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OUR REMEMBERED SELVES: ORAL HISTORY AND FEMINIST MEMORY

Julie Stephens

In retrospective accounts of the women's movement, personal memories of feminists have taken on a public and collective significance. What has come to count as an official memory and what has been forgotten is invariably contested. Oral history interviews with Australian feminists looking back on the women's movement challenge sanctioned accounts of second wave feminism and raise important questions about memory and oral history. This article explores some of the creative possibilities of interlinking memory theory, oral history and feminist reminiscence. In examining oral testimonies about mid-twentieth century feminism, a more multifaceted and ambivalent dialogue about the women's movement emerges than that found in memoir and autobiography. Oral reminiscences resist some of the pressures to conform to dominant representational frameworks.

ABSTRACT

KEY WORDS:
feminism,
memory
studies,
composure,
cultural scripts,
maternalism

In retrospective accounts of mid-twentieth century feminism, debates about history and memory intersect. The personal recollections of feminists have taken on a public and collective significance, informing conferences, journals, memoir, autobiography and of course, popular discourse.¹ Efforts to stabilise or selectively shape these memories into a sanctioned version of the past are always fiercely debated. By examining an oral history collection held at the National Library of Australia, I will suggest that interpretative approaches from oral history and memory studies can work against fixed versions of feminism's history and allow more ambivalent dialogues to emerge. While there is an overlap between the oral record and written life narratives, attention to oral history can challenge some of the dominant public memories of second wave feminism.

The National Library of Australia Oral History Collection contains a wide range of interviews with well-known Australian women who were active in the women's liberation

movement. This includes writers, historians, academics, public commentators, activists and those who achieved considerable success in the political and executive arenas. The oral history unit of the library continues to build its strong collection of interviews documenting Australian feminism and the history of the women's liberation movement in Australia. While some of the interviews to be discussed here were conducted with this aim firmly in view,² others were part of oral projects on Australian historians,³ political activists, academics or women members of parliament and the senior bureaucracy. In the course of a wider project researching the political consequences of the different ways feminism has been remembered,⁴ I grouped together eighteen recorded interviews with prominent Australian feminists that share the characteristic of 'looking back' and remembering the early women's liberation movement.⁵ These interviews have not been assembled in this way before or analysed collectively.

The interviews not only provide retrospective narratives of the women's movement but also share a certain generational perspective. With few exceptions, the interviews are with women who 'discovered' the women's movement at similar ages or life-stages. Significantly, most interviews were conducted at the turn of the century between 1998-2003. As narratives recorded at the end of the twentieth century, they mirror the widespread view at the time that something had passed and was lost — never to be retrieved again. In the Australian political context, this perspective was reinforced by an increasing hostility to John Howard's conservative government during this period. The interviews also coincided with and reproduced an emerging cultural interest in memory, a 'memory wave' reflected at the time in films, novels, popular discourse and the rise of the memoir. The revived intellectual interest in memory also shaped the burgeoning interdisciplinary field of memory studies. Accordingly, a compelling way of viewing these oral history interviews is to see them as end of millennium narratives conducted during a personal testimony epidemic.

My approach to these oral sources shares some methodological characteristics with what is currently known as a secondary analysis (even though no primary analysis of this material has been done before). This method is defined by Janet Heaton as the study of 'artefactual data derived from previous studies, such as field-notes, observational records and tapes and transcripts of interviews'.⁶ Joanna Bornat and Gail Wilson build on this definition in 'Recycling the Evidence' and outline some of the ethical and conceptual issues posed by the re-analysis of interviews and life histories.⁷ Elsewhere, Bornat shows how the relationship between the meaning and context of an interview can be illuminated by re-analysis. Inevitably, 'second takes' at interviews bring 'additional theoretical frameworks to bear on the data'.⁸ While my approach to the National Library of Australia interviews feels like a 'first-take', it is important to acknowledge that my re-grouping of these interviews in a different context does open up possibilities in the recorded material that could fall outside the original purpose for which the interviews were conducted.

As Alistair Thomson reminds us, oral history (like memory) is shaped by particular social and intellectual forces.⁹ As well as reflecting a generalised interest in life narratives and memory research,¹⁰ these particular oral histories are shaped by earlier ideas about the radical potential of allowing women to 'speak-for-themselves'.¹¹ The interactive approach to interviewing also dramatises later feminist critiques of positivism in the 1980s and the cele-

bration of subjectivity¹² as an important tool of analysis, rather than as a shortcoming of research. Many of the *interviewers* are also active participants in the Australian women's movement and often friends of the interview subjects. As examples of feminist rejection of the separation between researcher and researched, these are very dynamic and interactive interviews. They follow informal conversational idioms with interjections, qualifications and even at times disputes over respective memories of particular dates. Consequently, the kind of oral testimony to be discussed in what follows, also provides pointed insight into the relationship between personal and public memory.

