

Listening Across Collections: Migrant Memories of Health in Australia

EUREKA HENRICH¹

Eureka Henrich is the Australian Historical Association 50th Anniversary History Fellow and Visiting Research Fellow in the School of Humanities, University of Hertfordshire. Her work explores histories of migration, health, heritage and memory in Australian and transnational contexts. She has recently remigrated to her hometown, Sydney, after ten years in the UK.

This article explores the methodological and ethical issues arising from the reuse of migrant oral history collections in Australia. It provides an overview of the literature on reuse, or the secondary analysis of qualitative data, and highlights approaches that consider the reuse of multiple collections. Two collections from the researcher's own secondary analysis are presented as case studies: Morag Loh's FILEF interviews from Melbourne in the late 1970s, and the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW Oral History Project interviews managed by Janis Wilton in Sydney in the early 1980s. Through comparing and connecting a small-scale community-engaged project, and an early government-initiated migrant oral history collection, the article posits that it is possible to listen not only 'with', but 'across collections'. Listening across collections is a particularly valuable approach to histories of migration and health, both areas in which migrant and/or patient voices are rarely captured in 'traditional' historical records.

1 I would like to thank the Wellcome Trust for the grant of a Medical Humanities Fellowship [104391/7/14/Z] which funded the research project of which this article is a part; the two anonymous reviewers and the editors of this special issue for their encouragement and feedback; and audiences at the University of Warwick's Centre for the History of Medicine (2019) and the History and Public Health Seminar at the Institute of Historical Research (2022) who helped to shape my thinking on 'relistening'.

This article starts with two stories. The first belongs to a man named Giovanni. Giovanni grew up in the Calabria region of Southern Italy and became a painter and a decorator. At the age of 21, he emigrated to Melbourne on the south-east coast of Australia. The year was 1952, and Australia was in the midst of a post-war immigration drive to boost the population and the workforce. Giovanni recalls that being sick was ‘a tremendous problem for migrants – if you were sick there was hardship because there was no hospital or doctor or anybody at that time who would speak Italian, so we would have to take an interpreter’. Suffering pain in his right hip and arm from his work as a painter, he sought out a local doctor for advice but didn’t understand the diagnosis. He returned the next day with a friend’s young son, who did his best to translate. It soon transpired that the doctor suspected appendicitis and wanted to operate as soon as possible. Giovanni remembers: ‘I did not know whether to believe the doctor or not. Anyhow I did not go to the doctor again and I have not had the operation. It was not an appendix at all, it was a muscle in my arm and it was the pain that made me sick’.²

Memories of ill-health also feature in Vicky’s story. Vicky and her family left the Greek island of Lesbos in 1955 for a fresh start in Australia. However, as she remembers, ‘that’s when hell started’. After living in a series of poorly provisioned migrant hostels, Vicky’s parents managed to privately rent an apartment. The family then suffered misfortune, exacerbated by language problems and isolation:

When we were living in Birchgrove, my mother was hit by a car, she was very badly hurt and there was no help, no compensation in those days. Of course, we couldn’t understand anything. She was brought home to find all of us little kids outside. She had to put up with that on top of it all. She was very sick. Who would take her to the hospital? No-one would have called an ambulance, she just struggled and found her way home, I had to look after her. I was only nine at the time. How could we go and call a doctor?

2 Giovanni Sgro, interviewed by Morah Loh in Melbourne in 1976, Oral History Interviews with Italian Migrants, State Library of Victoria, MS Box 4042.

We couldn't speak any English. We just had to leave it. She was sick quite a while.³

Giovanni and Vicky's stories are from two different collections, recorded by different interviewers for different projects and deposited, catalogued and archived in different state libraries. They are examples of thousands of migrant oral histories kept by community, state and federal collecting institutions in Australia. Alongside histories of war and the impact of colonisation, post-war migration and settlement has been a key locus of memory work.⁴ Most oral history projects have taken place within migrant communities, sometimes exacerbating the ethnicisation of this period of Australian migration history and limiting the scope for comparison between experiences.⁵ However, as these two stories demonstrate, disparate individual memories can transcend the boundaries of their collections and take on new meanings when put in dialogue with each other. As a historian interested in experiences of health, the presence of health-related memories in the oral history record suggests a largely untapped and precious resource for patient perspectives. These personal sources also raise important questions about government provision and access to care for newcomers, people without English as a first language, and those without the ability to pay at the point of service. For instance, why was Giovanni able to access medical advice, however problematic, through a GP, whereas Vicki's family struggled in isolation without GP or hospital emergency care? Stories like Giovanni's and Vicky's also attest to the importance of health-related memories in the course of migration and settlement. Their experiences were significant enough to be volunteered in oral history interviews 30 years after the events. As Vicky said to her interviewer, 'Things come to mind when you ask these questions. You never forget. You just like to put it behind you'.⁶

3 Vicki Alvanos, interviewed by Janis Wilton in Sydney in c.1981–83, Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales – Oral Histories Project (N.S.W.), being transcripts of interviews with Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds concerning the migrant experience, 1981–1982; and associated material, 1924–1983, State Library NSW, MLMSS 4407, MLOH 18 (sound recordings).

4 Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton (eds), *Remembering Migration: Oral Histories and Heritage in Australia* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 1.

