

The historian as document producer

A candid reflection on the production of oral history timed summaries

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Introduction

This chapter draws attention to a seemingly innocuous document that is often produced in the oral history process. It considers the inevitable subjectivity, and the labour, that goes into the production of this kind of document. All this may sound like I am about to discuss interview transcripts, which is not my intention. Rather, the humble ‘timed summary’ is the focus of analysis here, a type of document that is rarely subject to scrutiny. Generally produced by oral historians (or assistants), timed summaries are documents that provide time-logged summary statements describing every two to five minutes of an interview, alongside selected keywords (Bradley 2014). These documents are primarily intended as ‘finding aids’ to accompany catalogue records in oral history collections.

Given their supplemental status, timed summaries can be understood as a form of ‘paratext’ that accompanies a ‘main text’ (in the form of an oral history interview recording). Here I am borrowing from Gérard Genette’s concept of paratext (1982/1997), as well from expansions of his theory that have been undertaken since the emergence of digital forms of media (e.g. Benzon 2013; Birke and Christ 2013; McCracken 2013). Now a well-established analytical concept applied to documents, literature and narrative, paratext is usefully understood as the textual and visual framing devices employed in relation to a text (Birke and Christ 2013). Timed summaries are paratextual documents that supplement, accompany and frame oral history interviews. In the context of my analysis here, I am specifically considering the paratextual quality of timed summaries in relation to online and digitised oral history interviews. As noted by Dorothee Birke and Birte Christ (2013, 66), the concept of paratext has become ‘a highly productive tool for the analysis of medial difference and medial change’. As oral history interviews are increasingly digitised and uploaded online, and made available through library databases and other online sources, the paratextual material that frames these interview recordings shifts markedly. Digital library catalogues, library metadata, links, supplemental images, online media players, transcripts and timed summaries; these (and other

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elements) are what make up the paratextual layering surrounding the digital audio recording. None of these layers are entirely neutral, inevitable or natural; each of them has been designed, written and organised in some way, by a variety of authors (and/or designers).

In undertaking an examination of an apparently mundane or near-invisible document (such as a timed summary), the approach taken by ethnographer Annelise Riles is instructive. Riles (2006, 1) examines documents as ethnographic artefacts, and considers ‘how ethnographers conceive, grasp, appreciate, see patterns’ through the documents they use and produce. She notes, ‘documents are special ethnographic subjects’, in part because ethnographers document the world by producing their own documents (2006, 6). In this way documents both *record* ‘modern knowledge practices’, and they also *constitute* what is understood to be knowledge itself (Riles 2006, 7). This observation helps make the document ‘strange’, a form of distancing that allows an analysis to emerge, no matter how apparently straightforward or unproblematic a document may seem to be. This was also an approach taken by Don Brenneis (2006), who looked to his own ‘enrollment in the projects of producing and evaluating bureaucratic documents’ (in Riles 2006, 15). Brenneis found even the most mundane documents—*especially* the most mundane documents—to be particularly revealing vectors of cultural and social knowledge and power. Likewise, it is my intent to reflect upon my own position as producer of ordinary, unquestioned documents. Accordingly, this chapter addresses the role of the timed summary—as an historian-produced document—in the production of what we call history. I consider how historians, and those working in history-related labour, develop and understand the timed summary as part of the process of history-making, and how the production of this paratextual document operates in relation to the primary source (or the ‘main text’), which in this case is the digital audio recording of an oral history interview.

Like indexes, timed summaries are designed for efficiency. They expedite access to the interview audio, allowing a researcher to identify particular time segments, so that they may play only the sections of an interview that pertain to particular topics or keywords. Timed summaries do the detailed work of a library cataloguer or archivist, but rarely are they authored by a librarian. Rather, timed summaries are often produced as an afterthought, for instance by a harried interviewer trying to finish off a project, or by a casual worker on relatively low pay. As with the graduate evaluation forms examined by Brenneis (2006), there is an assumed impartiality to timed summaries. Their function is not questioned, they are generally overlooked as *mere* summaries, banal statements of apparent facts. Timed summaries are invisible and naturalised in the catalogue record. Of course, library catalogue materials are neither neutral nor objective, although they are often assumed to be so (Lewis 2008). This is even more the case for timed summaries, which must in some way map a narrative that a person constructs about their own life.

