

## Introduction

# Oral History and Working Lives

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Nicholas Herriot and Paul Sendziuk

Since at least the 1960s, oral history and the fields of labour history and working-class studies have evolved in tandem, often overlapping but also sometimes challenging each other. Oral testimony has long been recognised as a means of uncovering the voices and perspectives of workers and their communities, groups less likely to leave written records and those who have been excluded or misrepresented in traditional historiography. The nexus between oral and labour history remains a dynamic area of inquiry. It is in appreciation of this nexus that this special issue of *Studies in Oral History* arises, considering the theme of ‘working lives and workplaces’.

In the United Kingdom, oral history was pioneered by socialist and feminist-influenced historians such as Paul Thompson and Elizabeth Roberts.<sup>1</sup> These scholars placed workers and their struggles at the centre of their research during the 1970s and 1980s. Thompson’s *The Voice of the Past*, published in 1978, was particularly influential and widely read abroad, including among many early Australian practitioners of oral history. It stridently defended the methodological value of oral testimony as a source and made a bold claim for what oral history might bring to the practice of writing history: ‘Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into

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1 Paul Thompson, *The Voice of the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978); Elizabeth Roberts, *A Women’s Place: An Oral History of Working-Class Women, 1890–1940* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1984).

history itself and widens its scope... It provides a means for radical transformation of the social meaning of history'.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, Thompson reflected, oral history might even help 'change the world'.<sup>3</sup>

Thompson's sentiment echoed the spirit of idealism and social change among an emerging generation of oral history practitioners. Periodising the precise origins of oral labour history is a challenging task. There is, of course, an ancient tradition of eye-witness recollections and longstanding traditions of family and local historians employing oral testimony. In Australia, an important antecedent to working-class oral history were members of the folklore movement and folk societies formed to collect songs and oral folk culture during the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> Interested in working-class culture, leading members of this movement such as John Meredith, Ian Turner and Wendy Lowenstein were armed with tape recorders and strong left-wing political sympathies and active participation in the labour movement.

It was during the 1970s that oral history assumed a greater prominence in Australia and elsewhere, beyond its early audience of folklorists. During this time, oral and labour history became particularly enmeshed. A strong bond developed between the two fields. Among Australia's early pioneers in this field was Wendy Lowenstein, who did much to popularise oral history in her best-selling study of workers' experiences during the 1930s Depression, *Weevils in the Flour*, published in 1978.<sup>5</sup> Inspired by the approach in Studs Terkel's trailblazing study, *Hard Times*, Ray Broomhill's *Unemployed Workers: A Social History of the Great Depression in Adelaide* similarly used oral history interviews to consider the hardships of the Great Depression through the eyes of those who experienced it.<sup>6</sup> Lowenstein, Broomhill and other early champions

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2 Thompson, *Voice of the Past*.

3 Paul Thompson, with Joanna Bornat, *The Voice of the Past: Oral History*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 21.

4 Alan Roberts, 'The Development of Australian Oral History, 1798–1984', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* no. 7 (1985): 11.

5 Wendy Lowenstein, *Weevils in the Flour: An Oral Record of the 1930s Depression in Australia* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1978).

6 Studs Terkel, *Hard Times: An Oral History of the Great Depression* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970); Ray Broomhill, *Unemployed Workers: A Social History of the Great Depression in Adelaide* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1978).

shared a strong political commitment to approaching working-class history through the voices of workers themselves.

The development of oral labour history was profoundly shaped by the growing movement for people's history and history 'from below' during the 1960s and 1970s. In Australia, as elsewhere, a new generation of historians wanted to challenge the limited horizons of the discipline. They expressed interest in disadvantaged groups marginalised by traditional history. Rebelling against an emphasis on the 'great men' and powerful elites of history, this cohort of left-leaning researchers engaged with how workers, the poor and the oppressed experienced the past. 'We can only understand Australian history', wrote Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee in their rejoinder to the 1988 Australian Bicentennial celebrations, 'by analysing the lives of the oppressed'.<sup>7</sup> Such a statement captured well the sentiment of this new social history: an interest in hearing workers' own interpretation of history as they experienced and made it. Seeking a vehicle through which to construct history around workers' lives, a growing number of historians welcomed the oral history approach.

