Intimate Histories and Public Conversation: Oral History, Migration History and Public History

MARY HUTCHISON

Dr Mary Hutchison is an honorary associate professor at the Australian National University's Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies. As an oral and public historian, museum exhibition curator and writer, her research and professional interests include creative heritage and museum interpretation, community collaboration, Australian migration history, and cultural diversity. She has a particular interest in interpretation of historical and cultural experience through personal histories and senses of place.

This paper discusses oral history and Australian migration history from the perspective of my work with oral history in a variety of public history settings. From this angle of public representation of personal experience, it connects with several significant developments in oral history theory and practice over the twentieth century and shows some of the intersections between oral history and other disciplines and practices. Migrant histories and voices feature in my discussion as part of my field of activities, and as both content and subject of my collaborative migration exhibition research.

INTRODUCTION

This paper looks at oral history and its intersections with migration history through the prism of my career as an oral historian and writer in a variety of Australian community, public history, research and arts settings. It is framed by developments in oral history theory and practice since the 1970s, when I was an undergraduate. These developments have also framed the development of Australian migration oral history. Migrant oral histories and voices, implicitly and explicitly, have been part of the environment and content of my creative oral/public history activities. Most

substantially they have been the focus of my research concerning the representation of personal experience in museum exhibitions about migration.[1]

My discussion takes the form of examples of my work from the 1970s presented in the context of oral history theory and practice and relevant aspects of Australian social history and government policy. In the context of oral history practice, the creative, public and community-focused nature of the examples connect with chapters in *The Oral History Reader's* discussions of 'Making Histories' (public history) and 'Advocacy and Empowerment'.[2] Like these chapters, my work also reflects involvement with various other practices and interests including social activism, reminiscence, literacy, and text and audio forms of representing personal experience.

In the context of oral history theory, the two developments most strongly reflected within and across my examples are the interest in democratising history by collecting data about lived experience typically neglected in dominant historical narratives; and the focus on memory as a process of personal-cultural remembering, rather than as a transparent source of what happened.[3] The contribution of feminist theory to oral history alongside both these developments, and the connections with sociology and other disciplines that informed the focus on memory, are also reflected in my experience.[4] Intentions of activist movements that oral history joined forces with from the 1960s – particularly activist arts activities that in Australia became 'community arts', and the community writing and publishing movement in Britain – also play a role in the work I discuss.

Michael Frisch's term 'shared authority' to describe the subjectivity and agency of both interviewer and interviewee in creating the interview, has been a long-term guide to my practice as an interviewer and in collaboration with community groups.[5] Another enduring element that underpins my discussion is the capacity

---

1   See migrationmemories.net.au.

2   Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 2006).

3   Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 1–8.

4   Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 4, 6.

5   Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (USA: State University of New York Press, 1990).

of first-person expression of experience to speak immediately and powerfully to an audience. In the to and fro of the interview conversation, an individual's words, tones, turns of phrase, descriptions and other elements of telling (such as hesitation, silence, change of pace or cadence) reflect the emotions of an experience – and of remembering it. As Alistair Thomson reminds us, the twenty-first century 'emotional turn' in history is not new to oral historians, but provides it with a new platform.[6] It enables contemporary discussion of oral history's value as 'intimate' history, not only *conveying* feelings and meanings, but capable of *touching* the feelings of audiences. As my colleague Penny Grist and I have argued, as a sensory, embodied 'experience of experience', oral history provides a basis for creating conversations across time, place and cultural difference.[7]

The examples are presented in sections that reflect significant changes in the context and focus of my work. Excerpts from the stories and voices of people who shared their experiences, with me and wider audiences, are included in italics, as are responses from audience members.

ORAL HISTORY RESEARCH AND WRITING: WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF CHANGING OPPORTUNITIES

As an undergraduate in Australia interested in writing and the changing, multiple textures of everyday life, I found my way to oral history via three universities and the subjects of drama, English literature, politics, sociology, anthropology and history. This exploration took place in the 1970s era of radical social movements and their impact on government policies. In Australia, the women's movement had made women's social position and rights a topic of public and domestic discussion, which gained political traction after the election of the Whitlam Labor Government in 1972. Action for Indigenous rights, including land rights, was becoming a critical part of the political landscape. The White Australia policy was finally dismantled

---

6   Alistair Thomson, 'Indexing and Interpreting Emotion: Joy and Shame in Oral History', *Oral History Journal Australia*, no. 41 (2019): 1–11.