Much has been said about the subjective nature of oral history interviewing. It is now a widely accepted view that oral histories are a constantly evolving process of historical meaning-making, where new interpretations are made at every stage. This occurs in the process of recording, in transcription, through historical interpretation and quote selection and through dissemination in all its forms. We now understand that the oral history interview is a co-production of meaning between the interviewer and interviewee; it is an exploration of the way memory operates in relation to a person's experience of the past, telling us how someone sees themselves 'in history' (Shopes 2011; Hamilton 2019).

Unlike the interview itself, timed summaries are not a co-production of meaning, but a forum in which the timed summary author exercises a small degree of power over a narrative, and must use their judgment and caution in relation to people's life stories. Oral historian Alessandro Portelli's more general comments about oral history are useful here:

The control of the historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian ... Instead of finding sources, the historian at least partly 'makes' them; though other people's words may be used it is still his or her discourse.

(1981, 104–105)

Here, Portelli centres the historian in oral historical practice, describing how the historian does not sit to the side of the source material, but 'is pulled inside and becomes part of it' (1981, 105). My approach, therefore, is an effort to reveal some of what happens 'inside' the production of public history documents.

This chapter now moves to provide the background context to existing critiques of the oral history transcript, exploring flow-on implications for timed summaries in practice. From there, I focus on the specific use of oral history timed summaries as they exist within the National Library of Australia's oral history collection, particularly as they are made available online in tandem with digital audio. This brings me to openly reflect upon my own practice as an oral historian and writer of timed summaries, and to consider the labour and decision-making processes involved in the production of these documents. The chapter then engages with two particular oral history projects held with the National Library of Australia: *Bringing Them Home* and the *Reshaping Australian Manufacturing* oral history projects. While vastly different in terms of scale, content and political implications, both projects are examples of the online use of timed summaries as a research finding aid, and as an added layer of historical meaning available for public use. Finally, I reflect upon the dual role of timed summaries for current and future research uses. With the future in mind, the looming ubiquity of artificial intelligence is discussed in reference to the future production of such documents.

Existing critiques of oral history's written documents

We have come a long way since mid- to late twentieth-century critiques of oral history as being 'unreliable' because it is based on spoken, not written sources (Thomson 1998). Oral histories are evidently not about asserting 'facts', but about the subjective experience of history as felt by individuals and groups who are often left out of conventional text-based records. Oral history evidences information not so much about 'what happened' but about how people felt about what happened, or what should have happened, or what they wished happened. In this way, oral histories help us understand historical intentions, affect, rumour, cultural conventions and human responses to change. Insights such as these—about oral history's value—are now well established. Largely as a result of social history and feminist critiques of conventional historical methods, oral sources are no longer the 'underdog' in a false dichotomy between written sources and the spoken-word. In fact, the pendulum of oral history methodological discourse has shifted in another direction. Those who use oral histories are now strongly persuaded to avoid relying solely on interview transcriptions, and encouraged to attend closely to the aural source; to listen, so as to account for pauses, laughter, accents, sarcasm, awkwardness, tone and the sonic background of the interview (Samuel 1998; Gluck 2014; Bradley and Puri 2016; Hamilton 2019; Stein and Rowden 2019; Good 2000). The intimacy of hearing the voice—as opposed to the flattened and regulated nature of reading printed text—can change the listeners' relationship to the interviewee, allowing a deeper and more empathic engagement with the subject (Foster 1991; see also Bradley and Puri 2016). Digital technologies now mean that the cumbersome nature of audio tapes—the problem of fast-forwarding and rewinding, for instance—is no longer an issue, and digital audio files are increasingly accessible in online collections.