Oral historians helped broaden the focus of conventional labour history beyond interest in the structures, organisations and leaders of the workers' movement. Labour history traditionally focused on themes such as trade unions and labour councils, labour parties, the arbitration system and dramatic moments of class struggle. 'By accentuating subjectivity and agency', writes Lucy Taksa, 'the growing use of oral sources challenged the primacy given to structures and institutions'.<sup>8</sup> Oral history, Greg Patmore similarly explained, allowed labour historians to 'explore the recollections of working class families, unorganised workers, and rank and file union members'.<sup>9</sup> Other subjects, including the everyday lives of workers, women, migrants and Indigenous Australians entered the breach. An early landmark example of this kind of oral labour history was Janet McCalman's social history of working-class life

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7 Verity Burgmann and Jenny Lee (eds), *A Most Valuable Acquisition: A People's History of Australia Since 1788* (Melbourne: McPhee Gribble/Penguin, 1988), xii.

8 Lucy Taksa, 'Labor History and Public History in Australia: Allies or Uneasy Bedfellows?' *International Labor and Working-Class History* no. 76 (2009): 85.

9 Greg Patmore, *Australian Labour History* (Melbourne: Longman Cheshire, 1991), 16.

in Richmond from 1900 to 1965, *Struggletown*.<sup>10</sup> In a significant departure from the preoccupations of existing political and economic history, McCalman used oral history to reconstruct and foreground the experience of mothers, children and working-class family life.<sup>11</sup> These were valid and important subjects of analysis, McCalman asserted. ‘Her attention to the role of women in working-class life highlights the extreme neglect which women have suffered at the hands of Labour historians’, wrote one critic in a 1985 review of McCalman’s book.<sup>12</sup>

*Struggletown* made an important contribution to the emerging field of women’s history in Australia. During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of historians employed oral history to reveal women’s paid and unpaid work and make gender a central focus of historical research. But women were far from the only subject illuminated by oral labour history. In fact, works of oral history were proving able to convey the diversity of work and working lives in Australia. Bruce Shaw, Ann McGrath and Kevin Gilbert demonstrated the use of oral history to excavate the experience of Aboriginal workers, often with a focus on the pastoral industry.<sup>13</sup> Clive Moore’s *The Forgotten People* brought to light the oral tradition of Australia’s South Sea Islander community and the lives of descendants of Queensland’s Kanak labourers.<sup>14</sup> *The Immigrants*, by Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh, highlighted the efforts of migrants attempting to make a living in Australia.<sup>15</sup> The political commitments of oral labour history were clearly visible. In the preface to *The Immigrants*, Lowenstein and Loh wrote of their shared hope ‘that the stories told here will help others to understand and

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10 Janet McCalman, *Struggletown: Public and Private Life in Richmond, 1900–1965* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1984).

11 For an appraisal of *Struggletown* written on its 35th anniversary of publication, see Carla Pascoe Leahy, ‘Public Histories and Private Struggles: The Place of Janet McCalman’s *Struggletown* in Australian Historiography’, *History Australia* 16, no. 4 (2019): 656–73.

12 Lindsay Tanner, cited in Leahy, ‘Public Histories’, 663.

13 Bruce Shaw, *Countrymen: The Life Histories of Four Aboriginal Men as Told to Bruce Shaw* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986); Ann McGrath, *Born in the Cattle: Aborigines in Cattle Country* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1987); Kevin Gilbert, *Living Black: Blacks Talk to Kevin Gilbert* (Melbourne: Allen Lane, 1977).

14 Clive Moore, *The Forgotten People: A History of the South Sea Island Community* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 1979).

15 Wendy Lowenstein and Morag Loh, *The Immigrants* (Melbourne: Hyland House, 1977).

sympathise with the struggles, the sorrows and the joys of the working people'.<sup>16</sup> All this work brought to light workers' experiences both in and beyond the workplace. In doing so, oral labour history extended our horizons beyond the 'great men' of labour history and in their place established new studies of subaltern groups.

