sanctioned in a region where the only available water is groundwater from the GAB.

Anne and Neil described a series of events and meetings, from the Queensland gas fields to Canberra, that unfolded as they researched the industry. They felt that once they could provide their National Party representatives with enough scientific evidence and legitimate community concern, that the party would support the growing anti-CSG sentiment amongst the farming communities in the North West region. They have always been Country/National Party voters, as had generations of Neil’s family. Eventually, however, they came to believe this was naivety and that their party had turned their back on the farmers. Neil, especially, expressed his ‘bitterness’ at this. As Jo noted, there was a deep sense of loss among interviewees – in part for a known political world they felt had abandoned them.

Anne and Neil were active in the protests, including Neil ‘locking on’ (that is, a person locking on or attaching themselves to a building, object, fence or another immobile object, particularly at blockade-style protests), as well as Anne’s tireless political lobbying. She commented:



**Figure 2** Anne and Neil Kennedy photographed at 'Yuma' 2017. Photograph by Johanna Kijas for the State Library of NSW, 2017.

I always thought I was a desperately conservative farmer, never thought to protest ... They refuse to listen, and you see the drilling and the irreparable damage to the groundwater. People power is the thing to do now ... I'm amazed now that I have done the things I have done ... We have done everything correctly. But now we have been forced to act this way – to get our democratically elected representatives to listen to

our case. When all other methods fail, something is very wrong when we have to take this action.<sup>1</sup>

The State Library commissioned the project to build the library's collection of environmental protest and active community responses to contemporary issues. In anticipation of the future diverse uses of such a collection in the GLAM and other sectors, each interviewee was asked final wrap-up questions that could ideally be used for a media grab or quote in an exhibition or article. The NSW State Library has all the anti-fracking interviews available online.

There is nothing like communities seeing and hearing themselves reflected in cultural organisations. It says their voices and their stories matter. There is still room for the GLAM sector to increase its use of intangible cultural heritage including oral histories. Not only do the passionate individual voices from interviews add value to exhibitions, but by having their interviews online, in some cases they honour the wishes of the interviewee. As Anne Kennedy comments, 'we have intergenerational responsibility to inform not just current generations, or my 13 grandchildren but the future generations for hundreds of years'.

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1 Neil and Anne Kennedy, interviewed by Johanna Kijas, Coonamble, 21 September 2017, Oral history interviews documenting community responses to coal seam and unconventional gas mining in New South Wales, Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW, ref 9627798.



# Reviews



***Thin Black Line* (Podcast), Allan Clarke (Presenter) and  
Rudi Bremer (Producer)**

*ABC Radio National,  
Australian Broadcasting Corporation,  
[https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/thin-  
black-line/](https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/thin-black-line/)*

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REVIEWED BY MAXWELL JOHN BRIERTY,  
*University of Queensland*

The death of Daniel Yock, a young Aboriginal man, following his arrest by Queensland police in Brisbane in 1993 remains shrouded in infamy and tragedy. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation podcast, *Thin Black Line* traces the events surrounding his death, exposing the fine line between ‘tragic incident’ and unfinished business. Speaking with members of Yock’s family, his friends and senior figures of Brisbane’s Aboriginal community, Allan Clarke, a Muruwari man and award-winning investigative journalist, brings listeners on a journey in pursuit of answers. But what is uncovered is not black and white. The podcast paints a profoundly devastating image, with listeners being unable to avoid the shattering impact that Daniel Yock’s death had on those closest to him, and the far-reaching impacts that it had on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community in Queensland.