All this should mean that there is more *listening* and less *reading* going on in relation to digitised oral history interviews. However transcripts are *still* favoured by historians for reasons of practicality. Transcripts remain the easiest way to search interview content and access potential quotations. Oral historian Michael Frisch (2006, 102) has described the vast swathes of audio and video interview materials in public collections globally as 'notoriously underutilised' and 'largely untapped'. Although it is rarely admitted publicly, even oral historians themselves struggle to listen to their own interviews in their entirety, to say nothing of historians and other researchers who may wish to use the content later on (Frisch and Lambert 2012; Boyd 2014; Hamilton 2019). While this is regrettable, it is an understandable problem: oral histories are often very lengthy. Listening to an entire interview is not always feasible in today's fast-paced, time-poor and often precarious scholarly environment. Added to this, many collections do not catalogue oral histories in great detail, meaning that much of the content is buried, and therefore missed by researchers (Frisch 2006).

To address this problem, librarians and oral historians have increasingly encouraged the production of timed summaries—among other paratextual elements such as searchable metadata—to accompany oral history audio sources (Bradley 2014). This returns us to the point made earlier in this chapter: timed summaries are an exercise in efficiency. They enable faster location of relevant content, allowing a researcher to quickly locate only the part of an interview they wish to listen to. In this way, it could be said that timed summaries are ‘centripetal’ forms of paratext, to borrow Ellen McCracken’s (2013) term, in that they (attempt to) draw the reader’s attention back to the main text of the interview recording. This is unusual for a digital form of paratext; many paratextual layers on digital documents link us beyond the central content, moving out ‘centrifugally’ in McCracken’s terms (2013).

While sections of the oral history community have been slow to catch on to the possibilities of digital content, the range of available technologies for creating, editing and sharing oral histories has expanded vastly over the past two decades (Frisch and Lambert 2012). This means that there is now a wealth of possibilities for digital audio or video to be paired with metadata and time-coded text content, enabling customised access to interviews online. There are possibilities for mapping interview data in new ways that are not chronological or linear, for instance, to map themes or keywords in interactive visual interfaces (Hibberd 2018). The main hindrance to this, however, has been a lack of funding in these areas to dedicate human working hours to summarising, coding and communicating interview content in innovative ways. Generally, collecting institutions have continued with established methods (e.g. using standard paratextual features such as transcripts, timed summaries or just simple catalogue records), because experimenting with newer forms is not financially feasible. There are moments, however, where an injection of funding can result in a boost to online oral history material, as we shall see further on with the *Bringing Them Home* oral history project.

There are inherent risks and challenges that emerge when making information available online in different forms, including issues with copyright, privacy and technical challenges such as file corruption and ongoing digital maintenance. Further, the use of timed summaries with an online player—where the listener can simply play the relevant parts of an interview, not its entire duration—could potentially enable an out-of-context engagement with an historical source. This may mean the listener misses vital contextual information or background detail before a particular keyword comes into play. However, the benefit of including timed summaries alongside online audio is that they are designed to lead researchers back to the primary source: to facilitate listening, rather than just reading a transcript (Ritchie 2015). All this means that the timed summary, as with all forms of metadata and cataloguing, is endowed with a particular responsibility to ‘carry the interview’. A timed summary must communicate just enough so that a researcher will find the available material, but not so much information that the researcher might ignore the audio

completely in favour of the summary alone. I am not convinced that I have hit this balance in my own work, as we shall see further on.

Oral history timed summaries at the National Library of Australia

The National Library of Australia's (NLA) 'Audio Management and Delivery System' (AMAD) is globally recognised as a leading system for delivering digital oral history and folklore audio through an open, free and relatively user-friendly online platform (Bradley 2014; Bradley and Puri 2016). This scheme is based on privileging the primary source, that is, bringing library users the audio content rather than principally offering transcripts. As noted by former NLA Oral History Curator, Kevin Bradley, this audio 'would need to be usable and discoverable in the existing and expanding infrastructure ... to put these unstructured sound recordings on an even footing with more traditional sources of information' (2014, 188).