By the late 1970s, oral history was increasingly formalised. Indeed, the years 1977 to 1979 have been described as Australia's 'oral history boom'.<sup>17</sup> The Oral History Association of Australia was founded in Perth in 1978, reflecting, and in turn supporting and connecting, an increasing number of practitioners across the country.<sup>18</sup> The *Oral History Association of Australia Journal (OHAAJ)* appeared on the scene in 1978. Oral history during these years built upon the institutionalisation of labour history as a legitimate area of research, teaching and study. The contents of *OHAAJ* offer a representative sample of the preoccupations of the time. Articles in the earliest issues of the journal sought to reveal the situation of women and ethnic minorities, waterside workers, Italian migrant workers, and industrial pollution in working-class Wollongong, to cite just a few.<sup>19</sup>

In many ways, oral labour history was able to bridge the gap between activists and academics. Members of the Oral History Association of Australia and contributors to its journal included not only professional historians but students, community workers and trade unionists seeking to practise and promote the method of oral history. Oral labour history was nurtured both in the academy and journals as well as among various political organisations, social movements, state-funded community projects and unions. Eric Fry explained in 1986: 'People of the generation

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16 Lowenstein and Loh, *The Immigrants*, ix.

17 Roberts, 'The Development of Australian Oral History', 17–18.

18 Beth M. Robertson, 'Long Desperate Hours at the Typewriter: Establishing the Oral History Association of Australia', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* no. 30 (2008): 74–81.

19 Baiba Irving, 'Oral Evidence, Women and Ethnic Minorities with Some Archival Considerations', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* no. 1 (1978): 22–27; Wendy Lowenstein, 'Not One Thing Voluntary: Melbourne Waterside Workers', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* no. 2 (1979): 17–23; Morag Loh, 'The F.I.L.E.F. Project Interviewing Italian Immigrant Workers and Their Families in Melbourne 1975–1979', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* no. 2 (1979): 13–16; Glenn Mitchell, 'Industrial Pollution at Port Kembla, 1945–1974: Observations and Reflections of Port Kembla Residents', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* no. 3 (1980): 69–77.

which suffered in the depression, revived the unions and the Labor Party or built the Communist Party, worked or fought in World War Two and hoped to change the world after it, are now at an age where they have a life to record and a conviction that they participated in vital events'.<sup>20</sup> Recovering and preserving such examples of working-class tradition and cultural heritage were important concerns for unions and other organisations that recognised the importance of oral history in recording and celebrating histories of working lives.

The 1970s and 1980s also saw significant cross-fertilisation between university-based academic research and community history. Unions and labour studies programs helped propel the development of oral labour history. In Adelaide, oral historian Ray Broomhill was instrumental in establishing one of Australia's first (if not *the* first) Labour Studies programs. The course involved significant collaboration with union activists who joined as guest speakers, part-time lecturers and students.<sup>21</sup> In working-class Port Adelaide, Susan Marsden demonstrated the use of oral history as a tool for community development, involving 40 young unemployed people as researchers in a local history project during the late 1970s. Enabled by the tape recorder, oral labour history encouraged the shared, inclusive and participatory character of making history. Such an ethos was clearly embodied in Wendy Lowenstein's book, *Under the Hook*. Published in 1982, *Under the Hook* was co-edited with Communist and waterside worker Tom Hills and evoked working lives on the waterfront as told by Melbourne's waterside workers.<sup>22</sup> It offered another reminder that oral labour history has played an important social and political purpose beyond the scholarship committed to paper.

Despite its growth internationally, many academics viewed oral history with suspicion. Their preference was that it remained outside the academy. Some, including practitioners of labour history, cautioned that a focus on ordinary 'little' people

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20 Eric Fry, 'The Writing of Labour History in Australia', in Eric Fry (ed.), *Common Cause: Essays in Australian and New Zealand Labour History* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 153.

21 Pat Wright, 'Remembering Ray at Labour Studies', *Labour History News*, newsletter of the Labour History Society (South Australia) (Summer 2023): 15.