5 Darian-Smith and Hamilton (eds), *Remembering Migration*, 5.

6 Vicki Alvanos interview, c.1981–83.

In seeking out, selecting and interpreting life narratives collected by previous generations of oral historians, I have become aware of the methodological and ethical issues that their use involves. In order to make sense of my own methods and inspired by the candid writing of others who have trodden similar paths, this article examines the possibilities, potential and pitfalls of reuse for histories of migration and health. Oral historians have argued that contextualisation and recontextualisation are key methodologies for reuse, usually in relation to a single large collection. In this article I ask how this methodology can be adapted to the reuse of multiple collections. By putting different collections in dialogue with one another, I argue, we can learn through comparison and connection. Doing so can enrich our listening and enables us to make better use of smaller collections that could otherwise be overlooked.

USING DATA AGAIN

There has been scholarly debate for decades now on what is variously called ‘secondary analysis’ or the ‘reuse of qualitative research data’.⁷ Joanna Bornat’s work in the early 2000s drew connections between different disciplines, arguing that unlike social scientists, historians had not reflected enough on the reuse of interviews. ‘Reusing’ was part and parcel of the analysis of any source and could almost be taken for granted. Historians needed to ‘make strange’ the process, to appreciate issues of method as well as potential new understandings.⁸ In her 2003 article ‘A Second Take’, Bornat examined ethical and theoretical issues raised by her reuse of interviews undertaken with members of the geriatric specialty in the UK. For instance, had interviewees consented to the purposes of the initial project only? If so, did this preclude any reframing by future researchers? She concluded that the deposit of interview data in public collections involved a transfer of ownership away from the ‘researcher and researched’, and while ‘ethical caution’ was to be recommended, the

7 For debates relating to social research, see Janet Heaton, ‘Secondary Analysis of Qualitative Data: An Overview’, *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung* 33, no. 3 (2008): 33–45.

8 Joanna Bornat, ‘Crossing Boundaries with Secondary Analysis: Implications for Archived Oral History Data’ (paper presented at the ESRC National Council for Research Methods Network for Methodological Innovation, 2008, Theory, Methods and Ethics across Disciplines, Seminar 2 ‘Ethics and Archives’, University of Essex, 19 September 2008). Available at https://www.restore.ac.uk/archiving_qualitative_data/projects/archive_series/documents/ArchivedEthicsandArchivesEssex19-0-.08JBornat.pdf. Accessed 3 December 2021.

interests of ‘furthering knowledge’ were better served by the reuse of interview data. Importantly, any secondary analysis must involve a ‘full and open acknowledgement of the varied and different contexts for interpretation’.⁹ This reflective approach to reuse acknowledging both ethical and theoretical issues became the new benchmark for academic oral history research.

Malin Thor Tureby, working with the Jewish Memories collection at the archive of the Jewish Museum Sweden, built on Bornat’s discussion to reflect more on the process of ‘archivalisation’.¹⁰ For Tureby, archives and collections had their own ‘tacit narratives’ which must be listened to in order to understand the archived interviews they contain.¹¹ She called this ‘seeing and hearing with the archive’.¹² Listening in this way involves exploring the contextualisation of interviews – the process of archiving, and the documentary evidence it creates – and reflecting on the recontextualising that inevitably occurs when revisiting archived interviews in the present. Alistair Thomson’s biography of an archive, the Australia 1938 oral history project, is a case in point.¹³ By piecing together the social, political, institutional and disciplinary context of this national collection and locating his own trajectory as an oral historian within it, Thomson contextualised and recontextualised a resource that is both problematic and full of potential. In his words, it is only through ‘taking a critical approach to interview sources and situating them within the context of their creation’, that the potential of these collections, newly available through digitisation, can be realised.¹⁴

The majority of the literature on secondary analysis relates to a researcher’s engagement with a single collection. When designing a research project relying on reuse,

9 Joanna Bornat, ‘A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose’, *Oral History* 31, no. 1 (2003): 52.

10 Tureby here is drawing on the theory of ‘archivalisation’ as distinct from ‘archivisation’ as outlined by Ketelaar. Malin Thor Tureby, ‘To Hear with the Collection: The Contextualisation and Recontextualization of Archived Interviews’, *Oral History* 41, no. 2 (2013): 64.

11 Tureby, ‘To Hear with the Collection’, 68.

12 Tureby, ‘To Hear with the Collection’, 71.

13 Alistair Thomson, ‘Biography of an Archive: “Australia 1938” and the Vexed Development of Australian Oral History’, *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 425–49.