The hallmark of the AMAD system is that it produces a package of data involving an Extensible Markup Language (XML) system, and a Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) (Bradley and Puri 2016). Put in lay terms, this enables the transcript and the timed summary (where they exist) to be aligned with the digital audio, and delivered together (Bradley 2014). This system enables timed summaries to be entered through a back-end content management system (CMS), which pairs the summarised descriptions with the relevant time section in the interview. The CMS allows the timed summary writer to summarise sections of the interview (usually every two to five minutes, breaking the sections wherever it seems logical), and to add searchable keywords in an adjacent column. The keywords are a mix of proper nouns, themes and key topics. As I will explore further on, the timed summaries provide a more analytical framework than a verbatim transcript: the addition of keywords and the use of summaries mean that the timed summary writer must *interpret* the content and reframe it in terms that may be useful for someone potentially searching the material. Rather than repeating the voice of the speaker, the timed summary writer is another step removed: an interpreter.

When the text encoding on the timed summaries and transcripts is connected to the correct time in the interview's digital audio file, this enables users to simultaneously access audio and text materials that pertain to the same section of the interview. In practice, this means users can search for keywords and terms in the interview content, and then listen only to the identified passages. This also means researchers can cite a particular part of an interview, not just the interview in its entirety, which has theoretical benefits for citation transparency. The resultant layering of the 'main text' and paratextual elements—digital audio, timed summary, transcript, digital interface, etc.—produces an oral history experience that is altogether different from older forms of oral history exposure (which often involved a catalogue request, and a researcher being

handed a tape and a set of headphones in a library setting). In some ways this layering makes the interview more than the sum of its parts. It becomes a primary source that is already interpreted and organised in particular ways. In the process, existing hierarchies—between ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ sources, for instance—may seem to blur. But these layers of paratextual text and audio also open up new avenues for exposure to interview content, encouraging more listening and allowing easier access to recordings that were previously ‘buried’ deep in library collections.

The labour of oral history summary writing

I started writing timed summaries in 2010, as a form of casual work while undertaking my PhD. The interviews I summarised were existing National Library of Australia collection items prioritised for digital upload onto the aforementioned AMAD system. Since that time, I have written almost 50 oral history timed summaries, including of interviews dating back to the 1960s by Australian oral history pioneer Hazel de Berg (1913–1984), and a number of interviews from the *Bringing Them Home* oral history project (a significant national project in Australia, explained in detail further on). More recently, as a researcher and oral history interviewer, I have written timed summaries of my own interviews, as part of the *Reshaping Australian Manufacturing* oral history project. When an oral history interviewer or a research team agrees to undertake a new oral history project with the National Library of Australia, they are also expected to create timed summaries of the interviews they produce, which are to be entered via the online content management system. I now hire research assistants to write timed summaries for me, and it is quickly apparent how different everyone’s summary ‘style’ is, and how this might impact a researcher’s interpretation of an interview.

The experience of writing and contracting timed summaries has meant I have been able to develop a perspective that sees the summary’s construction, and sees the condition in which they have been produced. Somewhere behind the scenes is a casual worker, often sitting in a café, wearing headphones, hoping their laptop computer battery will last another two hours. Sometimes these summary writers come to the interview with very little background knowledge about the interviewee (or the interviewer’s project, for that matter). They must work with what they have—the audio in their ears. This means the summary writer may miss an obvious context or theme that was never explicitly stated in that particular interview. It can also mean that, like a transcriber, the summary writer sometimes has to replay the mumbled parts of an interview ten times until a place name crystallises. My experience as a writer and commissioner of timed summaries means I now see them fundamentally as a finding aid, which entails thinking closely about the experience of a future researcher. For instance, very generalised keywords such as ‘feelings’ or ‘family’ are of little use in a catalogue search. But more specific terms such as

'letterpress', '3D printing' or 'apprenticeship' have more potential value as searchable keywords.