22 Wendy Lowenstein and Tom Hills, *Under the Hook. Melbourne Waterside Workers Remember Working Lives and Class War: 1900–1980* (Melbourne: Melbourne Bookworkers, 1982).

risked overlooking the broader historical structures and forces shaping individual lives. Others criticised the methodology as inferior and emphasised the unreliability of memory. Patrick O'Farrell's now infamous review of Lowenstein's *Weevils in the Flour* and Thompson's *Voice of the Past* appeared in 1979 in the conservative journal, *Quadrant*. O'Farrell's criticism of oral labour historians' 'attempt to canonise the ordinary' prompted widespread debate, including in the youthful pages of this journal. Oral history, O'Farrell warned, was moving into 'the world of image, selective memory, later overlays and utter subjectivity'. By enshrining the 'trickery' of memory, oral history risked leading scholars 'not into our history, but into myth'.<sup>23</sup> Even Eric Hobsbawm, perhaps the best known of Britain's Marxist historians, shared such a view. Memories, he noted, are not facts. As such, oral testimony was not a reliable medium for historical research.<sup>24</sup> Oral labour history, then, was not without its critics.

The work of Lowenstein, Thompson and other oral historians was in many ways skilful and trailblazing. However, many early oral labour history accounts were limited by their tendency to accept oral testimony – what was said during the interview – at face value. Their focus remained firmly on reconstruction and recovery, on recording and preserving the voices of working-class people and allowing workers to 'speak for themselves'.<sup>25</sup> To be sure, this was an important development within the study of labour history and the discipline more broadly. In his introduction to *Under the Hook*, for instance, Robin Gollan wrote of how Lowenstein and Hills' study of workers' lived experiences was a necessary corrective to the omissions in institutional labour history. Workers, he explained, have traditionally been viewed only as 'strikers or scabs, as voters, or the recipients of welfare, and not as human beings with hopes, fears and beliefs'.<sup>26</sup> However, as Graeme Davison later reflected, many oral historians of the 1970s and early 1980s believed in creating an 'unmediated sense of connection to working-class life and experience'.<sup>27</sup>

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23 Patrick O'Farrell, 'Oral History: Facts and Fiction', *Quadrant* (November 1979): 7, 5, 8.

24 Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 206.

25 Lowenstein and Loh, *The Immigrants*, iii.

26 Lowenstein and Hills, *Under the Hook*, 3.

27 Cited in Leahy, 'Public Histories', 666.

It would be erroneous to caricature all pioneers of oral labour history as unquestioning champions of the objectivity of their interviewees' testimony. McCalman, for instance, questioned the veracity of oral testimony without consideration of its strengths, weaknesses and context. In *Struggletown*, she recognised how individuals 'rewrite history' to suit 'current values and preoccupations' and the ways in which memories of the Depression were shaped differently by gender.<sup>28</sup> 'Oral testimony is no less fallible than documentary evidence', Clive Moore cautioned readers of the *OHAAJ's* first issue.<sup>29</sup> Many early researchers addressed the role of the historian in the interview and issues of memory. Joan Sangster, therefore, warns us from 'pars[ing] working class oral history into moments of celebratory recovery, and later, moments of deeper investigation of meaning and subjectivity'. 'The project of recuperation did not disappear after the 1990s', she asserts, 'and the seeds of studying memory and subjectivity were already apparent in the 1970s'.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the political project of many early oral historians was not to affirm or cast doubt over workers' narratives but to assert their significance as a corrective to history as written by the victors. They did not seek a definitive or closed historical truth, but rather a different *kind* of truth. 'Most of the story is told in the words of wharfies', Lowenstein and Hills explained in their introduction to *Under the Hook*. 'Is it "true"? The question is academic. The truth of a shipowner is not the truth of a waterside worker'.<sup>31</sup>

With this said, by the 1980s and 1990s an increasing number of labour scholars were employing oral testimony, and it is possible to identify a greater emphasis on issues of subjectivity, narrativity, memory and meaning. Historians have recognised, among many factors, the ways in which memory changes with the passage of time, according to an individual's evolving understanding of past events, in response to a shifting cultural and political circuit and according to the intersubjective encounter of the interview. As Carla Pascoe Leahy explains in a retrospective consideration

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28 McCalman, *Struggletown*.