I will argue that interpreting these interviews through the lens of memory studies and oral history theory highlights different ways these oral narratives resist dominant representational frameworks. First, they avoid the binary logic of many historical and popular accounts that tally-up the successes and failures of feminism. Secondly, they acknowledge and dramatisate the affective dimensions of the women's movement and the role of the emotions in the formulation of activist strategy and identity. This is in contrast to the flattening out of emotion in certain feminist memoirs. And finally, I will propose that these interviews contest dominant cultural representations that naturalise an opposition between feminism and motherhood. This article will explore each of these areas and the creative possibilities of interlinking memory theory, oral history and feminist reminiscence. Where appropriate, contrast will be made with written memoir and biography.

'THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IS MY COUNTRY'¹⁵

The poetic and political force of oral narratives often resides in what Daniel James calls their 'messiness', their paradoxical and contradictory nature.¹⁴ Certainly, some interview subjects attempt to shape reminiscences about their lives into neat, coherent and somehow instructive accounts, such as what they may have learned from their experiences or how present circumstances appear to have logically emerged from their past. In a searching interview, however, such attempts are never entirely successful. This process has been theorised by oral historians as the seeking of composure¹⁵ or as the need to construct a 'safe and necessary personal coherence out of risky, unresolved or painful pieces of past and present lives'.¹⁶ The concept of 'composure' has a dual meaning. Following Graham Dawson, it refers to both the process of composing a life story and to the narrator striving to be composed, calm and coherent.¹⁷ A struggle for personal coherence is clearly

evident in some of the recorded interviews with Australian feminists in the National Library of Australia oral history collection. Yet, the interactive nature of the interviews, the friendships and familiarity between the interviewers and interviewees, the breaks and interruptions, the interjections and shared involvement in memory production means there is ample space for contradictions, paradoxes and discontinuities. This closely accords with Penny Summerfield's observation that composure is always provisional in life narratives and that feminist oral history practice may be more conducive to producing and revealing discomposure.¹⁸

In this respect, the strength of oral testimony can be its failure to entirely control the process of remembrance. In the case of these interviews, singular readings of key historical events become much more difficult with oral evidence. The tally sheet logic often underpinning public discussions of the legacy of second wave feminism (quantifying successes and failures) is never wholly reproduced. A memory can invoke manifold responses, some of which are outside the dominant cultural scripts. Suzanne Bellamy, artist, radical feminist and writer, uses the metaphor of the mosaic in her oral history interview to describe the feminist movement in Australia:

This was never a period of unity. This was not a period in which everyone sat down and all agreed. It was a period of creative struggle out of the fantastic. It's like the palette was endless. The palette was, you know, it was a mosaic... You can't set it up. But it was an explosive, creative struggle period.¹⁹

At other points in this interview she remembers women's liberation as 'an egg-laying extravaganza' and 'one of those epoch breaking periods that can only be sustained briefly, but within which everything is born'. Her recollections depict the 'explosive spontaneity' of the time as both 'really precious' and as having 'wounded everyone in various ways'. Refusing the role of the auditor, retrospectively calculating the achievements or shortcomings of feminism, Bellamy instead embraces the 'disconnects' of the day and resists the temptation to seek the 'composure' or 'safety' that some interpreters of oral history see as characteristic of personal testimony. This gives her particular interview an almost meta-narrative quality, where memories are recalled and theorised at the same time.

There's a sense if you're only going to look at a person's life as, like messy, that you'll



say that they are sometimes connected with themselves and then they're sometimes disconnected with themselves... But in an historical sense, that's often a useful creative tool for looking at movements of change, that they draw to them – first of all they draw to them a really disparate group. I mean, you know... that we drew to us the best and the worse, worse in inverted commas and best, because I think that we were the cream of our generation and also some of the most loopy.²⁰

An example of the interactive nature of the interviews in this archive and the often reflective and irreverent approach to memory is in the following exchange. Bellamy is discussing with the interviewer Biff Ward, the relationship between the verbal and the visual in the women's movement, in poster art and in the layout of the first Australian women's liberation newspaper *Mejane*.²¹

BW. My memory of it, just as you speak is that it always had in terms of layout a kind of space – and it wasn't that there was a shortage of material, of blank spaces, but it wasn't as dense visually as everything else was at that time. It was almost as though there was room to breathe.

SB That's good. That's good that that's your memory. I dare say I think that probably isn't true, but that's a wonderful memory, because the breadth was in there, in the idea – wasn't it? That's why you've got that memory possibly.²²

Getting it together (A Women's Liberation Conference) 1979 screenprint, printed in colour, from multiple stencils, National Gallery of Australia, Canberra. Purchased 1982 © Toni Robertson.