*Thin Black Line* is an assertive act of truth-telling, one that clearly articulates the unfinished business of the past. The podcast exemplifies a range of elements of Aboriginal storytelling that are profound and compelling, and the medium of podcasting allows this to be conveyed in a sophisticated way. Where traditional histories approach the past in abstract terms – holding the past at arm's length in the present – the Aboriginal oral histories in the podcast collapse time and summon time. Listeners are pulled into the past and made to bear witness to the evocative retelling of Daniel Yock's life and his tragic and avoidable death. The overarching narrative structure and non-linear progression of the podcast accentuate the storytelling of Aboriginal people, causing listeners to share in the anguish, devastation, and sense of profound injustice at the death of Daniel Yock. This is achieved by listeners gaining a sense of who Daniel Yock was. The oral histories presented in the podcast clearly demonstrate that his life endures in the memory of those who knew him, and that many people continue to mourn his loss today.

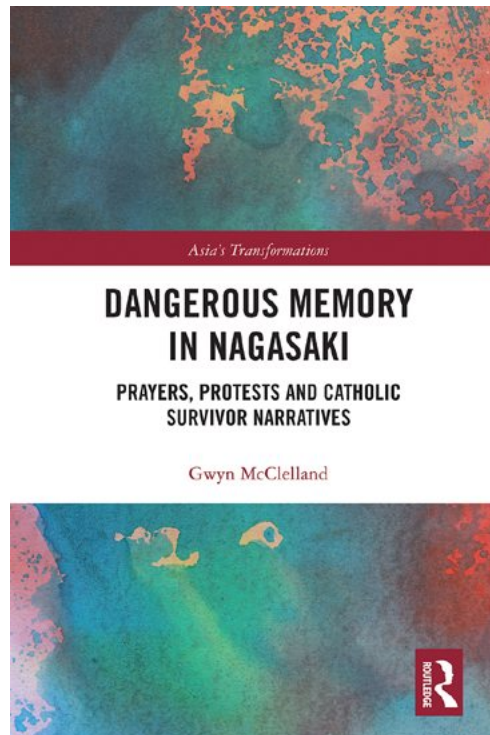
The unfinished business surrounding Daniel Yock's death may be particularly challenging for listeners. The narrative structure of the podcast gives listeners a sense that answers are needed, that justice must be done, but it concludes without a resolution. That justice has not been done is unmistakable, but the question remains how justice can be done going forth. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to identify truth-telling as a critical part of meaningful reconciliation, but *Thin Black Line* does not necessarily position listeners as potential changemakers nor equip them – particularly lay people – with the knowledge of how to learn from the past to reshape society.

The blame for Daniel Yock's death is framed around over-policing and the propensity that Queensland police have, at numerous times throughout their history, had for doing violence to Aboriginal people. This means that, at an elementary level, institutional racism and systemic failures are foregrounded in the podcast. This clearly builds from the dominant social and political discourse around Indigenous incarceration following the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Such discourse has tended to position Indigenous deaths in custody as a 'wicked' problem and something that can only be ameliorated through

progressive reform. However, this fails to fully account for the deeply embedded legacies and continuities of colonialism in Australia. After all, many Aboriginal people have a long historical memory and – as the Queensland Native Police reminds us – it was not that long ago that *it was the job* of certain members of the Queensland police to kill Aboriginal people.

Truth-telling is a critical and powerful part of *Thin Black Line*, but it may have been able to draw on the experiences and storytelling of Aboriginal people in such a way that problematised institutions in the present and reenvisioned a decolonial future. Without exploring the emancipatory potential of de-institutionalisation and decolonial efforts, the podcast reinforces – even naturalises – the position of police and the prison in society. At the same time, perhaps it is only first through processes of truth-telling – like that undertaken in the podcast – that meaningful societal change can come about.

It is difficult to engage with *Thin Black Line* without being made to confront the ongoing violence that sustains settler-colonial order in Australia. With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now being among the most incarcerated groups in the world, and Indigenous deaths in custody continuing, podcasts such as this are more important than ever. It provides a window into a world that many non-Indigenous people would not be exposed to and, consequently, it is a valuable resource. That *Thin Black Line* does not arrive at a clear way forward is an important and compelling act of truth-telling in and of itself: truth-telling must take place before a resolution can be made. This podcast reinforces that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have unfinished business with colonialism. Such opportunities to voice experiences and injustices of the past and present are integral for creating a meaningful coexistence between First Nations people and settlers in Australia.



