

Words and Silences

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Foreword

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Harmony and Disharmony: Selections from the XXI International Oral History Association (IOHA) Conference in 2021.

Foreword

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At the closing ceremony of the XXI IOHA Virtual Conference 2021 organised by the National Archives of Singapore, I had posed a question and then shared my preliminary thoughts: “How will we remember this conference years later? For me [it] will be tied very much to the experience of virtuality. How we received ideas, how I was able to engage with other human beings... not “[On a Little Street in Singapore](#),”¹ but the Zoom chat rooms at the Singapore conference.”

Today, two years on, I find my memories of the conference inescapably tied to personal and collective experiences of COVID-19. It was COVID-19, after all, which forced the postponement of the *original* conference – the 2020 IOHA Conference, which was to be held for the very first time in Southeast Asia.

Up through March 2020, my organising team and I had been planning a multimodal and multisensory experience – the keynotes, workshops, poster sessions and paper presentations (*of course*), film screenings (*yes*), but also local culinary delights, evening of theatre, and botanical excursions in tropical weather (*yes, yes, yes!*).

Then the World Health Organization declared a global pandemic (*no!*) and a year later, we found ourselves starting from scratch, planning a virtual conference. Instead of renting an auditorium and meeting rooms, we were *building virtual rooms*, planning their look and feel, designing their functional details. Like so many other COVID-19 experiences, we found ourselves on new and unfamiliar ground.

We had to question our most basic assumptions. For example, what time would the conference day be? 9am to 5pm? But which time zone? Singapore time? Sure, but that would mean 9pm to 5am for someone in Halifax, Canada.

In the end we realised we couldn’t please everyone completely, but we tried to create a programme where participants in most time zones could attend at least one or two live sessions within reasonable waking hours. This resulted in a conference programme with three daily timeslots: 9 to 11am, 5 to 7pm and 8 to 11pm – we stretched out the day to 14 hours with breaks – a killer schedule for the team in Singapore.

There were some positives. Without the costs of air travel and accommodation, the conference became much more affordable to many.

Building a virtual platform also meant creating new opportunities. Conference veterans know the perennial bugbear of having to choose between parallel sessions. With a virtual conference, it became that much easier to record sessions and make them accessible for later viewing.

¹20 minutes prior to my speech, we had played a clip of the 78 rpm shellac recording of the song “On a Little Street in Singapore” for our online participants. Released in 1939, the song was written by Billy Hill and Peter De Rose, and performed by Al Donahue and his Orchestra in the orchestral vocal jazz style popular in its day. The song is about place and memory – the Singapore street being the site of an unforgettable encounter of cross-cultural romance.

In fact, our conference website stayed “live” for three weeks after the closing ceremony so participants could view and review the recorded sessions. Technically speaking, this meant the Singapore conference lasted a month!

As planned, the IOHA journal *Words & Silences* published the themed issue “[Oral History and Space](#)” in 2022 before starting work on selections from the Singapore conference. Titled after the conference theme “Harmony and Disharmony: Bringing Together Many Voices,” the new issue allows us the opportunity to visit, revisit, ponder and reflect on some of the diverse pieces first shared in the virtual rooms of the Singapore conference.

I would like to congratulate the authors on the publication of their essays – many of these began as abstract submissions in 2019, and were shaped by the pandemic and exchanges at the conference itself.

I would also like to express my gratitude to the dedicated *Words & Silences* team for facilitating the continued dissemination of important ideas by the international oral history community.

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