If there is a particular 'template of remembrance' informing how feminism is recalled, Suzanne Bellamy refuses to follow it. More than any other in these interviews, Bellamy rejects official versions of the women's movement in Australia as a story just about nation building or the integration of women into a nationalist narrative. Her reference points are not legislative changes or policy battles but the relationship between feminist anarchist guerrilla activism and art movements such as dada and surrealism. She refers to a secret history of feminism that has not yet been documented about such direct actions and the difficulty in finding an intellectual language creative enough to capture the underground narratives of the movement. This accords with views expressed by some radical feminists in Australia that their history has been overshadowed by more mainstream accounts of the achievements of liberal feminism.

The other oral history interview in this collection which both recalls the early days of women's liberation and views personal and collective experience through a different cultural lens is that of Jill Matthews, Professor of History at the Australian National University. Memories of music and cultural protest, the different expressions of lesbian culture in the Australian cities of Adelaide and Melbourne and the details of the first women's liberation posters are richly drawn in this interview. Matthews recalls the times, not as 'the unfolding of activism into a career path',²³ but rather as a period when, Matthews declares, 'we were absolutely rabid'.²⁴ The extent to which Australian feminist cultural radicalism has been eclipsed, or to use terms from memory theory, 'actively forgotten' is a topic for another paper. I concur with Margaret Henderson's persuasive observation that the autobiographies and histories of Australian feminism that emerged in the mid to late 1990s tend towards a persistent 'othering' of radical politics.²⁵

Oral historians grapple with questions about the relationship between individual and collective memory and whether personal recollection always follows a cultural script.²⁶ The oral narratives of Bellamy and Matthews, and many others in the National Library of Australia collection, illustrate that there is 'space for the consciously reflective individual', to use Anna Green's words, and that oral reminiscence is not always determined by a pre-existing cultural script.²⁷ Green raises questions about cultural theorisations of memory that devalue or reject notions of individual memory. She argues that the cultural and linguistic turn in memory theory has risked a form of cultural determinism where personal reflection is always subsumed under the rubric

of a collective, social memory.²⁸ Green convincingly argues against the automatic conflation of individual and collective memory. In reference to the wider field of cultural history, Wulf Kansteiner also suggests a widening unease with the failure of memory studies to sufficiently conceptualise individual autobiographical memory as distinct from collective memory.²⁹

Turning back to the interviews, there is no doubt that at certain points in the oral narratives, cultural scripts do seem to emerge. In my view, this is more likely to be the case when interviewees are asked sweeping chronological questions. The questions themselves follow a template. This is evident in questions about a person's first encounter with feminism. The interviewee is prompted to tell of a 'conversion-like' experience. Going to the first women's liberation meeting, for instance, is remembered as being 'totally new', like nothing ever experienced before. Sara Dowse, writer and the inaugural head in 1974 of the Women's Affairs Section of the Australian Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet remembers being 'truly blown away [at] that first meeting'.³⁰ Julia Ryan, feminist, educator and a founding member of the National Foundation For Australian Women, depicts her first meeting with the women's liberation group in Canberra in 1970 as being like 'hearing the word. It was very much a feeling of that'.³¹ Deborah McCulloch, feminist and Women's Advisor to the South Australian Premier (1976-1979) echoes this interpretation:

In later years, looking back it was like what happened to St Paul. It was a total, total conversion. I was then dedicated [raucous laughter] oh my God, to the women's movement and I was! Everyone else came a very bad second.³²

Biff Ward, along with Sara Dowse is one of the key oral history interviewers in this collection. She was prominent in the women's movement in Canberra, the women's refuge movement and the women's peace camps at the American base at Pine Gap in the 1980s and recalls her emotional response to her first women's liberation meeting in Sydney above Bob Gould's first bookshop:

I had an epiphany of extraordinary proportions, in that I was almost winded. I felt like I had been hit by a huge implement in the gut in recognition that that's how I always had lived and that at some level, that meant that I hated what I was, which was woman....So I got completely turned around and came out of that meeting just gabbing.³³