14 Thomson, ‘Biography of an Archive’, 449.

this makes good sense, as a large well-catalogued and documented collection will offer a set of interviews addressing similar themes and collected at a similar time, making them more comparable. However, in my own research I have found it necessary (and indeed valuable) to draw on archived oral histories from multiple collections. This approach requires some further reflection on the methodological dimensions of reuse. Libby Bishop observed in 2007 that while secondary analysis had become more commonplace, few studies ‘provide reflection on the actual, not idealised process’.¹⁵ Her own research on the sociology of food drew on two historical datasets – Thompson’s *The Edwardians*, collected in the early 1970s, and Blaxter and Patterson’s *Mothers and Daughters*, undertaken in the early 1980s. Questions such as ‘what was going on in society at large that might matter when I analysed this data in 2005 compared to...25 years earlier?’ demonstrate Bishop’s practice of recontextualisation, which she undertakes twice, once for each dataset.¹⁶ She is particularly interested in the relationships formed between researcher and respondent, and how they shape the data, and compares the two datasets with this in mind. Also thinking about food at a similar time were Graham Smith, Peter Jackson and Sarah Olive, for their project ‘Families Remembering Food’. Three datasets were used: *The Edwardians*, the Millennium Memory Bank and 100 Families.¹⁷ When working with multiple collections in transcript form, and an eye for information relevant to one’s research question, it is possible to ‘mine’ the transcripts for any mention, in my case, of health or ill health. But as Smith, Jackson and Olive point out, this information has been offered as part of a longer narrative, and it is therefore the context of the interview itself, as well as the collection, which can enrich the reuse of data:

Approaching the sources as we did with new research questions in mind clearly has its dangers. It is tempting, for example, to try and extract relevant

15 Libby Bishop, ‘A Reflexive Account of Reusing Qualitative Data: Beyond Primary/Secondary Dualism’, *Sociological Research Online* 12, no. 3 (2007): Abstract.

16 Bishop, ‘A Reflexive Account of Reusing Qualitative Data’, para 6.8.

17 Peter Jackson, Graham Smith and Sarah Olive, ‘Families Remembering Food: Reusing secondary data’, working paper (2007). Available at https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Graham-Smith-11/publication/260351319_Families_remembering_food_reusing_secondary_data/links/54469ecf0cf2f14fb80fbf82/Families-remembering-food-reusing-secondary-data.pdf. Accessed 3 December 2021.

material from each interview without paying sufficient attention to the wider narrative context in which the extract is embedded. Crudely, then, one might search the transcripts for references to food and drink without paying attention to comments elsewhere in the interview that shed light on these specific references.¹⁸

These researchers suggest that when working across multiple collections, context becomes even more important, and that the dangers of ‘cherry-picking’ may increase with the number of collections considered. Despite this reticence, all who have reflected on reuse agree on the potential of archived interviews to yield new insights. To explore these issues in relation to my own research, I have selected two collections I have found particularly useful. By comparing and connecting the two, one a small-scale community-engaged project from the late 1970s, and the other an early government-initiated migrant oral history collection, I want to ask whether we can listen to oral histories not only ‘with collections’, as Malin Thor Tureby has suggested, but also *across* collections. This shift involves thinking about the links between collections – a process of recontextualisation that acknowledges shared historical contexts and ideas.

ORAL HISTORY AND MIGRATION HERITAGE: THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Thinking about context means acknowledging the circumstances in which oral histories became recognised widely as a historical source, one that could be archived in the same way as textual or material sources. Oral history gained momentum as a method in the late 1960s and early 1970s, tied to social movements which demanded public space and attention for oppressed and marginalised groups. As a methodology or a way of doing history, oral history was radical, and it is no coincidence that it was feminist and socialist historians working in the budding and intersecting fields of immigration history, worker’s history and women’s history that first championed

18 Jackson, Smith and Olive, ‘Families Remembering Food’, 10.

its potential.¹⁹ Paul Thompson's reflections on his time studying history in the 1960s in Oxford reveal the previously accepted notion of what historical research entailed:

Historians were and are still essentially jackdaws, scavengers: they use other people's detritus rather than create their own data. At that time historians got no training of any kind in research methods, but two things were always clear. First, you should be willing to make the best use you could of whatever sources you could find, whether in public archives, or in business offices, or in private house attics or sheds. And second, you should search for unknown new sources, for finding a significant new source was the biggest scoop you could make.²⁰

In one sense this is a rather scathing assessment of what historians do, but one that evokes the context in which some, including Thompson, began to embrace the potential of creating their own data, breaking away from the constraints of the archive and making new ones together with families and community groups. Interviewing people who might otherwise be undocumented in the traditional historical record beyond their births, deaths, marriages and court appearances offered a way of creating new sources and writing new histories.

Similar currents of radical democratising change were also present 'down under' where they fused with local politics and national soul-searching in the wake of post-war social and cultural change. Australia's modern history is one of continual immigration, yet the post-war period, between 1945 and 1970, represents a radical phase of planned increase. Induced by free and assisted passages, aided by family sponsorship or self-funding their journeys, more than 2 million people arrived in just over two decades – a major demographic change given that Australia's post-war population was just 7.4 million.²¹ Over half of the new arrivals were non-British migrants, who for the first time were actively sought as potential citizens. By the

19 Linda Shopes, "Insights and Oversights": Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History', *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 257–58.

20 Paul Thompson, 'Re-using Qualitative Research Data: A Personal Account', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 1, no. 3 (2000): para 6.

21 Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 'Key Facts in Immigration', fact sheet no. 2, 25 May 2010.