29 Clive Moore, 'Oral Testimony and the Pacific Island Labour Trade to Queensland: Myth and Reality', *Oral History Association of Australia Journal* no. 1 (January 1978): 42.

30 Joan Sangster, 'Oral History and Working Class History: A Rewarding Alliance,' *Oral History Forum d'histoire orale* 33 (2013): 7.

31 Lowenstein and Hills, *Under the Hook*, 4.



of *Struggletown*, 'oral history has matured significantly in its appreciation of the opportunities to uncover subjective meaning-making in inconsistent narratives'.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, oral historians have increasingly and more confidently foregrounded the ways in which the unique characteristics of memory are in fact its strengths.<sup>33</sup>

The reconstructive and recovery values of oral labour history have been enriched by new critical, reflexive and interpretative approaches. During the 1980s, a great deal of work was done to theorise oral history and the processes of memory. Most renowned was the work of Alessandro Portelli. 'Oral sources', Portelli famously wrote in 1981, 'tell us not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing and what they now think they did...Oral sources are credible but with a *different* credibility'. Memory, according to Portelli, was 'not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings'.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, oral history allows us not just to explore what happened in the past, but how individuals reflect upon the multiple meanings of that past from the perspective of the present.

Published in 1988, the second edition of Thompson's landmark *Voice of the Past* reflected this shifting emphasis from historical reconstruction to explorations of memory and subjectivity. Overseas developments in the field, of which Portelli was a driving force, were also an important influence on the work of Australian oral historians. They encouraged more nuanced and complex explorations of memory, both individual and collective, and a greater attentiveness to narrative construction, including silences and things left unsaid. 'For me, as for other oral historians at this time', Alistair Thomson reflected, 'oral history was no longer just a resource for historical research. Memory was an important subject in its own right'.<sup>35</sup>

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32 Leahy, 'Public Histories', 666.

33 Alistair Thomson, 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2007): 49–70.

34 Alessandro Portelli, 'On the Peculiarities of Oral History', *History Workshop Journal* no. 12 (1981): 96–107.

35 Alistair Thompson, 'Oral history', in Anna Clark and Paul Ashton (eds), *Australian History Now* (Sydney: NewSouth, 2013), 81.

From at least the 1990s, oral labour history has experienced increasing interdisciplinary cross-fertilisation. During this period, oral historians have been influenced by other disciplines such as sociology, narrative studies and memory studies.<sup>36</sup> The insights of linguistics, psychology and anthropology led to significant mutations in oral history methodology and practice as practitioners sought to better understand narrative discourse. These shifts in understanding were to some extent underpinned by a changing academic and political zeitgeist, with organised labour and the Left in decline and the old certainties of historical materialism increasingly challenged by the linguistic and cultural turns.<sup>37</sup> Increasing interdisciplinarity and the influence of postmodernism, however, were not without potential shortcomings. Paul Thompson criticised extreme forms of the narrative turn for failing to distinguish between lived and remembered lives.<sup>38</sup> Other critics of post-structuralist historiography warned against a tendency towards narrative or discursive determinism. Interrogating the researcher's own role in the interview might risk foregrounding our own voice at the expense of our working-class informants.

Researchers have also gained a greater awareness of how oral history is created in a relationship between interviewer and interviewee.<sup>39</sup> The nature of this exchange shapes what is remembered. Recognition of this fact has helped oral labour historians approach workers' oral testimony both critically and sensitively. They have increasingly reflected upon *how* and *why* workers remember the past. As oral history has been more widely taken up, Thompson observed, the debate has shifted away 'from whether to use oral history or not, to how best to use it'.<sup>40</sup>

The field of oral labour history is varied in its approaches and the debate over how best to employ oral history continues. Further evolutions and expansions in subject

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36 See, for example, Chapter 4, 'Parallel strands', in Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*.