7   Penelope Grist and Mary Hutchison, 'Meanings and Feelings of Places and Collections: Oral History as Future Experience' (paper presented at the Association of Critical Heritage Studies conference, University College, London, 26–30 August 2020).

in 1975 and politicians were working with migrant leaders and politicians towards the bipartisan policy of multiculturalism.[8] As elsewhere, interaction between movements for social change and educational and cultural institutions involved changes in the practice of history and the management of museum and library collections and displays.[9]

In the mid-1970s, my first research using oral history was inspired by feminist research bringing women's changing experiences of time and place into historical discussion. It was also inspired by Paul Thompson's advocacy for oral history as a source of historical evidence 'from a new direction' that included the 'life experience of people of all kinds'.[10] More specifically, my research was framed by the sociology department that accepted my honours thesis proposal to examine the experience of changing opportunities for women from the early 1900s to the 1970s. As a result, my analysis was grounded in the class mediation of gender, and the understanding that our social-cultural positions inform the way we think about and express our life choices as individuals in the context of the present. My thesis was based on interviews with a sample group of three generations of women. All had attended the same middle-of-the-road private school in Adelaide, and were teenagers in the 1920s, 1940s and 1960s.[11]

There was another element in this mixture of undergraduate ideals and formal disciplinary frameworks – a strong interest in connecting oral history's voices of experience with an audience outside the university. After what was undoubtedly a

---

8   Anne-Marie Jordans, *Alien to Citizen: Settling Migrants in Australia 1945–75* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1997), 223–25, 229–33.

9   Mary Hutchison and Andrea Witcombe, 'Migration Exhibitions and the Question of Identity: Reflections on the History of the Representation of Migration in Australian Museums 1986–2011', in Laurence Gourievidis (ed.), *Museums and Migration: History, Memory and Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 230–31.

10   Paul Thompson, 'The Voice of the Past', in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 28. I learned about the oral history research work taking place at Essex University, where Paul Thompson was leading new directions for social history, from Vivien Brodsky who had just set up an entirely new type of history course at Adelaide University – the history of the family.

11   Mary Hutchison, 'Class Mediation of Gender: A Study of Three Generations of Protestant, Privately Educated Women Born in Adelaide During the 20th Century' (Unpublished honours thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the degree of Bachelor of Arts with honours, Flinders University, 1979).

struggle to explain theoretically what I had heard in the interviews, I used them as the basis for a radio play.[12] It took the form of a set of three interconnected conversations with actors taking the role of women of each generation reflecting on their lives. Each conversation touched on the way gender shaped the life experience of the women in my study and invited an appreciation of the way they expressed this in the context of 1970s debates about women's roles in domestic and public life. In this creative rendition of my findings, I was much more able to communicate the lively, and often conflicted, process of making sense of the experience and feelings, that I had tried so hard to explain in my thesis.

Another important element in my early oral history experience preceded my honours research: my friendship with a woman of my grandmother's generation whom I met when she wanted someone to help her sort out her family papers. Marjorie was happy for me to record interviews with her about her life, family and community. Those interviews, and Marjorie herself, her generosity and interest in participating in something new, taught me about the importance of reciprocity in the interviewing relationship. This experience paved the way for my understanding of 'shared authority' as a reflection of the agency or authority of both interviewee and interviewer, and their co-authorship of the interview. My friendship with Marjorie extended into the 1980s when, with her help, I researched the life of her mother, Edith Hubbe, and had the opportunity to make Edith the subject of a museum exhibition.[13]

COMMUNITY ARTS: DEMOCRATISING CULTURE AND HISTORY

My first experiments in forms of public history based on life experience coincided with oral history in Australia going public as the Oral History Association of Australia (OHAA) in 1978.[14] They also set me on a path in which my more mature learning about agency and collaboration in the telling and writing of lived

---

12   Mary Hutchison, 'Three Pieces', Sunday Play, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Radio 2, 28 June 1981.

13   Mary Hutchison, *Who Was Edith Hubbe?* (Adelaide: Constitutional Museum, January–May 1982).

14   Oral History Australia, History. Available at https://oralhistoryaustralia.org.au/. Accessed 10 June 2022. I joined the South Australian branch in 1979, the year the first volume of the Journal was published.

experience, took place in the 'democratising culture' context of community arts activities and productions.[15]

One of the main drivers of the development of 'community arts' as a formal activity was the role artists had played in public representation of the concerns of grassroots action for change. Another was the possibilities opened up by the Whitlam Government's raft of 'community' policies to address disadvantage and access to education, health and welfare.[16] When the Whitlam Government's comprehensive arts funding policy came into operation under the Australia Council in 1975, 'community arts' was established as a special program for 'unclassified activities and a response to new arts developments'.[17] By the 1980s, changes in the funding and status of the program were encouraging the growth of an across-artform practice bringing diverse social and cultural life experiences to public audiences in the voices, words, music, images, artefacts and cultural traditions of everyday people. Co-funders, supporters and generators of this 'theatre of artwork' were unions, women's organisations, migrant cultural organisations, and a range of cultural, educational, and local and issues-based organisations. Much of this work was premised on 'an exchange of skills and experience between professional artists and members of the community' – potentially a mirror of 'shared authority'.[18]

Over the same period there was increasing acceptance of Australia as a multicultural society. Migrant advocacy organisations developed an established role in government policymaking and the implementation of government services and programs. A landmark result of this collaboration was the 1980 establishment of multilingual public broadcasting in the form of the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) television and radio stations. Local groups were soon managing their own 'ethnic broadcasting'

---

15   Michelle Evans, 'Community Cultural Development: A Policy for Social Change?' (Unpublished thesis submitted for Master of Creative Arts, Melbourne University, 2003), 23–24.