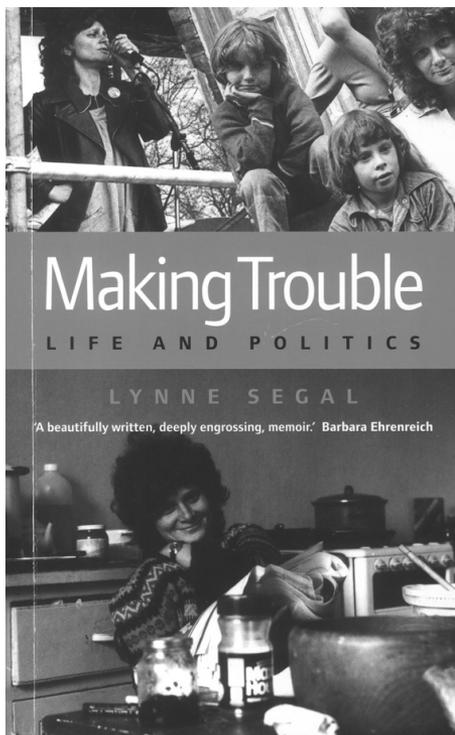
Margaret Bearlin, teacher, educator and social activist echoes this collective memory by remembering her first meeting as being 'like a bombshell' where she was 'learning to see with new eyes and to listen with new ears'.³⁴ Yet, the space is created in these interviews where a memory can also embody two things at once. Other prominent feminists describe their first women's liberation meeting as more like a homecoming. Joan Russell, member of the Women's Electoral Lobby, public servant and the first woman leader at Casey Station in Antarctica in 1991 recounts both the newness and the familiarity: 'It was like one of those instantaneous feminist conversions. These women speak my language, they feel the way I do, this is where I belong – a coming home feeling'.³⁵

These recollections conform more to a recognisable public discourse about the 'before' and 'after' of a conversion experience. Similar 'templates of remembrance' would be apparent in written biographies and memoirs. However, the 'both at once' characteristic of these personal testimonies underscores the value of oral records as less ready to adopt binary modes of thinking about collective experience. Importantly,

there is space for individual reflection and resistance to unitary cultural scripts where the personal is erased by dominant notions of the collective view. Unlike historians or memoirists, the oral history interview subjects have more control over when, how and to whom the oral record of their interview is released. This may mean there is less pressure to regulate or tone down discomfiting reminiscences or to try and fit them into an existing dominant representational framework.

Binary logic, however, seems to unwittingly infuse academic debate about feminism's legacy or the trajectories of women's history. Take for example Susan Magarey's otherwise illuminating analysis of four interweaving strands in the development of women's history in Australia in *Women's History Review* 16.³⁶ Her analysis is framed by a perceived conflict between a celebratory view of women's history and what she views as a more negative perspective. She cites Stuart MacIntyre's claim that women's history marks one of the most significant changes to the discipline in the last twenty years, as representative of the former, and Jill Matthews' comment that feminist historians should now turn their

Women on the march wave their placards at the International Women's Day march, Melbourne, 8 March 1975. Photographer: John McKinnon. National Library of Australia [http://nla.gov.au/nla.pic-vn3510654].



hands to other things, as representing the latter, 'an occasion to fall on one's sword'.³⁷ It should be noted that this binary approach appears uncharacteristic, as elsewhere Magarey celebrates the disorderly conduct associated with women's liberation and its various forms of cultural expression.³⁸ Yet, the impulse to definitively capture and pin down the legacy of diverse and disruptive forms of protest seems difficult to resist in retrospective analyses of social movements. It is an impulse that is rejected in Bellamy's use of the metaphor of the women's movement as an endless 'mosaic'. Similarly, Todd Gitlin, activist and commentator, uses the idea of a 'sand painting' to indicate that the outcomes and meanings of social movements are always provisional and shifting in historical time.³⁹ Interpretive strategies from memory studies and oral history provide a useful framework for keeping this provisionality firmly in view. If memory is seen as a narrative, a form of interpretation, not a replica, as Marita Sturken reminds us,⁴⁰ then tally sheet versions of history are less likely to surface.

'WOUNDS IN THE TISSUE OF MEMORY'⁴¹

Aside from the manifold dimensions of memory being recorded in the oral testimony of Australian feminists, the National Library collection richly documents in more detail than most written accounts, the emotional charge of

the early days of the women's liberation movement. Feminist history has long been predicated on an interest in the emotional lives of women. Yet, feminist histories and memoirs of the women's movement can also be strangely devoid of affect. This is all the more puzzling given the genuinely passionate commitment to the idea of the personal as political at the time. The reflections of Lynne Segal, Australian-born Professor of Psychology at Birkbeck College London, in her *Making Trouble: Life and Politics* are a case in point. It is a book opening with the provocation: 'This is not a memoir'.⁴² Segal rejects popular and scholarly assessments of second wave feminism as a form of historical revisionism and tries to do something different in recalling her own political journey. She offers a 'portrait of a political moment, placing oneself within it, however cautiously, knowing the limits of retrospection'.⁴³ Her detailed reminiscences make compelling reading partly because her experiences are so unconventional on the one hand, and so typical of the day, on the other.