37 Sangster, 'Oral History and Working Class History', 8–9.

38 Thompson with Bornat, *The Voice of the Past*, 118.

39 See, for example, Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1990); Valerie Yow, "'Do I like them too much?' Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa", *Oral History Review* 42, no. 1 (1997): 55–79; Alistair Thomson, 'Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process', *Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003): 23–26.

40 Thompson with Bornat, *Voice of the Past*, 386.

matter and approaches have occurred. Whereas early oral labour history often emphasised social class and the solidarity of organised labour, more contemporary work has actively investigated the diverse identities within working-class communities. Researchers have sought to understand the ways in which these identities intersect with class and shape the ways in which workers experience and remember their lives. As Cybele Locke notes in a fascinating overview of oral labour history in Aotearoa New Zealand, the field has increasingly engaged with gender, race and radical history and their intersections with class.<sup>41</sup>

Since the trailblazing works of the 1970s, oral labour history has also had to grapple with major historical processes such as deindustrialisation and its discontents. Studies of deindustrialisation have been enriched by the use of workers' testimony to explore the diverse meanings, emotions and impacts of job losses.<sup>42</sup> The article by Alison Atkinson-Phillips and Matt Perry in this edition strongly demonstrates the use of oral history, enriched by audio-visual elicitation, to provide a different lens to study and comprehend deindustrialisation, especially how it impacted working-class lives and the ways in which it is remembered. Atkinson-Phillips and Perry reflect on the relationship between oral history interviews and archival films in illuminating histories of deindustrialisation. They recover the history of the Save Our Shipyards campaign, but also provide interesting reflections on methodological approaches to exploring histories of deindustrialisation and working lives more broadly.

More recently, responses to the COVID-19 pandemic impacted significantly on our experiences of work. This journal has previously considered the ways in which social distancing and travel restrictions modified, transformed and impacted upon the work of oral historians.<sup>43</sup> John Choo adds to this by considering the process of work-from-

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41 Cybele Locke, 'Oral History and Intersectional Approaches to Labour History in Aotearoa New Zealand: A Personal Perspective', *Labour History* no. 123 (2022): 60–69.

42 See, for example, chapters in Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Perchard (eds), *The Deindustrialised World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places* (Vancouver: University of Columbia Press, 2019); Alessandro Portelli, *They Say in Harlan County: An Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Tracy E. K'Meyer and Joy L. Hart, *I Saw It Coming: Worker Narratives of Plant Closings and Job Loss* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

43 See 'Covid Reports' in *Studies in Oral History* no. 42 (2020): 163–95.

home arrangements in Singapore during the COVID-19 years and its impact on workers' lives. The meaning of work and working lives has been another important area of study for oral labour historians. Choo, like other researchers, refutes the idea that work no longer retains any intrinsic meaning in the modern economy or with increased technological change. Drawing from interviews with educators from the recent National Archives of Singapore's COVID-19 collection, Choo argues that online activity limited the intimacy of in-person teaching and learning and discusses possibilities for how human connection intimacies might be imagined and cultivated in new work arrangements.

Another important area of labour history that has been illuminated by oral history is the ways in which work has impacted upon workers' health, wellbeing and bodies.<sup>44</sup> How have workers experienced, understood, reacted to and narrated health and safety in their workplaces? Answers to this question are considerably less developed in Australia than elsewhere. However, as Paul Sendziuk and Carolyn Collins show, oral history helps us to get behind the data to understand what it felt like to sustain or witness an injury while at work. Drawing on interviews with almost 100 former General Motors-Holden employees, their article examines the company's evolving approach to health and safety and workers' memories of workplace wellbeing. Oral history, they demonstrate, is able to capture the nuances of workplace culture and individual experiences of safety which are often lost in official statistics, corporate records and the data-driven approaches of quantitative research.