As a casual worker in 2010, the pay for summary writing was modest. Payment was calculated by the 'recorded hour', not by the hours actually spent working, which gave me some impetus to work fast. In all of this I was also my own worst enemy. While other timed summaries tend to be quite brief, often eschewing full sentences and providing mostly keywords and general themes, my summaries often contain a lot of detail. Certainly, they do not transcribe the text, but they work hard (perhaps too hard) to convey all of what was said. My instincts were that the detail mattered, and that this is where the interviewee's humanity lay. In this, perhaps my judgment was off. In any case, the National Library of Australia did not seem to mind. Later, in 2017, I attended an Interviewer Training Session at the National Library and was bemused (and embarrassed) to discover that my timed summary for the *Interview with Alan Villiers by Hazel de Berg* was being used as the 'exemplar' summary for other interviewers and timed summary writers (Villiers 1970). Villiers' interview, as I recollect, was challenging because it contained a great deal of now-obscure sea-faring terminology, and Villiers himself had an unusual accent (the National Library subsequently promoted this interview on *Talk Like a Pirate Day*).

More than just making judgments about how much to include or leave out, the timed summary writer has to exercise judgment about the terminology they might use. For example, if an interviewee refers to abusive behaviour or sexual harassment in the workplace, without actually using that terminology, the timed summary writer has a choice whether to include the term 'sexual harassment', 'abuse' or 'bullying' (among other options) in the keyword section, even if the interviewees themselves might not have described their experience in that manner. In this, there is a delicate balance between not wanting to misrepresent the interviewee as a passive 'victim', but also a progressive desire to call out violence and prejudice where one sees it. Oral historian Katherine Borland (1998) has described a similar problem. Borland's feminist perspective shaped her interpretation of interview content, causing some tension with the interviewee, in this case her grandmother. Borland notes (1998, 324), 'as a feminist I am particularly sensitive to identifying gender dynamics in verbal art', and this influenced her framing and interpretation of her grandmother's experience. Borland's grandmother, however, objected that 'the story is no longer MY story at all' (1998, 327, caps in original). As Borland notes (1998, 327), this disagreement brings up a 'crucial issue in oral narrative scholarship—who controls the text'.

Like Borland, I regularly have to make judgment calls about gender, terminology, power dynamics and patriarchy in my interpretations of oral history content. In the context of the oral histories of manufacturing workers who undertook trade apprenticeships, this issue came up often (although I never encountered objections in the manner that Borland did). When a number of interviewees described routine (and sometimes sexualised) 'apprentice initiations' in factory

contexts, I described such events as ‘arguably a form of institutionally condoned child sex abuse’ (Stein 2016, 46, see also 88). It was a deliberate choice to describe apprentice initiations in this manner, even though the interviewees never used this phrasing. This is particularly tricky interpretive territory: most interviewees did not describe the abuse in any detail, and conveyed more through dramatic pauses, gestures and other non-verbal cues. However, my background knowledge, accrued through undertaking many interviews with tradespeople, played a role here. I had a fairly clear sense of the suffering that some apprentices suffered at the hands of their ‘masters’ or older apprentices, in the name of ‘initiation’ and acceptance into the hegemonic masculine culture of factory trades. But in terms of clear, verbal ‘evidence’, not a lot is explicitly said by most of the men I interviewed, especially as they were addressing a relatively young, female interviewer (see Stein 2016, 88). I expand further on the ethical implications of interview interpretation and terminology choices in the following two sections.

***Bringing Them Home* oral history project**

The ethical implications of timed summary writing were made particularly stark when I commenced work summarising interviews for the *Bringing Them Home* oral history project. In response to the *Bringing Them Home* (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997) report resulting from the *National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (1997), the Australian Commonwealth Government agreed to fund a large-scale national oral history project to record people’s stories, under the auspices of the NLA. From 1998 to 2002, the *Bringing Them Home* oral history project collected the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, as well as others, such as missionaries, nurses, administrators, police, all of whom were impacted by, or involved in, the process of child removal. Follow-up interviews with some of the original interviewees were also conducted in 2010. Uploading the oral history material online became a priority for the NLA (where interviewees’ access permissions allowed) (National Library of Australia n.d.). It was clear that the scale of the project was such that it would take years for all the material to be transcribed and summarised. Unlike most oral history projects, however, generous funding was available for transcription and timed summary writing, and this is how I came to be sent this material for summarising in 2010 and 2011. Given the funding provided to the *Bringing Them Home* oral history project, most audio recordings of interviews in this collection are now available online, presented with full transcripts and timed summaries, where rights permissions allow. This means that someone accessing the interviews online is now able to have three experiences of the source simultaneously: the digital audio, the transcript and the summary, delivered in tandem. This means that, potentially, library users are more easily able to draw their own conclusions about the interview content, by comparing the different mediums.