***Dangerous Memory in Nagasaki: Prayers, Protests and Catholic Survivor Narratives, Gwyn McClelland***

*Routledge, London, 2020. 246 pages. \$77.99 (paperback). ISBN 9780367777234.*

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REVIEWED BY SHINNOSUKE TAKAHASHI,  
*Victoria University of Wellington*

On a small island west of Kumamoto is a rustic fishing and farming village called Amakusa. On this island, there is a museum where visitors can see small bronze plates with prints of Christ crucified on the Cross, all of them well-worn. Next to the bronze plates are wooden sculptures, which look like Buddha, yet holding a small baby. It is at this museum that I saw for the first time the remnants of mass persecution of Christianity in this area, which took place most violently between the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The image of Christ on the bronze plates

is hardly recognisable without prior knowledge, not just because the plates are aged, but because they were stepped on by thousands of local Christians as they renounced their religion. On the other hand, the Buddha-like sculptures of the Virgin Mary tell us how local villagers secretly retained Christianity despite the risk to their lives. It is still a painful memory for someone who grew up in a Catholic community, marginal today, once violently forbidden. Yet, what caused me more pain was the humble town of Amakusa, which still remains economically and socially disadvantaged in this region.

My review of Gwyn McClelland's *Dangerous Memory in Nagasaki* begins with a personal anecdote from my trip to Amakusa, which, as the author briefly mentions in an early part of the book, had cultural connections to the Christian community in Nagasaki over many years. This book, which is based upon the author's award-winning doctoral thesis, is perhaps one of the most remarkable works exploring the historical and contemporary experiences of the Christian community in Japan, sitting alongside Mark Mullins' monumental work, *Christianity Made in Japan*. Although the history of Christianity and Christians in Japan still occupies only a marginal area in the Western context, its significance has recently drawn more attention, visible in popular culture, including Martin Scorsese's film, *Silence* (2016), which was based upon the novel with the same title by Shūsaku Endō (1966), and more recently by Pope Francis's visit to Japan in 2019. In this context, Nagasaki, a prefecture in the west of Kyushu Island, is undoubtedly one of the crucial sites of enquiry, as the area was a part of the broader region in northern Kyushu where Christianity was protected by the local warlords prior to the great persecution around the turn of sixteenth century.

However, the history of Christianity does not represent the entirety of this book. In fact, what makes this book timely, relevant and, above all, essential is its detailed account of communal division, social exclusion and prejudice against the local Christian population, which has been deeply embedded in the local community for centuries. The history of the 'outcasts', also known as *eta* or *hinin* in pre-modern Japan, and its lasting social impact on modern life has been a major subject within Japanese studies, such as *Embodying Difference* by Tim Amos. Also, more recently,