1970s, this generation had endured the first years of precarious life in migrant hostels, where families were often separated while the ‘breadwinner’ fulfilled their two-year government work contract, a feature of many assisted immigration schemes. Those who had prospered were becoming more vocal in the public sphere, and the second generation were coming of age and entering professions that were barred for many of their parents. Giovanni, whose story began this article, is a case in point. From a painter and decorator, he became the founding president of the Federazione Italiana Lavoratori Emigrati e Famiglie (Federation for Italian Workers and their Families, hereafter FILEF) in 1972 and was elected to Victorian Parliament as a Labor MP in 1979. Giovanni’s Labor colleagues urged him to change his name to John Anthony, as his given name was too hard to pronounce.²² He refused, and instead pushed back against the pressure to assimilate to Anglo Australian norms by giving his maiden parliamentary speech in Italian, a milestone in Australia’s political history.

A federal policy shift from migrant assimilation to an embrace of multiculturalism, and the concurrent assertion of rights to cultural expression and political representation by migrant communities, was the immediate context for the rather belated realisation that Australia had a diverse migrant heritage, and it needed to be collected, preserved and celebrated.²³ It was a shift that coincided with moves to organise and professionalise oral history. The Oral History Association of Australia was established in 1978 and held its first national conference the following year. As Alan Roberts has pointed out, this was not a starting point, but a consolidation of work already underway by folklorists, local historians, and others for generations, work not necessarily thought of as ‘oral history’.²⁴ It was the confluence of these two ‘moments’ – the professionalisation

22 Kristina Kukolja and Lindsey Arkley, ‘Unwanted Australians: Giovanni Srgo’, *SBS News*, 11 July 2016. Available at <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/unwanted-australians-giovanni-srgo>. Accessed 3 December 2021.

23 For migrant heritage in the museums context, see Eureka Henrich, ‘Museums, History and Migration in Australia’, *History Compass* 11, no. 10 (2013): 783–801. Alistair Thomson notes the confluence of migrant oral history making and the multicultural era in Australia. See Thomson, ‘Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies’, *Oral History* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 32.

24 Alan Roberts, ‘The development of Australian Oral History. 1798–1984’, *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 7 (1985): 3–22.

of oral history, and the recognition of Australia's migration heritage – which resulted in a hive of activity to collect and record migrant memories.

THE FILEF PROJECT

This then, is the historical context in which my first case study collection was created. Its origins were at a school in Melbourne in the late 1970s where Morag Loh, a teacher, and Wendy Lowenstein, a librarian, were both struck by the lack of local studies material from which to teach. Their interests in working-class experiences, including the experiences of immigrants, led to their first oral history collaboration, *The Immigrants*, a collection of first-hand accounts of moving to the area. It also was the impetus for the founding of the Richmond Local Resources Project, a small grassroots operation based at a community education centre and inspired by the People's History of Hackney in the UK. In a publication reporting on their work, Loh and Lowenstein described themselves as 'fieldworkers in oral history', capturing the hands-on and community-engaged spirit of their activities.²⁵ Loh went on to publish a second collection of stories, *Growing Up in Richmond*, documenting the lives of local people.²⁶ The Richmond Project's aim of building a collection or an archive for the local community aligned with the radical potential for oral history to create sources where the traditional historical record had none.

Alongside her work with Richmond locals, Loh was involved through personal connections with a number of Italian workers and their families living in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. They were affiliated with the left-wing migrant welfare association, referred to above FILEF. Loh evoked her conversations with them vividly in an article in the *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* in 1980:

Very few of them had had more than five years of schooling, some had far less but they all spoke spontaneously and easily. Some had real flair as raconteurs. Once...they accepted that you were interested in their experiences

25 Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh, 'The Richmond Local Resources Project', *Archives & Manuscripts* 8, no. 1 (1980): 17.

26 Morag Loh (ed.), *Growing Up in Richmond* (Richmond, Vic: Richmond Community Education Centre, 1979).

they would open their hearts to you, recalling often painful experiences, sometimes through tears. At first I was amazed at such openness, which was foreign to the way I had been brought up. I delighted in the fine sense of humour so many had, frequently turned against themselves. They were first class communicators with something valuable to communicate. I felt they possessed a vast amount of experience that was ‘going to waste’, that teachers of recent European and Australian history could well use the observations of these immigrant workers, men and women, to make the events they taught come alive for their students. And so many of the stories were good in their own right as tales, as slices of life. They should be passed on.²⁷

Loh’s keen attention to the potential of these stories as teaching material is evident in her characterisation of their liveliness, as well as their content. On the encouragement of Joan Collins, organiser of the first national oral history conferences in Australia in 1974 and 1975, Loh approached FILEF to ask if they would be interested in supporting her to create a collection of tapes, to be stored at their headquarters and used as a community resource. The organisation agreed, providing contacts and help with interpreting, typing and transport. She described her method as one of recording ‘life histories, biographies, loosely structured in that while certain basic points were covered in every interview – details of life in Italy, occupation, housing, kinship ties, reasons for emigration, first impressions of Australia, jobs obtained here etc., the informants and I were free to raise whatever we felt was relevant or important’.²⁸ What began with one interview (a contact whose story had also appeared in Loh and Lowenstein’s *The Immigrants*) quickly ballooned, and as more people heard about the project the links with FILEF became less important. As Loh observed, some she interviewed had never heard of the organisation. What united the cohort was the experience of migration from Italy to Australia. Most of the interviews were carried out in English, although Loh reflected that her own ‘broken Italian’ often helped to form a rapport with interviewees: ‘Informants, initially a bit shy about

27 Morag Loh, ‘The F.I.L.E.F. Project: Interviewing Italian Immigrant Workers and Their Families in Melbourne, 1975–1979’, *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 2 (1979–80): 13.