16   Michelle Evans, 'Community Cultural Development', 24.

17   Gay Hawkins, *From Nimbin to Mardis Gras: Constructing Community Arts* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1993), 29.

18   Deborah Mills, 'Cultural Development and the Arts in Everyday Life' (Australia Council Scoping Study Reference Group 2006) quoted in Liliana Correa, 'Community Cultural Development in the Australian Context', *Global Media Journal 1*, no. 1, (2007): 7.

programs on community radio. Another cultural first was the opening of the Migration Museum in Adelaide in 1986.[19]

In the web of variously resourced and accepted community organisations and projects that were typical of the wider 1980s activist landscape, both oral history and community arts were involved in the growth of research and representation of migration history and migrant experience. The theme of the 6th volume of the OHAA Journal issued in 1984 was 'Migrant Histories'. Amongst its papers, several concerned arts and media projects. These included radio documentaries and the Greek Australian poet, Π.Ο.'s poems about the 1961 Bonegilla riots, which he created from his interviews with people involved in them. It also included Andrew and Eugenia Hill's silk-screen print exhibition, *Land of Promises*, made with participants who offered their oral histories as a basis for the prints.

> Within the oral history context this project was significant because it used recollections, remembrances and emotional impressions as the foundation and sculpting factors to create silk-screen prints. The works themselves incorporated segments of oral history and we relied upon those histories, published in a booklet, as an extended exhibition catalogue, to provide the audience with an historical framework and a heightened awareness of matters related in the prints.[20]

Other papers highlighted the advocacy role of oral history. For instance, Helen Andreoni's paper discussed how her oral history course in the Graduate Diploma in Multicultural Studies at Armidale College of Advanced Education was encouraging student 'interaction across individual and communal boundaries'. Janis Wilton's directory of migrant histories included community arts projects.[21] Her previously completed oral history handbook for the Ethnic Affairs Commission of NSW,

---

19   Hutchison and Witcomb, 'Migration Exhibitions', 230.

20   *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 6 (1984): 31.

21   *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 6 (1984): 61–63, 64, 31–38, 25–30, 65–73.

Balancing the Books: Oral History for the Community also reflected the advocacy inter-connections between community organisations and government agencies.[22]

The continuing relationship between oral history content and community arts activities was highlighted in Roberta Bonnin's report to the Community Cultural Development Committee and the Literature Board of the Australia Council, *Oral History and the Arts*. The report documented community arts productions based on oral history that included visual artworks, multimedia exhibitions, soundscapes, performances and books of poetry and stories. Participants were senior citizens, ethnic groups, aged care residents, trade unionists and youth groups. Initiating organisations included trade unions, local councils and local libraries. The theatre company founded by the Italian Federation of Emigrant Workers and their Families (FILEF) was collecting oral histories as the basis for plays about the Italian experience in Australia.[23]

My own early community arts projects in the 1980s included various plays for community theatre telling stories of diverse individual and community experiences, and an oral history program on Canberra's community radio station 2XX, 'Rank Hearsay'. Later in the decade I became more involved in community writing workshops and projects in group settings that included adult education, neighbourhood centres, aged care day centres, women's services, trade unions, and local community history and writing groups. This direction was given form and substance by an organised body of collaborative community writing and publishing activities in the UK that I learned about through contact with oral historian Alistair Thomson. The Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (FWWCP) was an independent writing and publishing co-operative of community groups who shared the intention to make their experience of history visible/readable in their own words. Groups worked collaboratively and used recorded memories, autobiographical writing, other story forms and poetry.

---

22   Roberta Bonnin, *Oral History and the Arts* (Australia Council of the Arts, 1990), 22.
23   Bonnin, *Oral History and the Arts*, 12–20.