Understanding life backwards the spirit of each decade I entered in my adult life appears, remarkably, in perfect harmony with my needs of the moment. I embarked on sexual life in the Sixties, in the growing clamour for sexual liberation. I became a single mother in the Seventies, as feminism bloomed again. In the late 1980s, I began a retreat into the responsible shores of academe when, if you were lucky, you could be both paid (though increasingly poorly) and acclaimed for performing your 'oppositional' politics on lecture circuits, just at the moment when Left and feminist activism were largely vanishing from more accessible public forums, in preparation for the dismal decade of the 1990s.⁴⁴

This narrative could easily fit the lives of many of the feminist oral histories recorded by the National Library of Australia. Yet, does the conventional shape of this narrative illustrate Summerfield's observation that in reproducing the self as a social entity, we necessarily draw on familiar public renderings of history?⁴⁵ Unlike the oral testimonies discussed here, Segal chooses to recall the details of campaigns and struggles more than the feelings and emotions they inflamed. Aside from the extracts from other people's letters and memoirs, *Making Trouble* is notable for, and perhaps limited by, its relatively impersonal voice. While Segal is adamant that her book is not meant to be a confessional narrative, the silence around her interior life (the exception being a brief section on ageing), can work to undermine the gendered

and embodied, and in short, the 'feminist' character of the narrative. The struggle for composure or personal equanimity can be at the expense of registering the emotional texture of the experiences that are remembered.

Margaret Henderson highlights this contradiction in her analysis of the autobiographies of notable Australian feminists. She offers a persuasive critique of three memoirs by feminists who were prominent in government, the media, education and the corporate sector in Australia (Susan Ryan's *Catching the Waves*, Wendy McCarthy's *Don't Fence Me In* and Anne Summers *Ducks on the Pond*). Henderson turns to a review by celebrated novelist Drusilla Modjeska, who observes that in these memoirs, it is possible to get a good sense of what these women have done but 'not much of who they are'.⁴⁶ Henderson carefully details the way a specifically masculine kind of subjectivity is fashioned from the 'limited engagement with the intersection of fantasy, desire, the irrational and the emotional in the subject of women's movement politics'.⁴⁷ She asks the important question of how might a feminist activist's life be narrated in a feminist mode?⁴⁸

Listening to oral accounts, where the emotional intensity of feminist recollection is so palpable, a very complex history of the women's liberation movement emerges. As all oral historians would know, the aural experience of listening to the interview is crucial to this complexity. A written transcript does not provide access to the wild laughter provoked by particular memories, or the performative aspects of an interview. Listening to the interviewee struggle with the contradictory emotions produced by the process of recall and the effort to compose a coherent narrative of disparate fragments, provides rich insight into the personal and public stakes of feminist involvement. This is not always evident from reading written records (histories or memoirs) of the women's movement and as Henderson contends, a toned-down, domesticated rendering of feminist lives can be the result. The implication is that a more direct engagement with the emotional would allow different forms of subjectivity to surface.

The 'affective turn' in cultural and critical theory is evident in recent attempts to theorise the way emotion works to 'inform and inspire action'.⁴⁹ The oral histories of the Australian women's movement are stories of passionate attachments: to political ideals, to activist identities, to utopian senses of feminist community, to other women and to particular forms of cultural expression. They are also stories of loss, of political and personal rivalries, of anxieties, angers and disappointments. If these affective dimensions of the women's movement are

culturally forgotten and are absent from the public discourse then there is little wonder that current media representations of feminism take such firm hold.

'ALTERNATIVE DREAMS OF MUTUALITY – BACK THEN'⁵⁰

Clearly, attention to oral history can work to challenge some of the sanctioned public memories of feminism. We are all familiar with popular culture representations that naturalise an opposition between feminism and motherhood. Feminism is remembered as having been anti-child, of promising that women could 'have it all' and of producing a work-obsessed career woman. In the early part of the twenty-first century, anxieties about the historical accuracy of these representations have been played out in the opinion pages of newspapers in Australia. Perhaps the pertinent question here is not whether feminism failed motherhood, but why is feminism remembered as having forgotten motherhood? Listening to the dramatic oral recollections of this period, I was more than once struck by the memories of women struggling to tackle issues that affected the lives of mothers and young children. Moreover, these memories were not recounted in abstract, gender-neutral policy language. Instead, campaigns around women's refugees, violence against women, rape crisis centres or childcare were rendered as emotionally fraught, disturbing and often very contradictory experiences. A history of affect was being recorded as well as a narrative of key events. Moreover, in my view, this oral record unearths a maternalist ethos forgotten or hidden in many contemporary renderings of feminism.