28 Loh, ‘The F.I.L.E.F. project’, 14.

their imperfect English, get to feel quite at ease with an “opposite number”.²⁹ FILEF members provided something of an informal steering group throughout the process and suggested to Loh that a book would be a desirable outcome, rather than just a collection of tapes. After four years of interviewing, the book was published in 1980 as *With Courage in Their Cases: The Experiences of Thirty-Five Italian Immigrant Workers and Their Families in Australia*.³⁰ It was also produced as a radio series for the Melbourne station 3RRR. The project is an example of what Thomson described as a ‘cycle of recognition’, where the process of telling and recording personal testimony can empower narrators, and the products of those recordings (books, radio series, exhibitions) ‘provide words or meanings which enable the telling of private stories’.³¹ In this case, it was the community who were firmly in the driving seat of the outcomes they wanted.

So, what theoretical or ethical issues arose in the reuse of Loh’s FILEF collection? The first has to do with the process of archiving, as no single collection of tapes and transcripts survives. I encountered four interview transcripts on a research trip to the State Library of Victoria in 2015. Catalogued in the Australian Manuscripts Collection and titled ‘Interviews by Morag Loh, 1976, with Italian migrants’, the transcripts were collected alongside 17 cassette tapes. They struck me as incredibly fulsome life histories, not limited to the experience of migration – in short, an excellent resource. Missing of course was the bigger picture, which Loh provided in her 1980 article:

Some of the tapes from the collection will be housed in the municipal libraries at Brunswick and Coburg, where there are large Italian communities. Some will also go to the La Trobe Collection at the State Library of Victoria because apart from giving vivid pictures of life in Italy and Australia they present profiles of individuals quite important in Victoria’s history.³²

29 Loh, ‘The F.I.L.E.F. project’, 15.

30 Morag Loh (ed.), *With Courage in Their Cases: The Experiences of Thirty-Five Italian Immigrant Workers and Their Families in Australia* (Melbourne: F.I.L.E.F, 1980).

31 Thomson, ‘Moving Stories’, 32.

32 Loh, ‘The F.I.L.E.F. Project’, 15.

There is an irony here in that attempting to make the interviews accessible to local communities, Loh inadvertently produced a scattered 'archive' with multiple artefacts, some of which became hidden in the digital age. Giovanni Sgro's recollections and the three others which went to the State Library were deposited in a collection that was indexed and discoverable to researchers; whereas the others are non-searchable, presumably in local library collections. One other clue to contextualising the interviews is Loh's description of her changing method. Once it was decided that a book would be produced, she wrote:

I no longer solely, collected life histories but frequently sought only accounts of particular experiences, for example of injury on the job and its consequences, or the years spent as a prisoner of war or the course of a mental breakdown caused through isolation and alienation.³³

Given the importance of contextualisation to the reuse of archived oral histories, it is worth reflecting on this split collection, and the changing approach to the interview process. As a researcher interested in health, discussion of workplace injury and mental ill health within an interview are highly relevant. Do they become less so when those experiences were sought by the original interviewer? And is a focus on four accessible interviews a misrepresentation of a collection much larger, though inaccessible? The cherry-picking warned against by Jackson, Smith and Olive is in this case a feature of the original collection and the circumstances in which it was created. Such messiness is perhaps no surprise to historians, familiar as we are with the sometimes random nature of survival of source material. Ultimately, Loh's interviews speak to the priorities of the organisation she was working with at the time, and any reuse of the archived oral histories must be contextualised by the changing aims of the project.

THE ETHNIC AFFAIRS COMMISSION OF NSW ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

While Loh was gathering the stories of Italian migrant workers in Victoria, Janis Wilton and Richard Bosworth were seeking the stories of post-war migrants in

33 Loh, 'The F.I.L.E.F. Project', 14.

Sydney. Bosworth was at the time a senior lecturer then associate professor in history at the University of Sydney, and Wilton was a recent graduate. Their collecting began with Bosworth's study, 'Refugees: Intellectual Roots and Impact of European Migration to Australia, 1933–1956', for which Wilton acted as interviewer.³⁴ This laid the foundations for a subsequent oral history project, initially called 'Thirty Years After', designed to capture the experiences of migrants who had arrived in Australia since 1951. It was part of a nationwide gathering of historical material in preparation for the 1988 Bicentenary, and initiated and funded by a government body, the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW (EAC). Ethnic Affairs Commissions were introduced across Australia as part of the official state infrastructure of multiculturalism. Their work often involved championing and researching the cultural heritage of minority groups but went beyond that to advocate for equal opportunity and participation in all facets of Australian society. It was apt then, that the EAC partnered with historians already working to collect the experiences and stories of Australians from non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Unlike Loh's interviews, which were conceptualised primarily as a local community resource, the EAC interviews were always envisaged as a donation of recordings, transcripts and other collected ephemera to the Manuscripts Section of the Mitchell Library, part of the State Library of NSW, where they could be catalogued and accessed as a collection. In Wilton's words at the time, 'We're hoping to provide present and future historians with durable, first-hand research material'.³⁵ The different scale and nature of this project is reflected in the design and eventual collection. Working with a government agency was far different to working informally with a particular migrant community. Interviewees were recruited by placing multi-lingual advertisements in newspapers – 60 people volunteered as a result. From these, 22 interviews were conducted, with some lasting five or six hours. The structure of the interviews was akin to Loh's life-story approach, with a 'loose set of questions

34 See the Administrative Biographical History field of the State Library of NSW collection record. Available at <https://collection.sl.nsw.gov.au/record/npAdzXb1>. 3 December 2021; Janis Wilton, 'Europeans in Australia: A Tower of Babel?', *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 3 (1980): 33.