Bringing Them Home was an unusually significant and sensitive oral history project. It had major ramifications for Australia's understanding of its history, and brought to light the catastrophic consequences of years of systematic racism embedded within government policy and social organisations throughout the twentieth century. The after-effects of the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families will continue to be felt for many generations to come. The *Bringing Them Home* interviews provide important and detailed evidence to counter the claims made by critics of the so-called 'Black Arm Band' view of Australian history: historians and politicians who claimed that the focus on harm done to Indigenous people was too negative (Blainey 1993; see also discussion on John Howard's interview with John Laws in McKenna 1997).

As a casual worker assigned to summarise some of the *Bringing Them Home* interviews, I was not entirely prepared for what I might hear, although I had enough background knowledge to anticipate the (often heartbreaking) content. To many Australians, this history is not widely understood: the impacts of legislation pertaining to Aboriginal people's 'welfare' and 'protection' are not widely taught in lower secondary high school education. Put simply, a variety of state and Commonwealth legislation gave the power to the Aborigines Protection Board and the Aboriginal Welfare Board in Australia to forcibly remove Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families and place them in institutions, in domestic service or in manual labour. I had the benefit of studying this history, but there is a significant difference between 'knowing the history' and hearing personal experiences told by those directly affected. The NLA required me to report any defamatory remarks, any full street addresses and make note of anything that might refer to Aboriginal 'Secret Men's Business' or 'Secret Women's Business' that should not be published. Other than this requirement, I was left to my own devices to summarise these interviews as best I could.

Interestingly, about half of the interviews I was given to summarise were with non-Indigenous people who had been involved, in some way, in the process of child removal. This included missionaries, teachers, nurses and administrators. For some, the interviews were a process of defending their role in this history, while for others it was a chance to atone and explain how their views may have changed over time. Writing the summaries of interviews with non-Indigenous Australians involved in child removal meant that I occasionally struggled when encountering what I felt were racist remarks, unfair statements or a certain kind of 'whitewashing' of uncomfortable histories. Generally, my strategy in those parts was to keep my descriptions very brief, but not entirely shy away from what was being said. I did not want to appear to promote the statements, but I also did not want to conceal them, revealing as they are of the way in which systemic racism functions socially.

John Bannister's 2001 interview with Kathleen Mack (1906–2004) is one such example (Mack 2001). From the 1930s to the mid-1950s, Mack was

a nurse involved in caring for Aboriginal children who had been removed from their families and placed into children's homes and missions. Towards the end of the interview Mack was asked about her views on whether Australians should say 'sorry' for child removals, which was a particularly potent political debate in Australia in 2001. The transcript reads:

Bannister: What do you think about the whole current sorry issue debate that has gone on recently?

Mack: Most uncalled for. The Aboriginals that went through it did it because they wanted to and realised that they were the better off for it.

(Mack 2001)

My accompanying timed summary statement is brief, but makes some effort at distancing myself from the comment. I wrote: 'The "sorry" issue is uncalled for, in Kathleen's opinion' (Timed summary for Mack 2001). A few minutes later Bannister probed again:

Bannister: So in finishing up, where do you think we are in relation to the discussion that we've been having about children that have been separated from their parents?

Mack: Well, I believe that the best was done and that there was a very happy relationship between the children themselves, the parents and ourselves. I myself haven't known any difficulties through it all and the children or their parents can call on me at any time and we have a happy time together discussing old times and new times.

(Mack 2001)

My timed summary statement again put in place a sense of distance from this position. I wrote: 'Kathleen's view is that it was all for the best, and what she witnessed was positive' (Timed summary for Mack 2001). I made sure to use the term 'stolen generations' in the accompanying keywords for this section.