COMMUNITY WRITING AND PUBLISHING: TELLING AND WRITING OUR OWN HISTORIES

> …people in the London Borough of Hackney devoured the pamphlets of autobiography and reminiscence which, amongst others, a dressmaker, a shoemaker and a cab driver had written… Other community groups in Bristol, Manchester and Brighton were at the same time publishing local people's writing and finding a mass readership amongst people who could identify with childhood experiences of family life, growing up, migration to England, finding work and struggling through… Ordinary people became their own historians and biographers, and many took an active part in editing, designing and promoting their books.[24]

The 1989 issue of the OHAA Journal, with the theme 'Let All People Speak', included an article by UK oral historian Joanna Bornat in which she discussed her work with older people's reminiscences in the context of FWWCP's community writing and publishing activities. Local community writing and publishing groups, as she indicates in the above excerpt, emerged in the early 1970s through collaboration between 'teachers, graduates and community activists' and people living in poor inner-city neighbourhoods.[25] After the FWWCP was formed in 1976, the vitality of the shared intention to democratise or 'disestablish literature' (and history) continued through the shift to more critical awareness of historical memory and increasing diversity of member groups.[26] When I visited the UK in 1994, members included reminiscence and adult literacy groups, as well as many concerned with specific experiences and histories based on gender, cultural background, race, migration experiences, disability, war, work, local history, special needs education, and activism.[27]

---

24   Joanna Bornat, 'Reminiscence and Older People', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal,* no. 11 (1989): 3–4.

25   Bornat, 'Reminiscence and Older People', 4–17.

26   Dave Morley and Ken Worpole (eds), *The Republic of Letters: Working Class Writing and Local Publishing* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1982), 2, 18.

27   This visit took place as part of a visiting fellowship at the Continuing Education Centre at Sussex University and an Australia Council grant which enabled me to meet member groups of the FWWCP and attend a conference. Since winding up in 2007 a FWWCP collection has been created at the Trades Union Congress Library Collections at the London Metropolitan University. Available at https://student. londonmet.ac.uk/media/london-metropolitan-university/london-met-documents/professional-service-

At the beginning of the 1990s, with a stronger sense of the meaning of 'community writing', and its connection with wider disciplinary frameworks, I added another university to my list and enrolled in part-time postgraduate study in continuing education at the University of New England. From 1991 to mid-1993 my friend and colleague, Annie Bolitho, and I job-shared the position of ACT Community Literature Officer at the Arts Council of the ACT.[28] We shaped our community literature program along the lines of the FWWCP model to include a broad interest in stories of life experience, to democratise literature and to encourage the development of independent writing groups. We also responded to considerable interest at the time in the often-neglected history and experience of the people from all walks of life who built Canberra physically and as a local community. We developed a connection between our program and more established FWWCP-style community writing and publishing activities in Victoria spearheaded by Cliff Smyth.

A central part of our work involved making a bridge between telling and writing which we created not by oral history recording, but by listening. This involved a process of writing people's stories as they told them. The aim was to capture verbatim the poetic elements of the telling as well as the essence of the story. It meant listening for what stood out for us – from elements of the narrative to distinct descriptions, and idiomatic turns of phrase. We also had our ears out for what seemed to have most meaning for the teller and the rhythms of their expression. After working with what we'd both recorded, we'd read what we had written to the teller and invite them to fill in gaps and make corrections.

Our 'scribing' approach was based on examples and discussion from FWWCP adult basic education groups about the power of making the distinct voice of the teller present in written form; of bringing their experience directly to them and to their peers as a wider audience.[29]

---

departments/library-services/tuc-library-collections/resource-guides/FWWCP-Complete-Guide.pdf. Accessed 7 June 2022.

28   Funded by the Literature Board of the Australia Council of the Arts with project funding from the Community Cultural Development Committee.

29   Sue Shrapnel Gardener, *Conversations with Strangers* (London: Adult Literacy and Basic Skills Unit Collective, c. 1985).

> Adults who are learning to read often say that the easiest pieces to learn to read are the ones which sound most like the way people speak… The language is part of the story…alive and central to the atmosphere and feeling.[30]

Australian examples of translating telling into engaging text include Barbara Brooks and Colleen Burke's approach to writing poetry with people in Australian nursing homes,[31] and Wangaratta Centre for Continuing Education's *Voices from In Between: Migrants in North East Victoria*.[32]

A particular characteristic of our scribing work was that we generally used it in reminiscence-like settings when people were sharing memories with each other – for instance of wartime or of coming to Canberra. This meant that we were recording a range of diverse but connected memories, rather than life stories, and in a context where participants were an interested audience for each other. This supported the agency and enjoyment of the telling. The small stories we scribed and refined with individuals sometimes encouraged tellers to write for themselves. Others simply enjoyed what had been created in the moment. Myrtle's memories of working at the Leeton cannery during the years of World War Two are an example of material collected from members of the Kirra Day Centre Group.