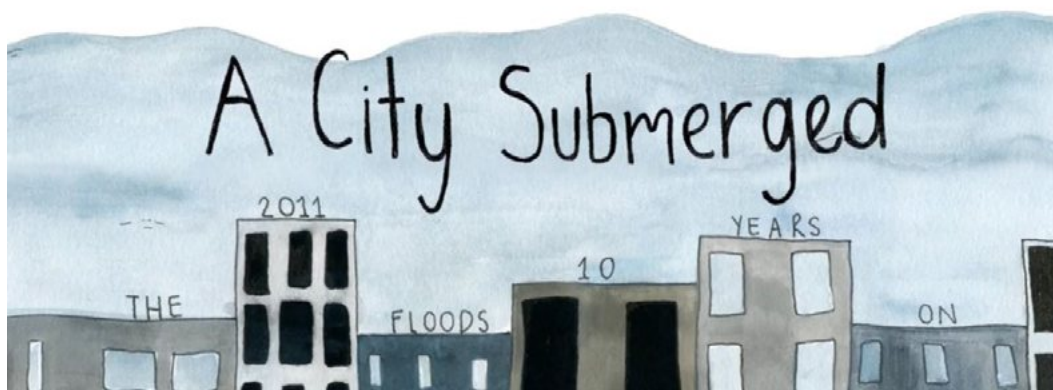
Yoshikazu Shiobara, Kohei Kawabata and Joel Matthews published a co-edited volume on communal division built upon race, ethnicity and social stratification in contemporary Japan.<sup>1</sup> In this context, *Dangerous Memory* sits in a distinctive place by tying the issue of social exclusion with the history of Christianity, which was, at least to me, unheard of prior to reading this book. Although the author does not discuss it extensively, what fascinates me was the fact that Korean prisoners of war who were taken to Nagasaki in the wake of Toyotomi Hideyoshi's invasion of Korea from 1592 to 1598 also became Christians. By delving into this local history of religious and social minorities, the author successfully reveals the presence of people and their long-neglected past, which have not previously been documented as a history.

The author's exploration of the impact that the atomic bomb dropped in Nagasaki on 9 August 1945 had on the Christian population led him to describe their oral histories, collective memory, individual testimony and social practice as 'dangerous' because they also unfold the stories of stigma and exclusion based on social class. For example, the book reveals that the area the bomb was dropped in, which suffered more damage than the more prosperous port area, yet was slower to be reconstructed, was populated by more socially vulnerable classes, including many Christians. His interviewees' historical narratives give us their active voices, which are otherwise dismissed or neglected by the majority of the local community in Nagasaki, because they are conceived as unsettling against the mainstream narrative and memory of the atrocity. In this sense, McClelland's work is indeed provocative, yet it also reveals a way in which this unprecedented event is endured and survived at the grassroots level, which is the mission of any historical study. This well-researched book is a must-read for those who are interested in the history of Japan, transnational history, and the memory of World War II beyond academia.

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1 Yoshikazu Shiobara, Kohei Kawabata and Joel Matthews (eds), *Cultural and Social Division in Contemporary Japan* (London: Routledge, 2019).





## ***A City Submerged: The 2011 Floods 10 Years On*** **(Exhibition)**

Museum of Brisbane, Brisbane,  
<https://www.museumofbrisbane.com.au/a-city-submerged>

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REVIEWED BY MARGARET COOK,  
*University of the Sunshine Coast*

Photographs and film are the standard media used to visualise a flood, but the Museum of Brisbane's *A City Submerged* exhibition offers a unique interpretation of South East Queensland floods through artist Holly Neilson's ink pen and watercolours, animated by Sai Karlen. The accompanying text is spare – small vignettes provide context and stories that gently inform readers, adding depth to both text and illustrations. Diverse texts, informed by a range of participants, have been chosen: Michael Barnes (State Coroner), lyrics by The Strums (Brisbane band), Matthew Condon (journalist) and Thomas Shapcott (poet and novelist), as well as the oral accounts from Shannon Ruska (Yuggera/Toorabul elder), Jo Willans (Brisbane BreakFree Climate Action Group) and Brisbane residents Marjorie Cross, Cassie Woolley and Rachel Hoey. The writing styles vary and offer insights into how floods affect human lives, shaping emotion and memory.

This exhibition illustrates the richness of collaborative work when artists, writers and oral historians combine skills to convey our stories and record the past. The snippets of oral history shared in this exhibition humanise the flood to an individual's level, adding a poignancy to the exhibition. As many Brisbane residents will remember the 2011 floods, these accounts may resonate with viewers of the exhibition.