35 Di Coutts, 'Culture Shock in a Land Where Men Don't Use Hair Nets...', *The Australian*, 21 October 1981.

covering family background, education and training, work, politics and culture and social life before and after arriving in Australia'. As Wilton explained:

It took time for them to relax at the interviews – for many it was the first time anyone outside their immediate family had shown any interest in their youth at all... Migrants are still asked about their lives as though they began when they stepped off the boat in Australia.

Some of the best insights people gave me into the last war in Europe came not only from professional people but from mechanics, farmers, and factory workers. They remembered the human details of food rationing, work patterns, and people's parties and other social life – facts which, when they are assembled, could paint quite a different picture of a country at war.³⁶

These interviews played a major role in a book co-authored by Wilton and Bosworth, *Old Worlds and New Australia: The Post-War Migrant Experience*, published in 1984. It was a landmark in Australian history, as the first major academic attempt to recover the migrant experience of post-war immigration and write it into the history of federal immigration policy.³⁷ The thematic chapters reflect the major themes of the oral history interviews, including journeys to Australia, working experiences, 'home, health and happiness', culture and politics (both in the 'old world' and in Australia). The interviews are quoted, sometimes at length, and not attributed to identifiable individuals, whether by the wishes of the interviewees themselves is not clear.³⁸ Some become representative of a community in their framing. For instance, writing about the folkloric traditions of the small Liminotto community in Sydney, the authors paint a picture: 'A particular sparkle comes into the eyes of older members of the community when they recall the *lotta*, which had been a traditional part of the procession until it was stopped by the local priest for being too vulgar'.³⁹ The person

36 Coutts, 'Culture Shock'.

37 Ruth Balint and Zora Simic, 'Histories of Migrants and Refugees in Australia', *Australian Historical Studies* 49, no. 3 (2018): 380.

38 Richard Bosworth and Janis Wilton, *Old Worlds and New Australia: The Post-War Migrant Experience* (Melbourne: Penguin, 1984), 78.

39 Bosworth and Wilton, *Old Worlds and New Australia*, 140.

who is then quoted describing the *lotta* is not named. They give the sense of an eye-witness to history, of bringing history alive. One of the sources that Wilton and Bosworth drew on apart from their own collection was *The Immigrants* by Loh and Lowenstein.⁴⁰

The resulting archive of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW Oral History Project is a rich one, and not limited to the 22 interviews recorded in 1981–82. Further interviews carried out by the Ethnic Affairs Commission between 1985 and 1987 ‘for the purpose of gathering wider information on the lives of migrant Australians during the twentieth century’ were added to the collection, and the photographs and other memorabilia donated by interviewees has also been preserved.⁴¹ Together with the initial interviews with refugee arrivals, undertaken in 1978, there is almost a decade’s worth of interviews with migrant Australians contained in the collection. An alphabetical listing of audio cassettes and transcripts is the main finding aid available to researchers. It reveals the type of material collected (tape, transcript, or ephemera) and the date of arrival of the interviewee, where applicable. Item numbers have been annotated by hand, presumably by the librarian who archived the collection, perhaps years later. There are some clues to when this may have occurred, as a commissioned survey of the library’s oral history collections took place in 1990. Writing about her role in this survey in the *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* in 1991, Rosemary Block provided an insight into the process of ‘getting a feel’ for a collection of tapes, rather than books:

A reel or a cassette does not reveal its character by its appearance. There are no marks of repeated use as there might be with an important document or a favourite book. The space for notation on the cassette casing or reel box is limited and the description must be necessarily brief. Much more than must one read about the collection or the item, so that supporting information

40 See, for instance, Bosworth and Wilton, *Old Worlds and New Australia*, 92.

41 Administrative/Biographical History of the collections record, State Library of New South Wales website, Available at <https://archival.sl.nsw.gov.au/Details/archive/110315719>. Accessed 3 December 2021. The phases of the project are also outlined in Judith Winternitz, ‘Telling the Migrant Experience: The Oral Histories Project of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of N.S.W.’, *The Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 6 (1984): 45.

is essential to the compilation of the register and promotes the important process of informed listening which will follow.⁴²

Amazingly, of the 1,200 tapes then in the library's oral history collection, Block had listened to 1,176 of them, including all the tapes from the Ethnic Affairs Commission project, which she noted was one of the collection's strengths. 'Informed listening' of the type described by Block mirrors the 'recontextualisation' argued for by oral historians. Through a combination of original finding aids, and later classification by librarians, the phases of collection and deposit and the relationship between them can be pieced together. An invaluable asset to this process is a collection of material relating to the organisation of the project, including minutes of advisory group meetings, publicity and press releases.⁴³ Like Loh, Wilton also contributed to the informed listening of future historians by documenting her own methodology in the *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, as well as producing a handbook for communities to conduct their own oral histories.⁴⁴

CONNECTING COLLECTIONS: MIGRANT ORAL HISTORIES IN THE MULTICULTURAL ERA

Contextualising each collection is vital to informed listening, or 'hearing with the collection'. Repeating this process when using more than one oral history collection for a research project may seem a logical step; indeed, it is what I have presented here so far. However, to do so without considering the shared contexts of different collections – historical, intellectual or disciplinary – leaves the process of contextualisation unfinished. In this section I want to suggest that by putting different collections in dialogue with one another, we can also learn through comparison and connection.