The American troops stationed at Wagga and Hay or somewhere about
Used to come down to the station.
There was a back track and their carriage would get shunted into it
And they weren't allowed to get out.
They'd be there for an hour or so and they used to throw us cigarettes out of the train.
The girls would go down from the cannery after they knocked off work – I was only about sixteen.
We'd all go down for devilment more or less, just to see what they looked like.
There were a lot of girls who had American babies.[33]

---

30   Gatehouse Project leaflet in Morley and Worpole (eds), *The Republic of Letters*, viii.

31   Bonnin, *Oral History and the Arts*, 14–16.

32   Geoff Baker (ed.), *Voices from In Between: Migrants in North East Victoria* (Wangaratta: Wangaratta Centre for Continuing Education, 2000).

33   Myrtle, 'Wartime Memories', in Various authors, Unfolding Memories (Canberra: ACT Library Service, 1992), 8.

When it came to publishing Myrtle's stories, and others from participants at Kirra, the title they chose was *Unfolding Memories*. They explained that this reflected their experience as tellers and as audience; as an unfolding of their own memories and as an unfolding to each other. The connections made across different experiences were a subtext to much of the work of the community literature program.

In reference to oral history discussion about shared authority and heightened awareness of the subject position of the interviewer, Annie and I based our process on reciprocity, clear delineation of our interests, and an invitation to participate in telling and writing that included listening and reading. For members of the Narrabundah Walking Group – a healthy eating and exercise reminiscence group – Annie and I, walking around the suburb as their scribes with our notebooks, were a distinct part of the identity they had grown into in company with us.[34] *Come and join us! You tell her the storia – she write it down.*

In the 1990s I also worked with two groups of women brought together by organisations interested in encouraging self-esteem through writing: women from homes of violence, and an adult education outreach course for women. My approach to encouraging this self-determining sense of self was informed by theoretical discussion about the fluidity of memory as a way of making and remaking sense of personal experience in the present.[35] It was also informed by feminist thinking about how the language available to us, and the way we use it, shapes our composition of memory as a composition of self.[36] For instance, Jane Mace describes how the rewriting of a recorded reminiscence using conventional generalisations replaced the lively, interactive voice of telling, with 'the banal voice of a formal thank you letter'.[37] My intention was to use imaginative ways of writing as an alternative to the passive, impersonal and stilted expressions of experience that reinforce disempowerment.

---

34   Various authors, *Group Walks Around Narrabundah* (Canberra: Arts Council of the ACT, 1992).

35   Perks and Thomson, *The Oral History Reader*, 211–12.

36   Frigga Haug et al. *Female Sexualisation: A Collective Work of Memory* (London: Verso, English translation 1987).

37   Jane Mace, 'Reminiscence as Literacy', in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 381.

The women supported by a women's refuge and The ACT Incest Centre in Canberra had a clear intention to 'speak out' about the experience of domestic violence and sexual abuse. They called themselves the Homefront Women's Writing Group. For Homefront the challenge was to find a form for saying what they wanted to say – not to tell all or sensationalise, not to offer themselves as *those poor, poor women*, but to show the impact of the experience of violent abuse and ways of overcoming it. Fun and frivolity planned by support workers accompanied my invitation to play with language using orally created group poems and the most familiar written forms such as letters and lists. A long list of demeaning, cruel and dismissive things that had been said to participants became a long pyramid-shaped piece of writing that the group called 'Naming'. In this heaped-up form (perhaps it was a bonfire) the words lost their power and became a basis for participants to speak for themselves – *and if I say that I'm built like a wharfie/you'd better believe that's the size I'm feeling today*. Another example is a group writing piece starting with 'I' that demonstrated the struggle with speaking confidently – until one of the participants stepped right outside familiar discourses to re-imagine herself – *I am the Amazon who dances on the backs of turtles.* Homefront made two publications of writing and images – *Belles' Letters* and *Hells Belles' Letters*[38] and the participant's new identity became the title of my PhD thesis.[39]

The outreach women had varied familiarity with writing, and different levels of confidence. They had a range of backgrounds and life experiences including child-hood poverty and lack of education, migration, mental and physical illness, and loneliness. They were amazing supporters of each other and genuinely interested in the diversity of their experience as it was revealed through group writing and listening to each other's efforts.

---

38   Various authors, *Belles' Letters: Voices from Homes of Violence* (Canberra: The Incest Centre, 1990); Various authors, *Hells Belles' Letters* (Canberra: Homefront Belles Australia, 1990).

39   Mary Hutchison, 'I Am the Amazon Who Dances on the Backs of Turtles: The Politics and Poetics of Writing Self and Community' (PhD thesis, University of New England, 1999).