The socially engaged spirit of oral labour history's socialist and feminist pioneers lives on in attempts to bring to light poorly documented areas of working lives and highlighting ongoing issues of oppression. Katie Singer's article on employment discrimination against African Americans challenges the myth that racist labour practices are no longer an issue deserving of attention. Employing oral testimony with African Americans recorded in New Jersey in the 1990s, Singer locates the

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<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Ronald Johnston and Arthur McIvor, *Lethal Work: A History of the Asbestos Tragedy in Scotland* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 2000); Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives: Work in Britain Since 1945* (Basingstoke UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Arthur McIvor, *Jobs and Bodies: An Oral History of Health and Safety in Britain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2024).

workplace as a site of racial discrimination and notes the echoes of their stories with workers' contemporary laments. Historians of working lives, Craig Heron reminds us, have often searched for 'threads of a tradition of resistance or struggle' to challenge conservative representations of history and validate current concerns and struggles to resist the loss of 'hard-won gains'.<sup>45</sup> It is in this tradition that Singer's article works. Hers is an oppositional perspective of the past and present and is also attentive to workers' agency in addressing their conditions.

However, there are sometimes problems in straightforward narratives of working-class heroism, as suggested in Nicolette Snowden's piece on working-class women. Like Atkinson-Phillips and Perry and other oral labour historians, Snowden is interested in how the processes of deindustrialisation and privatisation have impacted upon workers' lives. Snowden's article is especially attuned to what conventional stories 'forget', specifically the labour of working-class women in the Latrobe Valley, a former heartland of Australia's industrial coal mining. The focus in much of written labour history, Snowden reminds us, has remained on male-dominated trade unions and industrial heritage. Drawing on oral history interviews with 17 Valley women, she demonstrates the profound significance of gender in shaping experiences of work and working lives across the twentieth century.

In their article in this issue, Sendziuk and Collins cite the opinion of oral historians Michelle Winslow and Graham Smith, that 'studies located within living memory are [now] open to criticism if they fail to include oral history'.<sup>46</sup> Their focus is specifically on histories of health and medicine. However, it could indeed be argued that labour and working-class studies are inadequate without the many insights and values offered by oral history. By surveying the field and introducing some key themes in the field of oral labour history, this introduction has explored and argued in favour of what the oral history approach brings to histories of working lives. Oral history allows a unique focus on working lives, including better access to workers' emotions

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45 Craig Heron, 'The Labour Historian and Public History', *Labour/Le Travail* no. 45 (2000): 182, cited in Taksá, 'Labor History and Public History in Australia'.

46 Michelle Winslow and Graham Smith, 'Ethical Challenges in the Oral History of Medicine', in Donald A. Ritchie (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 372.

and the experiences they lived through. It can help us to both reconstruct and reimagine stories that are often forgotten, neglected, hidden or poorly documented. It is, as the articles in this volume suggest, an opportunity to listen, carefully and closely, to workers' voices and connect with their worlds. In doing so, oral history has extended the scope and reach of labour history and working-class studies. It has provided insights into the worlds of subaltern labour. It has enriched our understanding of identities including and beyond class and allowed a more participatory and democratic approach to our past.

In 1991, Lenore Layman wrote that the 'vitality' of Australian labour history lay in its close links with organised labour and progressive social movements.<sup>47</sup> It could be argued that perhaps oral labour history has suffered from the declining political fortunes of the workers' movement in the neoliberal era. Although much of the idealism of the heady 1970s has receded, the search for justice remains a central motivation for oral labour historians. From its earliest days more than half a century ago, oral labour history has become a key source and method for understanding working lives and workplaces. The peer-reviewed articles in this special issue speak to the diversity of oral labour history approaches, by scholars from sites ranging from Australia's Latrobe Valley to North America to North East England and to Singapore. They are an indication of the liveliness of the field and the potent convergence between oral and labour history, and a reminder that there is important work to be done still.

We express our thanks and appreciation for the opportunity to introduce this special issue. Like all work, it has been a collective labour. Thanks are due to members of the editorial board, the reviews editor, copy editor and designer and the many anonymous reviewers for their assistance. We hope that our readers find this special issue and its contents engaging, stimulating and accessible.

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47 Lenore Layman, 'Labour History in the Making: The Australian Scene in the 1980s and Directions for the 1990s', in John E. Martin and Kerry Taylor (eds), *Culture and the Labour Movement: Essays in New Zealand Labour History* (Palmerston North: Dunmore Press, 1991), 36.