None of these timed-summary-writing decisions were particularly strategic, but rather made on gut instinct, back in 2010 and 2011. To some degree there was a practical imperative to my decision-making: using keyword terms such as 'stolen generations' or 'sexual harassment' serves an ongoing functional use for future researchers, which I felt would be more useful than less specific terminology. Further, my actions were an attempt at a performed kind of neutrality about a topic that I knew full well that no one could be 'neutral' about. This example again demonstrates how a timed summary is never simply a 'finding aid', but is a paratextual document with complexities of its own, and with a role in shaping the interpretation of another document (in this case the interview with Mack). The choices made by the authors of timed summaries are never solely based on a response to the content in the main document (the interview), but are always informed by existing knowledge (or lack thereof),

experiences, biases and political positions. A timed summary writer must walk a tightrope between a responsibility to present the content as neutrally as possible, and a responsibility to those who may be victims of violence or bigotry, no matter how historical.

At a certain point the layering of meaning becomes almost overwhelming: one must remember that oral history interviews themselves are not a 'direct' encounter with the mind of another person, but are a mere sample, a conversation between two people which could have gone one way, and somehow went another. Oral history interviewers (and journalists) regularly lament that the best statements by interviewees always happen when the recorder is off. In this sense the interview recording—and its paratextual material—are only ever partial insights, and should always be analysed with this in mind. Moreover, like all documents, timed summaries will age over time: their research salience may increase or lessen over time, and their terminology may become dated. Any sense of control over an interview's interpretation remains illusory, and we must learn to be comfortable with that.

Reshaping Australian Manufacturing oral history project

Almost a decade later, I again found myself writing timed summaries. But this time it was as an interviewer managing my own (much smaller scale) oral history project: the *Reshaping Australian Manufacturing* oral history project undertaken with the NLA (2017–2019). As an individually run oral history project (conducted in addition to other forms of research), the number of interviewees was relatively small: 12. But the interviews were lengthy 'whole of life' accounts, where the interviewees narrate their life's journey loosely chronologically, from their birth and family background, to their contemporary experience. The interviewees were current and former manufacturing tradespeople with experience of dramatic economic, social and technological changes in Australia from the 1960s to the present. Leading the project meant that I had more vested interest in the thoroughness of the summaries, as I would be using them for my own research, in addition to their potential public use through the NLA catalogue. This changed the level of detail I was willing to include. The further complication was that, given time limitations, I was not able to write all the summaries myself, and I paid research assistants for (some of) this work. (This time I made sure they were fairly paid by the hour for their work, not by the 'recorded hour'.)

A great deal of the summarising process in *Reshaping Australian Manufacturing* involved putting a name to something, to describe, using keywords, the dynamic being discussed by the interviewee. For example, engineering patternmaker Debra Schuckar suggested a number of instances during her apprenticeship where she was treated differently because of her gender (Schuckar 2018). Being the only known female patternmaker in Australia, this was an ingrained part

of her daily working experience. Despite describing times where people were verbally abusive, for example being addressed as ‘you smart arse slut’, Schuckar never once used the terms ‘sexism’ or ‘sexual harassment’ in the interview (2018). Nonetheless, I made the decision in several parts of the timed summary to include those terms in the keyword column. This was balanced, however, with my descriptions of Schuckar’s testimony that also pointed to her sense of being respected by the great majority of her peers. Schuckar was proud of her ability to quietly and confidently manage the prejudiced men and boys she encountered:

I just felt that quite demeaning like it didn’t need to ... I remember saying to him,

‘Don’t you ever talk to me like that ever again.’

I said it very quietly and he apologised on the spot, and never ever ... said one derogatory comment to me. I didn’t handle it by being vocal. I handled it by being, what’s the word ... diplomatic and just teaching people to hold their tongue.

(2018)

The timed summary for this section reads: ‘Recalled a moment in trade school when she was sexually harassed and stood up for herself, diplomatically and not dramatically’, alongside keywords including *sexism*, *sexual harassment*, *female apprentice*, *female tradesperson* (Timed summary for Schuckar 2018). Like Borland, I am ‘concerned about the continued emotional effect alternative readings of personal narratives may have on our living subjects’ (1998, 327–328). In this, a balance must be struck between the public interest and the welfare of the interviewee.