What?… How did that happen? And you were….? Really! Why don't you start there… You could write it that way first… I think that's the most interesting bit… Read it to us again …[40]

One participant, a post-war migrant from Hungary, embarked on a long project to write her story from childhood to the present. She called her book 'Going Back'. At first this seemed like a cliché for remembering the past. I later realised that she was writing herself back to Budapest. She finished the book there and gave it another title, *Someone Is Watching Over Me*. She also published a Hungarian language version of her book and became a local celebrity. When my partner and I visited Budapest, we met Hungarian Dora.

INTERPRETIVE PUBLIC ART: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND SENSES OF LOCAL PLACES

In the late 1990s, increasingly conservative social and economic policies thinned out the landscape of community arts activities in Australia and I became involved in cultural planning projects, working with arts practitioners to create a sense of place, community culture and history as part of the development of urban and suburban environments. It was a development that also took place internationally. In the context of interpretive public artwork, my work with community telling and writing as public history became more centred on place and what might be loosely described as heritage interpretation.[41] It also involved working closely with architects, landscape architects, urban planners and designers, visual artists and graphic designers. The way-finding 'beacons', installed as two-sided structures along pedestrian access through the centre of the city of Canberra, had a dual purpose, namely to provide a geographical map on one side and a map of stories and histories presented in image and text on the other. The following is an excerpt from the text component of the beacon at the central bus interchange. It was developed with students in a CIT English language class.

---

40   Hutchison, 'I Am the Amazon Who Dances on the Backs of Turtles', 178.

41   Toby Butler and Graeme Miller's paper in *The Oral History Reader* provides an audio example of this kind of interpretive public artwork: 'A Landmark in Sound, A Public Walk of Art' in Perks and Thomson, 425–33.

I brought with me my wife and daughter, rice cookies and a small green buddha

I brought with me my mother's handmade linen

I brought with me traditional medicines, hair oil, tamarind and gold

Coming to a new place I brought my heart.

More recently this approach to creating lively places with a past, present and future, shaped by human experience, has been part of my interpretive work in a sustainable greenfields development.

CO-CURATING MULTIVOCAL MIGRATION HISTORY EXHIBITIONS: SOUNDS OF REMEMBERING AND DIVERSITY

At the end of the 1990s, leading up to the Centenary of Australian Federation, the National Archives of Australia saw a place for my community-based interpretive work with people's experience of history in their public programs. In this context, I learned how to apply my skills in developing material for an audience to curating museum exhibitions. It was an opportunity that also immersed me in Australian migration history and, in the case of a 2003 exhibition about the Bonegilla migrant training and reception centre,[42] allowed me to explore alternatives to the passive, add-on use of oral history in museums.[43] The involvement of composer and sound designer, Lea Collins, also with a community radio and theatre background, enabled this exploration to be embedded in both collaborative practice and how sound works as a medium. Specifically, we were interested in a lively alternative to the 'suspended in space' sound of the edited interview.[44] *Bonegilla Voices* turned out to be the beginning of various public oral history–based 'experiments' we've created together.

The material for the audio of *Bonegilla Voices* developed from my work with Canberra Bonegilla people to incorporate their personal experience of migration with a display of their immigration documents from the National Archives collection. Although I didn't formally interview them, learning about their journey, developing text and

---

42 Albury Museum, *From the Steps of Bonegilla*, 2003.

43 For example see Anna Green's alternative: Anna Green, 'The Exhibition that Speaks for Itself: Oral History and Museums', in Perks and Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, 416–24.

44 Mary Hutchison and Lea Collins, 'Translations in Dialogic Representation of Cultural Diversity in Three Museum Sound Installations', Museum and Society 7, no. 2 (2009): 99.

identifying personal objects for the display involved a lot of listening. I gained a strong sense of Bonegilla as an intense cultural and language crossroads. I also heard the process of remembering – for instance, the rising tone of incredulity in Enzo's voice as he told the story of arriving at Bonegilla at night, far from any habitation – *And they said that's it!* The Estonian couple slipped into their own language as they remembered together, prompting each other, laughing and then back into English, drawing me into the conversation – *We are just talking about…* – which often involved using both languages to help each other with the translation. As a listener I loved this conversational remembering: lending humour to bewildering experiences, catching on the memory of pain, reaching out to me.

Participants responded with interest to the idea of creating a soundscape of Bonegilla that would capture the sound of diverse languages and elements of their migration experience. For the recording I asked them to remember Bonegilla with me or someone else in both English and their language of origin. Everyone who participated created something different and generally with others. One participant brought her two young boys along to practise their Russian by translating her memories of going to school at Bonegilla. A couple got together with friends from Bonegilla days and created a mini performance based on the multilingual announcements on the Bonegilla loudspeaker. There was a sense of challenge and fun as well as the excitement of a public outcome.

In its final form, *Bonegilla Voices* was structured around extremely short extracts from each story recorded and interspersed with varying short periods of silence to create the effect of voices drifting in and out of a larger conversation. It was installed to be heard as evenly as possible around the exhibition and set at an audible but not intrusive level so that it was part of the exhibition.[45] I collected some responses to it.