While Sara Ruddick reminds us of the significance of 'maternal thinking' to feminist politics and theory,⁵¹ others depict the women's movement as a repudiation of maternalism. For instance, in *Australian Feminism: A Companion*, Marilyn Lake divides the Australian women's movement into five overlapping phases. She traces the way a maternalist orientation was discarded in the struggle for equal opportunity (1940s-1960s) and replaced by the language of citizenship and then by the language of revolution in the 1970s.⁵² Maternalism is a complex and ambiguous political configuration, as Lake deftly illustrates in *Getting Equal*.⁵³ Even Ruddick describes maternal politics as always 'partial, imperfect and limited by context'.⁵⁴ Yet, she makes a powerful case for maternal thinking as a constitutive element of a 'feminist standpoint'.⁵⁵ This is evident in the interviews under review. A form of maternalism surfaces in memories of an activism which had, as its central aim, to transform the concerns of mothers and children from

a private responsibility into public policy.⁵⁶ The nurturing impulses of this kind of activism seem to have been overshadowed or buried in sanctioned cultural memory. It is as though there has been a cultural forgetting of the nurturing feminist,⁵⁷ so much so that even putting the two terms together feels distinctly uncomfortable. However, cross-generational examples from the oral history record illustrate that the language of love and protection (seen to be a characteristic of the maternal phase of Australian feminism) is not neutralised by the emergence of other more self-consciously political calls for equality, citizenship or revolution.

Observe, for example, Ann Turner's interview with Phyllis Johnson in 1995. I have included this interview in the group under scrutiny because it illustrates a feminist activism which spans the whole of the twentieth century. Johnson, who describes herself as a 'lifelong campaigner for women's equality', was born in 1917 and went on her first International Women's day March in 1936. In her oral history interview, Johnson describes the 'tender loving care' that was given to the women and children who came to the Betsy Women's Refuge in Bankstown in 1975.⁵⁸ While she discusses the rallies and protests outside Parliament that were organised at the time and the slogan 'no silence against domestic violence', Johnson's language is expressly maternal. She describes how she and Frankie Oats would cook meals for the women and children when they first arrived at the refuge. Her words and her emphatic tone reveal a different picture to that of militant feminist ideologues discussing patriarchal power relations and women's collectivities with the victims of domestic violence.⁵⁹ Johnson exclaims, 'Oh the love, the love that we gave the children – the cuddles and the cossetting'.⁶⁰

Not surprisingly, the term 'cossetting' does not recur in the other later interviews. However, the nurturing impulses do resurface. Biff Ward recalls how ill-equipped many feminists were when working in the first refuges and unprepared for the experiences that would confront them. She discusses the grief she and others felt about the children of women who came seeking protection from violence:

Another memory I have is of a meeting, a staff meeting, where we decided, we had a major topic for this weekly meeting and we were going to finally really talk about the children...Virtually everybody in the room had enormous distress around these children and could hardly bear to look at them, and tried to kind of look over their heads all the time and to avoid...I mean, everyone had different things, but all of them were

just saying 'my grief in looking at these children is too great and I can't bear it'.⁶¹

Julia Ryan speaks in her oral history interview of how emotionally damaging it was to work at the refuge: 'Although I was not actually directly involved in any terrible incidents with guns or violence, just the whole feeling of tension all the time, and the misery and the hardness of it, I found it very, very demoralising'.⁶² She remembers how one of her roles was to provide statistics at the end of each month, calculating the number of women and children who had come to the refuge in search of a safe environment. She would frequently be unwell during this time and only later realised the connection between her empathy for the women and children, and her physical illness. Both interviews, in recording the affective dimensions of feminist activism, open a space where sanctioned cultural memory can be challenged.

The lens through which feminism is viewed backwards, is not that of the contemporary 'work/family divide'. Sara Dowse not only speaks very movingly about the birth of her son Sam when interviewed but of children being a distinct advantage in the policy arena when she was head of the Women's Affairs Section of the Australian Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet.

There were two things that helped me – apart from my feminism and being, if you like, an expert because nobody else in the department had a clue. First, I had no ambitions in this area at all. I was truly a disinterested public servant. I didn't envisage spending the rest of my life as a bureaucrat. I was surprised to discover what a good bureaucrat I could be, but I had no ambitions there. The second thing was having kids ...You know, if you have to go home and cook the dinner, you can't take yourself all that seriously. It's a grounding...You can be in an absolutely tremendous combat, a subtle but nonetheless tremendous combat in an interdepartmental committee, and go home and have to look for the frozen peas! I knew that there was nobody else in the department that had that experience. If they had to go home to dinner their wives would just present it to them. Although it made it easier in some ways, it isolated them terribly and did bad things to their egos. So you know, I think that those things did see me through what proved to be a very, very hectic, dynamic time.⁶³

Dowse makes it clear that she did not invest her sense of identity in paid work and in 1977

resigned from public office to devote herself to her writing. Other interviews with prominent Australian women in the National Library of Australia oral history collection,⁶⁴ also cut through the conventional 'women as nation-builders' version of feminist history and frequently run counter to public discourses about the historical legacy of mid-twentieth century feminism.