Recognising gender-power relations is a common part of interpreting manufacturing workers’ interviews. It is rarely acknowledged by the interviewees themselves that gendered identities and roles are constructed in any way, however it occasionally emerges as a form of realisation for the interviewees as they are speaking. For example, former engineering patternmaker (now a teacher) Peter Williams said:

it occurs to me that as, I’m not quite sure what it’s like in other parts of the world, I haven’t traveled overseas much at all, but I know in Australia, as Australian men, we identify personally very very strongly with what we do. For example if I go to a BBQ, and I’ll meet somebody, meet a bloke, the conversation’ll probably go along the lines of,

‘G’day Jim, I’m Peter.’

‘Oh g’day Peter how are you? Yeah ...’

‘Oh I’m pretty good yeah yeah, oh what do you do Jim?’

(2018)

My timed summary text for Williams' reflection certainly strays into the territory of analysis, not mere summary. I wrote:

Describes how Australian masculine identity is closely tied to work: men's socialisation is bound up with employment identity. Peter was confronted by the question of what it is to be a patternmaker who is no longer making patterns. Peter decided he had to be something else.

Keywords: *Masculinity, Australian culture, employment, Australian masculinity, patternmaking, masculine identity, self-esteem.*

(Williams 2017)

This sort of content would not appear in a verbatim transcript, and it demonstrates how a timed summary does active interpretive work. In this case, the Williams summary achieves added analytical content; however it also shows the potential for diverse interpretations, if the summaries are to be written from particular perspectives. While I might seek to make the Australian masculinity seem 'strange' and constructed, other authors might see masculinity as 'natural' or pre-given. Likewise, there are bound to be cultural and social elements of Williams' story that I am blind to. Once we take the time to examine timed summaries in detail, it is easy to see how far we have stepped from a 'mere summary' that abbreviates the interviewee's story.

Conclusion

The creation of timed summary documents places the historian or researcher in an unusual dual role. Not only is the interviewer the *producer* of an historical source, but they must also work in the service of potential future histories; this involves thinking carefully about how others might use the material later on. As noted earlier, the summariser must take on something of a librarian's mindset, and, to the extent that it is possible, project oneself into the future. This may mean guessing which topics and keywords might continue to be interpretable for future researchers. Of course, mistakes are inevitable, and some timed summaries may miss the mark completely for future use. Nonetheless, it is important to realise that the production of this form of document presents a distinct way of thinking about public history. It changes a dynamic in terms of who public history is 'in the service of'. Timed summaries necessitate a focus on detail, sometimes painstaking detail – and this level of detail is not always interesting to the interviewer, nor to the writer of the timed summary. This is detail produced for perpetuity, for potential future research, rather than for immediate gain. In that sense, the activity of writing timed summaries requires a dogged commitment to thoroughness that is increasingly rare in today's highly mediated realm of short attention spans and social media scrolling. Timed summaries are a slow form of historical production. They are

intrinsically inefficient in terms of labour time, despite existing for the purposes of research efficiency. The very value of timed summaries comes from this slowness and depth of engagement with content that might otherwise be archived and promptly forgotten.

Evidently, digital technologies are making incursions into the world of library cataloguing, image collation and audio transcription. There are now innumerable artificial intelligence (AI) services for transcribing interviews, image recognition and coding, indexing and other automatic metadata tools. While presently some of these tools are in the ‘clunky’ stages of beta development, we can be fairly confident that over time they will become more sharply honed and widely adopted by collecting institutions and online search services. Analysis is beginning to emerge about the benefits and problematic ethics of such systems (see for example, Hibberd 2018; Plosker 2018; Cohn 2019; Coleman 2020). In this context, one must ask whether timed summaries could be produced through AI, or, more to the point, how timed summaries might *not* be easily achieved through AI. As this chapter has demonstrated, timed summaries require an analytical framework for interpreting interview material, far more than verbatim transcription does. Without human judgment (flawed as it is), such documents would exist without an ethical framework and narrative clarity. Most importantly, they would lack a sense of responsibility towards those who share their life stories with the public in oral history form.

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