My impression was that visitors were so delighted to hear other languages in the exhibition space that they felt they wanted to say something to me when I was there [in my

---

45   Collins and Hutchison, 'Translations', 99.

capacity as exhibition designer] – the type of audio possibly broke down the sense of a barrier, as if the display was including them.[46]

I must say I was very proud of my mother. She is quite a story teller and the threepence and ice-cream episode brought tears to my eyes because she says in Polish right at the end, 'Ice-cream, we didn't have that in Africa'.[47]

In the context of oral history discussion, *Bonegilla Voices* is a modest example of using the medium of sound to expand the interpretive role of oral history in sound installations. Charles Hardy III suggests that sound installations in the digital era can be a means of sharing authority, providing multiple rather than univocal perspectives, and 'opening space' to loosen 'the notion that history is fixed'.[48]

Bonegilla Voices led to a practice-led investigation of collaborative migration museum exhibitions with an Australian Research Council Linkage research project at the Australian National University in partnership with the National Museum of Australia. The collaborative basis for these was based in shared authority and the 'side-by-side' co-creativity of community art.[49] In the context of museology the process for making the research exhibitions was based on Tony Bennett's concept of a 'dialogic' exhibition. This term comes from Mikhail Bakhtin's discussion of the novel as a democratic form of literature in which readers can participate through their own knowledge and experience, in 'dialogue' with its worlds of characters and events. A dialogic exhibition, as discussed by Bennett, communicates through a variety of perspectives on the subject rather than a controlling curatorial narrative. Its intention is to invite audiences to understand experientially through interaction or 'dialogue' with multiple voices. In this context, the 'to and fro' of dialogue mirrors the movement of shared authority in the oral history interview, and everyday conversation.[50]

46   Iona Walsh, personal communication with author, August 2003.

47   Wanda Horky, personal communication with author, 18 August 2003.

48   Charles Hardy III, 'Authoring in Sound', in Perks and Thomson (eds), The Oral History Reader, 398.

49   Maya Haviland, *Side by Side?: Community Art and the Challenge of Co-creativity* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

50   Collins and Hutchison, 'Translations', 93.

Another defining aspect of the *Migration Memories* research exhibitions is that they were framed by a political climate in which multiculturalism was pitted against 'cohesion'. In the 2003 review of the National Museum of Australia, the migration gallery, Horizons, designed around history and experience, came in for severe conservative criticism that preferred to see the Australian migration story as a cultural addition to 'white Australia' foundational narratives. *Migration Memories* was one of a growing number of exhibitions that focused on the experience of cultural diversity, included Indigenous Australians, and focused on cross-cultural encounters within a place.[51]

Migration Memories exhibitions were made in two extremely diverse small rural communities: Lightning Ridge in NSW and Robinvale in Victoria. They included soundscapes that Lea and I made together with participants in each location but here my focus is another way I used oral history material and conversation to embed shared authority in the exhibition.

Each exhibition was created around seven individual stories that reflected key periods and types of local migration. These included stories of nineteenth-century migration developed by those with a personal connection, and a story of migration from an Indigenous point of view. Each story was shaped through a long process of interviews and discussion with the individual storyteller and included text, photographs, maps, images from official documents, and an object that was significant to the meaning and feeling of the story. Panel text was presented as a conversation between the storyteller and me – to reflect the process and to show my voice as just one in the room.[52]

From Hungary 1949 to Lightning Ridge 1957

---

51   Hutchison and Witcomb, 'Migration Exhibitions', 237–39.

52   Storytellers' responses to their experience of shaping their stories with me reflect the process of putting them together as both review and rediscovery as shown in the storyteller perspectives section of the *Migration Memories* website. Available at http://migrationmemories.net.au/. Accessed 15 June 2022. Also Mary Hutchison, '"Shared Authority": Collaboration, Curatorial Voice and Exhibition Design in Canberra, Australia', in Viv Golding and Wayne Modest (eds), *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013).

Gabor (Gabo) Nagy, Shelia Nagy, daughter in conversation with Mary Hutchison

Gabo's story included the perspective of his daughter Sheila, his own fragments of memory, which catch his wry, laconic style, and my historical context. This is how the story started:

Sheila: Dad thought he was going to Argentina but he ended up in Australia.

Gabo: When I got here I thought, 'might as well stay'. I wanted to start a new life.