CONCLUSION

Personal memories of second-wave feminism are often given public prominence in popular discourses about motherhood, work and the contemporary legacy of the women's movement. Oral history recollections of women's liberation in Australia both reflect and critique these dominant narratives. By engaging in a secondary analysis of a group of oral history interviews from the National Library of Australia, I have attempted to show how oral accounts can work against 'tally sheet' versions of the successes and failures of feminism and move towards more multivocal, self-questioning and open-ended dialogues. Different forms of subjectivity emerge in oral narratives to those expressed in feminist

memoir and autobiography. While the written record tends to skirt around the emotional dimensions of feminist activism, oral accounts frequently focus on feelings and emotions and provide a significant alternative, affective history of the women's movement. Interpretative frameworks from oral history and memory also highlight some of the ways these oral narratives resist dominant representational frameworks and do not follow accepted cultural scripts. This is particularly evident when these interviews depart from culturally prevailing assumptions about work-centered feminism. The interviews can be interpreted as unearthing a forgotten maternalist ethos in early feminist activism and questioning popular representations that naturalise an opposition between feminism and motherhood. Green calls on oral historians to pay closer attention to the ways individuals negotiate competing belief systems or find spaces between dominant discourses.⁶⁵ In the case of the oral testimonies discussed here, this interpretative approach creatively opens a space for oral history to provide different insights into feminism, history and memory.

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NOTES

1. See for example Susan Magarey, 'Feminism as Cultural Renaissance', *Hecate*, vol 31, no 1, 2004, pp 23-46; Natasha Compo, 'Having It All or "Had Enough": Blaming Feminism in The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald 1980-2004', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Issue 85, 2005, pp 63-72; Susan Magarey, 'Memory and Desire: Feminists Re-membering Feminism', *Lilith*, vol 14, 2005, pp 1-13; The 'Living in the Seventies' issue of *Australian Feminist Studies*, vol 22, Issue 53, July 2007.
2. For example, in the oral history interview Biff Ward does with Suzanne Bellamy, she explicitly opens with the following: 'this archive has so far been mostly concerned with political reform. It's been interviews with women who've struggled and had successes and failures in the political executive arenas, the feminist women who've worked there', National Library of Australia, 2000, TRC 3988.
3. See for example Susan Marsden's interview with Anne Curthoys, National Library of

Australia, 2002, ORAL TRC 4911.

4. To be published as *Post-Maternal Thinking: New Questions of Feminism, Memory and Politics*, New York: Columbia University Press (forthcoming).
5. My arguments in this article were informed by the following interviews from the National Library of Australia Oral History Collection: Eva Cox interviewed by Ann Mari Jordens, 2002; Sara Dowse interviewed by Ann Turner, 1998; Sara Dowse interviewed by Biff Ward, 1998; Deborah McCulloch interviewed by Biff Ward, 2000; Anne Summers interviewed by Sara Dowse, 2002; Jill Julius Matthews interviewed by Biff Ward, 2000; Marian Sawyer interviewed by Sara Dowse, 2002; Anne Curthoys interviewed by Susan Marsden, 2002; Meredith Burgmann interviewed by Ann Turner, 2000; Suzanne Bellamy interviewed by Biff Ward, 2000; Biff Ward interviewed by Sara Dowse, 1998; Julia Ryan interviewed by Sara Dowse, 1990; Elizabeth O'Brien interviewed by Biff Ward, 2000; Joan Russell interviewed by Biff Ward, 2000; Lyndall Ryan interviewed by Sara Dowse, 2000; Margaret Bearlin interviewed by Biff Ward, 2000; Phyllis Johnson interviewed by Ann Turner, 1995; Mavis Robertson interviewed by Sara Dowse, 2003. Written permission has been given to quote from the interviews I discuss here.
6. Janet Heaton, *Reworking Qualitative Data*, London: Sage, 2004, p 6.
7. Joanna Bornat and Gail Wilson, 'Recycling the Evidence: Different Approaches to the Re-

Analysis of Elite Life Histories' in Rosalind Edwards (ed), *Researching Families and Communities: Social and Generational Change* London: Routledge, 2008, pp 95-111.

8. Joanna Bornat, 'A Second Take: Revisiting Interviews with a Different Purpose', *Oral History*, vol 31, no 1, 2003, p 50.
9. Alistair Thomson 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', *The Oral History Review*, vol 34, no 1, 2007, p 50.
10. As discussed by Anna Green, 'Individual Remembering and "Collective Memory": Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates', *Oral History*, vol 32, no 2, 2004, p 35.
11. See Joanna Bornat and Hanna Diamond, 'Women's History and Oral History: Developments and Debates', *Women's History Review*, 16 (1), 2007, p 21.
12. See for example, Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, *Breaking Out: Feminist Consciousness and Feminist Research*, New York: Routledge, 1983.
13. This is a quotation from Suzanne Bellamy in Biff Ward's interview with her for the National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 10th March, 2000, ORAL TRC 3988.
14. Alistair Thomson citing Daniel James' *Dona Maria's Story: Life History, Memory and Political Identity*, in 'Four Paradigm Transformations in Oral History', p 64.
15. For a discussion of the idea of composure and how gender intersects with culture and memory see Penny Summerfield, 'Culture and

Composure: Creating Narratives of the Gendered Self in Oral History Interviews', *Cultural and Social History*, vol 1, no 1, 2004, pp 65-93.

16. Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living With the Legend*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994, p 9 also cited by Green in 'Individual Remembering', p 40.

17. Summerfield attributes the concept to Graham Dawson in *Soldier Heroes*, see 'Culture and Composure', p 69.

18. Penny Summerfield, 'Dis/composing the Subject: Intersubjectivities in Oral History', in Tess Coslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds), *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories, Methods*, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp 91-107.

19. Suzanne Bellamy interviewed by Biff Ward, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 2000, ORAL TRC 3988.

20. Bellamy interview.

21. *Mejane* was published from 1971-1974.

22. Bellamy interview.

23. To borrow a phrase from Margaret Henderson 'The Tidiest Revolution: Regulative Feminist Autobiography and the De-facement of the Women's Movement', *Australian Literary Studies*, vol 20, no 3, 2002, p 186.

24. Jill Julius Matthews interviewed by Biff Ward, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 2000, ORAL TRC 3967.

25. Henderson, p 187.

26. See Anna Green 'Individual Remembering and Collective Memory', pp 35-44.

27. Green, p 36.

28. Green, p 37.

29. Wulf Kansteiner, *Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies*, *History and Theory*, vol 41, 2002, p 180.

30. Sara Dowse interviewed by Biff Ward, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 1998, ORAL TRC 3801.

31. Julia Ryan interviewed by Sara Dowse, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 1990, ORAL TRC 2651.

32. Deborah McCulloch interviewed by Biff Ward, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 2000, ORAL TRC 4591.

33. Biff Ward interviewed by Sara Dowse, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 1998, ORAL TRC 3764.

34. Margaret Bearlin interviewed by Biff Ward, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 2000, ORAL TRC 4553.

35. Joan Russell interviewed by Biff Ward, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 2000, ORAL TRC 4593.

36. Susan Magarey, 'What is Happening to Women's History in Australia at the Beginning of the Third Millennium?', *Women's History Review*, vol 16, no 1, 2007, pp 1-18.

37. Magarey, p 2.

38. See for example Susan Magarey, 'Feminism as Cultural Renaissance', *Hecate*, vol 31, no 1, 2004, pp 231-46 which includes representations of songs, poster art and examples of disorderly conduct associated with the women's liberation movement.

39. Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, New York: Bantam Books, 1987, p 433.

40. Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp 1-7.

41. This beautiful quotation is from Luisa Passerini's *Memory and Totalitarianism*, 2005, p 13 cited in Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', p 93.

42. Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics*, London: Serpent's Tail, 2007, p 1.

43. Segal, p 61.

44. Segal, p 32.

45. Summerfield, 'Culture and Composure', p 68.

46. Modjeska cited by Henderson, 'The Tidiest Revolution', p 183.

47. Henderson, p 185.

48. Henderson, p 178.

49. Kristyn Gordon, 'Theorizing Emotion and Affect: Feminist Engagements', *Feminist Theory*,

vol 8, no 3, 2007, p 345.

50. Segal's phrase, p 89.

51. Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1989 [1995]. See in particular the new Preface to the 1995 edition, p xx.

52. Marilyn Lake's entry in Barbara Caine, *Australian Feminism: a Companion*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998, p 133.

53. See Marilyn Lake, *Getting Equal: The History of Australian Feminism*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999.

54. Ruddick, p xxi.

55. Ruddick, pp 127-139.

56. See for useful definitions of maternalism Seth Koven and Sonya Michel, *Mothers of a New World: Maternalist Politics and the Origins of Welfare States*, New York: Routledge, 1993, pp 4-5.

57. For a discussion of a related cultural forgetting of the nurturing mother, see Julie Stephens, 'Cultural Memory, Feminism and Motherhood', *Arena Journal*, no 24, 2005, pp 69-83.

58. Phyllis Johnson interviewed by Ann Turner, National Library of Australia Oral History Collection, 1995, ORAL TRC 3304.

59. See for a contrast the language of Suellen Murray, *More Than Refuge: Changing Responses to Domestic Violence*, Perth: University of Western Australia Press, 2002, p 48.

60. Phyllis Johnson interview, 1995.

61. Biff Ward interview, 1998.

62. Julia Ryan interview 1990.

63. Sara Dowse interview, 1998.

64. For example, Ann Turner's interview with Meredith Burgmann political activist and then President, NSW Legislative Council, National Library of Australia, 2001, ORAL TRC 4656.

65. Green, 'Individual Memory and Collective Memory', pp 35-45.

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