Stories of the 2011 flood often highlight the dominant narratives of communities pulling together, overcoming nature's attacks through a determined common purpose to quickly return life to normal. But rather than relying on these familiar tropes of resilience – of heroism and conquering nature – this exhibition offers a more nuanced narrative of the flood. Recent scholarship has challenged the popular perception of a flood's temporal scale – they are not a short, singular event but one with enduring and indefinable timetables.<sup>1</sup> For some, lives are permanently altered; the event is not over when the waters recede and the mud is hosed away. In the words of poet Thomas Shapcott, cited in the exhibition: 'Floods may go down, but the things they leave behind take much longer'. Marjorie Cross tells us of the slow process of recovery as she was unable to sleep whenever it rained for five years after the flood. Shannon Ruska reminds us that floods are part of Deep Time, recounting the Dreaming story of Moodagurra, the rainbow serpent, that brought big rains that, as the accompanying drawing shows (image seven), subsumed all below.

The opening image depicts a city submerged in 2011 through graphics of moving and rising waters, as the exhibition title text bobs up and down in the ebbing flood-waters. The image immediately hooks the audience, enticing them to continue through the exhibition, which loosely follows the chronology of the flood. The ominous grey clouds, falling rain and lightning strikes in image two and the single figure looking into the rising waters in image three creates a sense of foreboding, as do the quoted lyrics from The Strums: 'Oh, river don't you come up over me'. The

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1 Scott McKinnon and Margaret Cook, 'Introduction', in Scott McKinnon and Margaret Cook (eds), *Disasters in Australia and New Zealand: Historical Approaches to Understanding Catastrophe* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 9.

muddy waters knocking on doors demanding entry (image four) reflects the agency of nature in floods. The family looking at their submerged house (image six) depicts the futility of human action, accompanied by the salient message from Marjorie Cross: possessions ‘don’t really matter’.

Mud is an enduring memory of floods and its ability to seep in everywhere is reflected in the image of the mud-filled toaster (image eight), and the teddies atop furniture surrounded by rising water (image nine) reminds us of the emotional impact of disasters. Brisbane resident Rachel Hoey describes the agonising decisions that were made over which precious belongings to save, while Cassie Woolley describes the ‘tonnes of mud that had been dropped on this suburb’, referring to her Brisbane home. Not surprisingly this segues into what may become the most indelible 2011 flood story – the thousands of people who volunteered to assist in the clean-up. The mud image (image 10) and Jo Willans’s words encapsulate both the story and the mythology created: ‘A city united, drawn together in solidarity to help out, clean up and rebuild. Out of the floodwaters rose the Mud Army’.

What is missing from the exhibition are the human contributions to the floods – humans are portrayed as the hapless victim. The challenge for future exhibitions, particularly in light of climate change and the accompanying risk of more frequent and intense floods, is to produce an exhibition that challenges human behaviour and discourages building on the floodplain. I suspect this was not the designer’s brief. Perhaps this is where artists and writers can make their greatest contribution: in working with flood scholars to convey future scenarios that inform the public. Exhibitions like these have important roles, as disaster scholarship demonstrates that maintaining flood memory contributes to public education and helps reduce the hazard by raising community awareness. I commend the Museum of Brisbane on this attractive and engaging exhibition that also fulfils a valuable educative role.

# PRIDE IN DEFENCE

THE AUSTRALIAN MILITARY &  
LGBTI SERVICE SINCE 1945



NOAH RISEMAN & SHIRLEENE ROBINSON

***Pride in Defence: The Australian Military &  
LGBTI Service since 1945, Noah Riseman  
& Shirleene Robinson***

*Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2020. 272  
pages. \$34.99 (paperback) ISBN 9780522876741*

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REVIEWED BY JAMES BENNETT,  
*University of Newcastle*

It is a curious fact that the lifting of the ban on LGBTI personnel serving openly in the Australian defence forces in 1992 is barely remembered and completely submerged by the dominant narrative of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ – the Clinton administration’s compromise solution a year after the Australian reform. In the years following the 1992 reform there was much unfinished business in changing attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ people serving in the military. By degrees, particularly through

the instrumental role of ADF leadership and LGBTI advocacy group DEFGLIS – Defence Gay & Lesbian Information Service – there has been a very significant shift in policy towards a more inclusive climate in the services.