The following is an example of my text and Gabo's response:

Mary: When he arrived in Sydney, Gabo, and probably most of his fellow passengers, were put on a train to Bathurst migrant camp. From there they were sent out to work. At this time assisted immigrants had to complete a two-year work contract…

Gabo: They taught me how to kill a sheep and skin it. When I'd finished the first one, there wasn't any meat on it.[53]

Together, each story in the exhibitions also provided its own conversation about the locality. The soundscapes had a similar function, also interacting with the stories. In Lightning Ridge the 'voices' were a key feature. On occasion, someone might speak back to them – *She's wrong about that!* There was also one voice that often stood out for people – Aboriginal Elder, Aunty June Barker, singing an Aboriginal 'migration' song in the Wangkamura language as well as in English. It was a Sunday School song that she remembered from her childhood at the Brewarrina Mission in New South Wales. The Wangkamura People brought it with them to Brewarrina, when they were removed from country in south-west Queensland.

---

53   Gabor and Sheila Nagy in conversation with Mary Hutchison, 'From Hungary 1949 to Lightning Ridge 1957', *Migration Memories Lightning Ridge*, Lightning Ridge Historical Society Gallery, Lightning Ridge, 18 August – 4 September 2006.

As part of my research, I took a conversational approach to collecting visitor responses to the exhibitions. I particularly enjoyed this one from Lightning Ridge.

It was lovely coming along the verandah and hearing the voices. I thought, oh there's people inside talking.[54]

In Robinvale, Sothea's story of his experience as an asylum seeker from Cambodia in 1990 was probably the most dramatic and revelatory. *You just don't realise*, was an often-voiced comment. For Sothea himself it was a decision to *open their eye* to the story behind his role as the manager of Robinvale's hotel. In the first two sessions of recorded interviews, he began with Pol Pot, the exodus to the forest before he could walk, the separation from his parents, growing up with his grandmother, to the details of the unseaworthy boat journey, the activists in Darwin, the detention centre, his fellow asylum seekers, the people who taught him English. Later he explained the experience of remembering people: *…everyone is just back to life. See them running, see them talking, see them standing around.*[55] He hadn't thought much about this part of his life for some time. When he found the denim jacket and cotton trousers he had worn on the boat, he tried on the jacket. The sleeves were 17 years too short and too tight. He had kept his journey clothing out of sight, but deliberately, as memory and history. *It represents me, my group of boat people, other refugees and the next generation*. Later he donated the denim jacket and patched cotton trousers to the National Museum of Australia. *I feel release when I give away. It was out of mind but in safe hands.*[56]

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I want to draw out several aspects of my personal oral history discussion that reflect on oral history itself. One is oral history's continuing investigation of histories and identities omitted from dominant narratives of who we are collectively.

---

54   *Migration Memories* research notes, conversation 6, Lightning Ridge (LR) responses, 20 August 2006.

55   Sothea, interviewed by author, *Migration Memories* research interview 3, Robinvale, 24 April 2007, 0:09:06, transcript held by the author.

56   Mary Hutchison, 'The Social Life of a Denim Jacket', *Journal of Australian Studies* 35, no. 4 (December 2011): 480, 487.

This intention weaves through my career and is central to the development of migration oral history. Another is that the intersections between my oral history practice, and other disciplines and practices not only exemplify the 'broad church' of oral history, but demonstrate the role that oral history plays, and potentially plays, across scholarship and various 'theatres of memory'.[57]

In this context of contribution, my discussion of working with individuals in different settings, also highlights a critical aspect of the oral history interview – its embodiment of abstract concepts such as subjectivity and memory. For instance, it's the palpable experience of interaction between interviewer and narrator that, in my view, powers 'shared authority' as a model for egalitarian and agentic collaboration with community groups and individuals – in part because it provides an experiential basis for self-critique or reflexivity. Similarly, the interview shows memory as the embodied/voiced action of remembering and expressing oneself in a particular context. Remembering fleshes out the process of making sense of experience in relation to wider discourses and circumstances impinging on the moment of telling. It also points to the possibility of re-remembering. On this basis, as others have argued, oral history offers particular insights into the relationship between individual remembering and public memory.[58]

The argument underlying my discussion is that intimate histories provide a basis for public conversation about 'us' by offering insight into 'me' through the meanings and feelings of my experience. In the context of publications and exhibitions, I've indicated that making the intimate world public in a way that is agentic and invites dialogue is not a transparent process. It involves attention to discursive expression, context and the way different media communicate. It involves tellers representing themselves on their own terms. It also involves collaboration between tellers and facilitators/producers in which they learn from each other and the experience of the process.

---

57   Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory*: *Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 2012).

58   For example, Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2016), 68–69; Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (eds), *Oral History and Public Memories* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008), vii–xii.

Finally, taking a personal approach to discussing oral history and migration history over the last four decades or so has been a bit like interviewing myself. On the one hand, fitting memory and historical context together and working out the most relevant lines of inquiry. On the other, hovering between any number of memory pathways and the stories they make.