42 Rosemary Block, 'In the Beginning... Oral History Collecting at the State Library of New South Wales', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 13 (1991): 68.

43 'Ethnic Affairs Commission of New South Wales Oral History Project background papers and transcripts', State Library NSW, MLMSS 10380 (3 boxes).

44 Janis Wilton, 'Europeans in Australia: A Tower of Babel?', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 3 (1980): 24–38; Janis Wilton and Angela Bollard, *Balancing the Books: Oral History for the Community: A Handbook Prepared for the Oral Histories Project of the Ethnic Affairs Commission of N.S.W.* (Sydney: Ethnic Affairs Commission of N.S.W., 1983).

This enriches our listening and, I argue, enables us to make better use of smaller collections which, by their size, may seem less suited to reuse.

Both projects explored in this article shared methodologies and motivations. The lack of local studies material that drove Loh and Lowenstein to begin collecting all manner of historical evidence in Richmond, and to create their own through oral histories, reflects the impetus of the EAC collection – to record and preserve the memories of post-war migrants so that they might inform histories of Australia written for the Bicentenary.⁴⁵ They were not alone. A special issue of the *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* in 1984 was devoted to the theme of migrant oral histories. Wilton was the journal's co-editor at the time, alongside Louise Douglas, and among the articles featured is one by Morag Loh, who by then was working on Chinese-Australian history. Loh's work also featured in a 'preliminary directory of migrant oral histories', which Wilton compiled. Arranged into three sections – completed works, works in progress and library holdings – it captures the hive of activity taking place throughout Australia to record the histories and experiences of different migrant or ethnic groups, and to recast Australia's national story as a nation of immigrants. To ascertain the current library holdings Wilton enquired with Australia's national and state libraries specifically for material in their collections 'which could be of interest to those using and collecting the oral histories of Australians from non-English-speaking backgrounds'.⁴⁶ The results are somewhat of a shock today, given the centrality of these experiences to the oral history record. The National Library in Canberra held multiple relevant collections. Of the state libraries and archives, only Victoria had more than one relevant collection. Libraries in Western Australia, New South Wales and South Australia each held one recently established migrant oral history collection. Queensland and Tasmania reported 'no relevant holdings'.⁴⁷

45 Winternitz, 'Telling the Migrant Experience', 45.

46 Janis Wilton, 'Migrant Oral Histories: A Preliminary Directory', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 6 (1984): 65.

47 Wilton, 'Migrant Oral Histories', 71–72.

Most work in migrant histories at the time was local and community based, or alternatively academic studies destined for journal articles and monographs. Among the completed works and works in progress were collections of school resource material from children of different migrant backgrounds, theatre productions, sociological studies, radio programs and autobiographies. Unlike the comparatively well-financed EAC project, oral histories informing these smaller projects are unlikely to have the necessary institutional support and financial backing to catalogue and archive their collections professionally. And as we have seen with Loh's FILEF interviews, the archive of these smaller projects can be harder to piece together, making it less likely that the data in its original form will be reused. It is largely due to this generation of scholars, researchers and activists that Australia's main collecting institutions no longer lack holdings in the field of migrant oral history. However, the survival of smaller collections, and access to them, is patchy.

LISTENING ACROSS COLLECTIONS: MIGRATION AND HEALTH

Writing in 1978, the Australian sociologist Jean Martin observed that 'health professionals have always played the greatest part in defining the health situation of migrants'.⁴⁸ In medical and government sources migrants are represented variously as a labour source, a potential public health risk, hapless newcomers deserving sympathy, difficult patients or mute subjects of government policy. Archived oral histories offer a way to redress this imbalance. Memories of medical screening, childbirth, hospitalisation, childhood illness and work-related injuries can provide invaluable insights into the lives of individuals and families caught up in Australia's post-war immigration program. Rather than passive subjects of medical expertise and government policy, many migrants emerge in their own telling as active agents in the maintenance of their health and that of their loved ones.

48 Jean Martin, *The Migrant Presence: Australian Responses, 1947-1977: Research Report for the National Population Inquiry* (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1978), 149.

Beyond migration history, these sources are also valuable to the history of medicine and health. As Kate Fisher has outlined, oral history can provide us with ‘access to the intersection between medical and other voices on disease and to the ways in which individuals process and make sense of the medical diagnoses and clinical categories through which information about their bodies, pain and symptoms are explained to them, in conjunction with their own experiences and the view of others around them’.⁴⁹ Dozens of collections of oral histories in local, community, state and national libraries contain the memories and reflections of generations of migrant Australians. However, this is a diverse and scattered ‘archive’. Accessing these memories, adequately contextualising and recontextualising them, is no simple task. It is little wonder, then, that many historians of migration have relied on more accessible, published migrant testimony, or conducted their own interviews tailored to their research interests.