That progress has been tempered in recent years of conservative government by a new culture war context, which has forced the progressive ADF leadership to temper its approach to inclusion strategies. The Murdoch press has characteristically led the charge in prosecuting the new culture wars. Costs borne by the ADF for gender affirmation surgery, HIV prevention drugs along with the ADF's official participation in the annual Mardi Gras parade since 2013 have all been flashpoints, held up by the media's chief prosecutors as evidence of 'radical social engineering'. The conservative challenge to diversity and inclusion policy was underlined even more starkly in May 2021 by the political master of defence chiefs – new Defence Minister, Peter Dutton. Following his appointment to the portfolio, Dutton moved quickly in ordering the Defence Force Chief and Secretary of Defence to cease morning teas in which staff wore rainbow clothes or ally pins in support of LGBTI servicemen and women, accusing the department of pursuing a "woke" agenda'.

Conservative critics have consistently and falsely conflated diversity and inclusion with identity politics and social engineering. Defence chiefs such as Chief of Army, David Morrison (2011–15), and Chief of Navy, Ray Griggs (2011–14) have argued conversely that the reforms are designed to build a better ADF, one that reflects the views and norms of modern Australian society. Noah Riseman and Shirleene Robinson's book is the first comprehensive account of the institution's key shifts, spanning an 80-year period from the days of hidden same-sex encounters in World War II to the diversity and inclusion programs pursued in the 2010s.

In so doing Riseman and Robinson build on the work of other LGBTI scholars, who have identified World War II as a site of particular interest for LGBTI history, and their own companion book, *Serving in Silence* (2018), which presented life stories of 14 LGBT service personnel after World War II. As part of their broader research goals, the team's findings were also disseminated in the form of a touring exhibition,

featuring objects, photographs, documents and life stories of participants from oral history interviews.

*Pride in Defence* is impressive in the scale and organisation of its undertaking. It draws on a wide array of archival and official sources – especially from defence forces and the National Archives of Australia: 140 oral history interviews, personal papers and media sources including LGBTI media are drawn upon. Oral history is popular among LGBTI scholars as there are so many silences in the archival record, while written records such as police files are limited in their capacity to yield an understanding of the personal. Put simply, oral history method provides us with a way to engage with the big picture of history through the micro-lens of the individual, significantly enriching our understanding of human experiences and impacts.

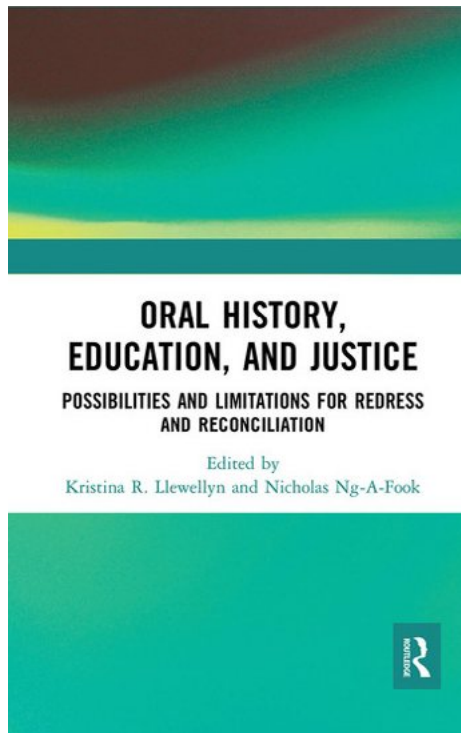
One of the book's significant findings to my mind relates to the 1950s and '60s – a time when same-sex encounters were not only illegal between men but were intensively policed, particularly in New South Wales, whereas there was a silence about lesbianism. And yet, the reverse applied in the military sphere where official anxieties were rampant regarding the effects of such a hegemonic masculine institution on socially accepted standards of femininity. The attraction of the forces to lesbians was perceived as threatening and became the basis for their targeting out of fear that a significant presence would rebound on the public image of the forces. This was the era of surveillance, investigations and witch-hunts, usually leading to dishonourable discharges, and became the template for what the authors refer to as the 'heightened ban years' from 1974 to 1992.

