

# Barking, Clocks, and the Printer: Accidental Sounds in Oral History

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**M**Y FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH ORAL HISTORY WAS AFTER I'D MOVED FROM LONDON BACK to Cornwall, in the far southwest of Britain, aged about 30 and armed with a PhD. I got a job as an oral history interview summariser. I would listen to each interview—mostly about peoples' lives in relation to aspects of Cornish culture, such as methodism and clay mining—writing up the key points of each conversation.<sup>1</sup> I'd do one or two each day, around my part-time teaching work at a local university, and it felt a privilege to listen in.

I could see how long each recording was, so would pick the shortest for when I was tired, and if I had more time and energy would embark on the longer recordings. One brave day I took on a two-hour recording. About 40 minutes in, the interviewer started wrapping up, and before I knew it the conversation was over—leaving me wondering what could be on the rest of the track? I listened, and a car door slammed, and another. Then there was just the sound of the kitchen: a ticking clock, the hum of a fridge. I felt compelled to listen on, wondering what might go on when nobody is in. A dog barked. There's a dog in the house. I felt

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<sup>1</sup> I have lost track of the summaries which are housed in an archive in Cornwall (for the Cornish Audio Visual Archive), but to find examples of interview summaries from my most recent project, Living Libraries, completed by Alison Chand, click the following link, then search the catalogue for C1868, then click 'Details' on any of the items, then the 'SHELFMARK' number and finally 'Details' again: <<http://sami.bl.uk/uhtbin/cgiisirs/x/x/0/49/>> (accessed 9 Oct. 2022).

strangely frightened, as if the dog had seen a ghost. Why was the dog barking? It settled down again. An aeroplane overhead. The ticking clock. It went on, and to both my relief and disappointment, nothing much else seemed to be going on. Eventually I started skipping bits to get to the end. As far as I know, there was nothing more on that recording. There was nothing here to summarise, but of all the oral histories from that project, that is one of the very few I remember.

Oral history interviews, to be of the highest standard, are supposed to minimise all background noise. We are reminded to switch off our phones, to find somewhere quiet, to use microphones and to do soundchecks to ensure that we get the best quality sound of the people talking. It's all about the talking. What to think, then, of an oral history that *is* background noise? Could this help make imaginable interviews with houses, with trees, with rocks? Could it at least help us reflect on the background noise that invariably creeps into almost all, if not all recordings? We can never carry out an interview without its being in a room, or outside—without its being *somewhere*. All interviews have acoustics. I've carried out interviews in people's homes, in chapels, and in libraries. Mostly in homes, as recommended to help interviewees feel at ease, and the background sounds that I think most frequently accompanied the interviews that I went on to carry out in Cornwall at least, was the sound of a ticking clock.

The histories of oral histories are supposed to be conveyed in what people say: for example, a generation of people talking about Methodist traditions in the 1950s. I am no expert in clocks, but those interviews lead me to dream of a kind of cultural history project involving a certain kind of wooden framed clock—sometimes of stand-up grandfather variety, sometimes a smaller, mantelpiece item—owned by many among a generation now in their 80s and 90s or beyond. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki have brilliantly illuminated the importance in oral history of what happens 'off the record'—of those sometimes imperfect methodological moments where the greatest insights may be revealed when the recording is paused, or after it has stopped (Sheftel and Zembrzycki). We might also think about how sounds—like clocks ticking—that are 'on the record', but only accidentally or as a kind of side effect, can be similarly revealing. I was interviewing across working- and middle classes, so my sense is that these clocks were not especially exclusive. I like to imagine that such sounds might, for example, enrich a cultural history of clocks in the home, and that we could even embark on an oral history all about clocks: where did you get it (a wedding present?), has it always lived on the mantelpiece, do you actually use it to tell the time, has it ever slowed or stopped, causing you to miss a train? Why do you want to keep this clock, or could you dream of getting rid of it?

One of these clocks has found its way into my own home. My recently deceased father-in-law gave one to our son, and sometimes, when I'm trying to settle him

down to sleep, I hear it and think of other homes I've heard such clocks in. But most of all, the sound makes me think of the relentless passing of time. Every second that ticks by, is now gone. Oral histories are often part of heritage projects, capturing a sense of the past, of cultural traditions—in one sense going against the linear passage of time and all the loss that can entail, trying to capture and to preserve things through the process of recording and archiving. But in the oral history interviews I remember from Cornwall, the background noise is often of time passing, a relentless reminder that we can do nothing, in the end, about that. It will all be lost. I am trying to relax my son, to be in the moment—to savour our precious time together, to help him drift into dreamtime. But this tick-tocking sound intrudes, reminding me also of Bergson taking issue with the carving out of time into discrete, linear units. I try to let the sounds slip into my auditory unconscious and to rejoin life's flow. Every second is not equal. This time is everything, for now.