It is for these reasons that I’ve pursued a methodology that aims to rebalance the historical record, not only ‘filling the gaps’ but also reframing the narrative around this period in Australia’s history.⁵⁰ My reuse of these oral history collections has been possible because of the broad, life story approach that interviewers like Loh and Wilton pursued. Their interest in migrants’ experiences both before and after migration also meant that comparisons between health systems are possible. And in the Australian context, multiple experiences and retellings of, for instance, childbirth in hospital, can build a picture of migrant encounters with Australian medical professionals that go beyond just anecdotes. When triangulated with other source bases such as medical professional writings and contextualised by the wealth of migration and health history written since the 1980s, these migrant memories of health offer an alternate viewpoint into the past.

There has been an exciting second wave of historical work on post-war migration to Australia in recent years, which builds on and extends the foundational work of the ‘multicultural era’. Migrant hostels have been revisited as sites of memory making,

49 Kate Fisher, ‘Oral Testimony and the History of Medicine’, in Mark Jackson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Medicine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 9.

50 On ‘filling the gaps’ see Wilton, ‘Europeans in Australia’, 27, 35.

and as fertile ground for an examination of the relationship between intimate family life and the Australian state, with family separation, reproduction and childhood emerging as key themes.⁵¹ But post-war migration has yet to be incorporated into social histories of medicine and health in Australia in the same way as it has in the UK or Canada. Turning to extant oral histories is one way to approach this gap, and for me it has proven the importance of the question I initially set out to answer: how did health shape the experience of post-war migrants?

As researchers, we're often unsure that we've asked the right question until we get into the field or archive and become familiar with the material. Other historians who have worked with archived oral history collections report similar feelings of encouragement from finding topics discussed that were not necessarily intended by the original interviewers. For Paul Thompson revisiting his collection of interviews for *The Edwardians* decades later with a new research interest in grandparenting: 'the material on grandparents which did appear in the interviews was spontaneous, because people just wanted to tell us about them...we were able to evaluate [from the earlier interviews], for how many people was a grandparent really significant?'.⁵² Joanna Bornat has written about the issues raised by returning to a set of interviews with the founders of the geriatric specialty in the UK, who in many cases spoke about overseas recruitment of South Asian doctors. This time, she analysed them with questions of race and ethnicity in mind: 'the fact that race and ethnicity was not a focus for the original interviewers helps to reinforce the significance of the serendipity of the references of interviewees to overseas recruitment'.⁵³ Another example is offered by April Gallwey, who used archived oral histories from the Millennium Memory Bank to find experiences of single motherhood, with particular interests in class and gender: 'the fact that these topics were muted within the project's research design made the interviewees' vocalisation of the significance of class and gender

51 See Alexandra Dellios, 'Memory and Family in Australian Refugee Histories', *Immigrants & Minorities* 36, no. 2 (2018): 79–86; Karen Agutter and Catherine Kevin, 'Lost in Translation: Managing Medicalised Motherhood in Post-World War Two Australian Migrant Accommodation Centres', *Women's History Review* 27, no. 1 (2018): 1065–84.

52 Thompson, 'Re-using Qualitative Data', para 16.

53 Bornat, 'A Second Take', 50.

within their life histories, all the more pertinent'.⁵⁴ In all these cases it is the serendipity, spontaneity or significance of these unelicited memories which proves or somehow confirms the topic of interest and the decision to reuse the data.

The health memories that emerge from the life stories of post-war migrants carry similar salutary signs for me – they reveal that health-related migration experiences punctuate the lives and memories of a generation of Australians. In reflecting on my own methods, it strikes me that it is precisely because of the presence of related memories across different collections undertaken in a variety of contexts that I am able to confirm their significance. These were not volunteered solely because one project focused, for instance, on childhood illness, or because interviewees were asked specifically about visits to the doctor. Careful consideration of the circumstances in which initial interviews were undertaken and archived, and reflection on how contemporary research interests shape the reuse of interviews, can assist in making new analyses and adding new layers of meaning to the data – Block's 'informed listening' or Tureby's 'hearing with the collection'. But in listening not just with, but across collections, the smaller pieces combine to suggest a bigger picture. Every discovery for a historian is a rediscovery, because someone has created the source in the first instance, and we are merely taking a second look, or 'scavenging', to borrow from Thompson. And in that sense, archived oral histories are no different, except that they have been earmarked for our rediscovery, usually by the people who created them. In doing so they've expressed a hope that someone further along the line is going to listen again. As Wilton wrote in 1981, 'the material will be saved from mouldering away in some academic's cupboard once its usefulness for his or her research project is over. It will be available to researchers and readers who want to analyse, or even just read, personal histories of the migrant experience'.⁵⁵

54 April Gallwey, 'The Rewards of Using Archived Oral Histories in Research: The Case of the Millennium Memory Bank', *Oral History* 41, no. 1 (2013), 46.

55 Wilton, 'Europeans in Australia', 31.