The book gives us a reasonably good sense of the relationship between the military sphere and the wider polity. The ban period, for example, witnessed progress in civil rights for LGBT people, responded to by service police with an even harder crackdown in an attempt to hold back the tide on changing gender and sexual norms. This dimension might have been developed further through a sharper focus on major shifts in the socio-political landscape in the first two decades of the twenty-first century via such landmark reforms as marriage equality. We do get a hint of this from one interviewee, a current member of the forces, who noted an upsurge in

homophobic comments during the marriage equality postal survey in 2017. This is an anecdote corroborated by emerging research on the impacts of corrosive public debates on marriage equality and related issues over the past decade.

*Pride in Defence* is an important achievement and will deservedly be foundational to our understanding of LGBTI people in the military for many years to come.





***Oral History, Education, and Justice: Possibilities and  
Limitation for Redress and Reconciliation, Edited by  
Kristina R. Llewellyn and Nicholas Ng-A-Fook***

*Routledge, New York, 2019. 218 pages. \$252.00  
(hardcover). ISBN 9781138896154.*

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REVIEWED BY CHRISTINE TRIMINGHAM JACK,  
*Charles Sturt University*

The central tenet of this multifaceted and highly informative edited book is that when oral history is coupled with educational endeavours it has a crucial part to play ‘in global movements for redress and reconciliation of segregation, apartheid, forced migration, genocide, and other human rights abuses’ (p. 1). The focus is mainly

Canadian but as an Australian reader, I found much to learn that is applicable to the Australian context.

The book is divided into two overarching sections where the broad themes of trauma, reconciliation, oral history and education are unpacked and tied together. Section one addresses public pedagogies, memory and redress, while section two focuses on unsettling curriculum, pedagogies and reconciliation.

In section one, the notion of 'education' is nuanced: contributors problematise their engagement in the field of oral history as 'positioned' researchers with the learning that comes from such reflexivity. Timothy Stanley's chapter traces his journey into understanding oral history, providing an overview of the development of oral history methodology. Offering examples taken from First Nations people, Chinese-Canadian and Japanese-Canadian communities, he discusses how trauma engendered by racialisation and exclusion takes time to emerge. The intergenerational transmission of trauma, and the ways that some oral history formats may both reveal while, at the same time silence, those whose experiences we seek is unpacked, and considered in relation to the small proportion of people whose histories have been recorded, and the ongoing nature of *true* redress.

Aparna Mishra Tarc analyses changes regarding what is accepted as legal evidence from First Nations people. What is valuable in this chapter is the revelation that oral histories have the potential to 'revolutionize our habituated meanings of knowledge, truth and justice' (p. 66), and that studying events where this occurs may lead us to re-examine our own consciousness about what constitutes evidence. Pamela Sugiman's contribution details the intergenerational trauma in her Japanese-Canadian family, and her decision as a young academic to draw on oral history to confront the silences in both her family's and community's past. After working with *Nisei* narrators, she powerfully repositions herself to 'gain a nuanced understanding of what non-Japanese Canadians, for decades silent, remember about the internment and how they narrate their memories' (p. 78). Her challenge is to problematise and question 'silence', especially relating to the racialised past. Jennifer Tupper's chapter reflects on the formation of her own 'settler' consciousness, including childhood

family experiences which were made possible by ‘material and social privileges’ which she recognises ‘are directly connected to a deeply colonial past and present’ (p. 98). She challenges us to engage in the ‘difficult work’ (p. 102) of recognising how settler consciousness is shaped by colonialism and a willingness to enter into ‘complex conversations that seek to connect the colonial past to present colonial realities’ (p. 102), arguing that ‘settler life writing’ (p. 90) offers a way forward in this process.