The other sound I remember from those interviews, is that of a printer. I'd come to interview a couple in mid-Cornwall, for a heritage project about the clay industry. They'd worked their whole lives in the clay. Already there was an extra person there, who had also worked his whole life in the clay and had a lot to say, and I was inexperienced enough to be quite anxious about this unanticipated threesome. And now the husband insisted on printing out a list of all the shops and businesses that were gone. The industry had brutally declined over recent decades, and the local area had lost a great deal—he had created this list which he was printing for me, and all the while it was printing he loudly (over the noise of the printer) talked me through the list of all the garages, banks, post-offices, newsagents, fruit and vegetable shops—naming each one in turn, followed by 'gone'. Printers used to be noisier, you might remember. I tried to pause the interview, but he wouldn't stop talking and I didn't want to miss anything, and I kept thinking it would surely stop soon. The slow printing of page after page seemed interminable, and my training made me anxious that all this background noise was making a true failure of an interview. But, again, it is one of my most memorable, and it was that interview—with its chorus and the rhythm of the three voices—that contained insights about living in the clay region that led the way in my first book (Trower, 'Regional Writing and Oral History'). The printer added an additional sonorous dimension to emphatically convey the scale of loss to the area. Also, I wonder where else we might have recordings of all these everyday sounds that tend to disappear into the background, of clocks, of printers, of aeroplanes or traffic.

Oral historians from Raphael Samuel on, have often urged us to think about the sound of the voice in oral history interviews, about its importance in adding meaning and nuance to what is said. We might go further to think about other sounds in oral history too, about sounds we don't usually quite register, and why

they might matter—sounds resulting from methodologically technical failures or otherwise—which I think John Cage had helped attune me to. Having encountered his classic *4'33"*, along with other compositions such as Alvin Lucier's *I am Sitting in a Room*, I'd found myself listening differently and had become alert to what goes on beyond any 'musical' notes or spoken words, which perhaps allowed me to readily experience oral history recordings as consisting of far more than the voices—or the 'oral'—that the whole enterprise is oriented toward.

At the time, my recently completed PhD was a cultural history of vibration, exploring the physicality of sound through a range of literary and scientific texts, and at first sight had nothing to do with oral history.<sup>2</sup> And yet, at the end of the nineteenth century, sound vibrations had made their impressions on wax, with the first recordings by Thomas Edison, who began to dream of a kind of oral history archive, of 'the sayings, the voices' of family members 'as of great men' (Edison). Edison, understandably, made a great deal of the differences between written documents and sound recordings, as in his account of the latter's powers to preserve the sonorous expressiveness of the voice. Samuel's essay, 'The Perils of the Transcript' (1972), published just over a century later, is similarly focused on the sounds of the voice, and on how written versions of audio interviews can turn them into something very different, but it could also serve as a prompt to consider the sonorous qualities of oral history more broadly.

Further, Samuel's essay contains some great advice about growing potatoes, a hobby my younger self would never have suspected me of taking up. Samuel quotes from George Ewart Evans' book *Where Beards Wag All* (1956), to illustrate how written words can make 'you seem actually to hear his informants talking and ruminating about the past, instead of hearing a summary of what they said', and he includes this extract from an interview:

It's like this: those young 'uns years ago, *I said*, well—it's like digging a hole, *I said*, and putting in clay and then putting in a tater on top o' thet. Well, you won't expect much will you? But now with the young 'uns today, it's like digging a hole and putting some manure in afore you plant: you're bound to get some growth, ain't you? It will grow won't it? The plant will grow right well. What I say is the young 'uns today have breakfast afore they set off—a lot of 'em didn't used to have that years ago, and they hev a hot dinner at school and when they come home most of 'em have a fair tea, don't they? *I said*. These young 'uns kinda got the frame. Well, that's it! If you live tidily that'll make the

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<sup>2</sup> Later published as *Senses of Vibration: A Cultural History of the Pleasure and Pain of Sound* (Trower, *Senses*).

marrow and the marrow make the boon [bone] and the boon make the frame. (212)

In summary: use manure and feed children.

**SHELLEY TROWER's** books include *Place, Writing, and Voice in Oral History* (2011), *Senses of Vibration* (2012), *Rocks of Nation* (2015), and *Sound Writing* (forthcoming in 2023). Oral history projects include *Memories of Fiction: An Oral History of Readers' Life Stories and Living Libraries* (2014-2020). She worked at the University of Roehampton for ten years, 2012-2022, becoming Professor of English Literature in 2019; she is now Emeritus Professor. Occasional Twitter user: @shelleytrower2.

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