In section two of the book, education takes centre stage. A key question for Kiera Brant-Birioukov, Nicholas Ng-A-Fook and Kristina R. Llewellyn is how ‘doing oral history education’ (p. 108) can become a ‘pedagogy’ of empathic and ethical listening, leading pre-service teachers to examine their positionality and relationship to the stories and history: a process of ‘learning’ and ‘unlearning’. They exemplify this through what is being done at the University of Ottawa to develop a ‘praxis of reconciliation’ (p. 107) at times comparing it with what is being done in Australia. Interestingly, the program includes viewing the film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, ‘which juxtaposes the violent intergenerational impacts of settler colonial residential schools in Australia, with Indigenous ways of knowing, ingenuity, and youth resistance’ (p. 113). What they seek is an ‘emotional response’ that ‘can bring a learner from a space of *witnessing* to a space of *experiencing* past relations that have fallen apart’ (p. 119).

Lisa Taylor’s chapter reports on her longitudinal study of the use of Indian Residential School survivor testimony and testimonial literature, film and storytelling in a Bachelor of Education program. There is an immediacy given to the report through the inclusion of student’s responses as they question the ‘certainties’ of their lives through what is termed ‘remembrance pedagogies’ (p. 139). Taylor uses the work of Roger Simon in leading students to recognise that as ‘heirs of difficult histories’, they are ‘communities *in the making*’ (p. 144) and how oral histories are ‘a resource to rethink the terms of contemporary social and political life’ (p. 144). Lisa Farley and Tasha Henry explore how picture books can be used in primary education for the purposes of the ongoing, uncertain reconciliation, while recognising that these texts ‘come into the hands of teachers and students already steeped in the colonial context of their publication and circulation’ (p. 156). They argue that in a ‘time

of reconciliation' the role of the teacher must be rethought to consider not only students but a confrontation of one's own position, especially 'the fantasied notion of innocence' (p. 163) ascribed to children, exemplifying a pedagogy that addresses rather than avoids trauma.

Kristian Stewart's contribution reports on a South African teacher education curriculum based on a 'pedagogy of discomfort' (p. 170). In this, students who have never mixed outside of their own cultural or linguistic categories join a storytelling circle, leading to the production of a digital story based on their journey of becoming a teacher, with a recognition that their stories are shaped by the historical context in which they were formulated. The students share personal, often traumatic, experiences from that journey, many of which are embedded in 'the complex socio-economic and political realities that affect today's South African society' (p. 172). The approach is based on a hope that it will 'disrupt their preconceived notions of otherness, assist them in developing empathy, and help them to understand troubled knowledge' (p. 170); it is a powerful way of 'producing critically conscious' (p. 179) teachers. Finally, Dan Roronhiakewen Longboat, Andrejs Kulnieks and Kelly Young explore how 'oral history education needs to involve a focus on restoring our relationships between humans and humans and humans and the Earth' (p. 185). The methodology involves bringing Indigenous and Western scientific knowledge systems together in teaching history, social studies and environmental education. 'Oral Tradition' takes a central place in this endeavour as 'an enlivening connection to a repository of knowledge', allowing dialogue about 'deep relationships between humans and the Earth' (p. 193). Like the South Africa project, they urge educators to provide opportunities for students to develop their abilities to tell the stories that are 'historically referenced' (p. 194), and to share their own often traumatic stories, leading them to view historical events from different worldviews or perspectives.

Permeating this book is, as Lisa Farley and Tasha Henry state, a recognition that reconciliation is 'a reparative action that is without the certainty of knowing when it will end' (p. 153). There are powerful guides for ways in which educationalists and researchers can participate in this difficult, essential and ongoing process that does not shy away from the accompanying trauma. There is much for Australian readers to learn from it.