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VIEWPOINT

Do You Understand? Unsettling Interpretative Authority in Feminist Oral History

Katherine Fobear, University of British Columbia

Abstract: This article interrogates interpretative authority in feminist oral history through a critical Indigenous lens. I argue that critical Indigenous theory provides a useful and needed understanding of participants' agency and the active role they have in shaping the research. Feminist oral history as a methodology has a long and well-established lineage of exploring difficult questions of power in the relationship between the researcher and the participants. While many feminist oral historians have actively interrogated issues surrounding power within their own research, there are relatively few works that press beyond looking at the one-sided hierarchical relationship between the oral historian and the research participants. The first part provides a theoretical and historical overview of feminist oral history in North America and Europe. From there I bring forward Linda Tuhiwai Smith's work on decolonizing research and the need to recognize the authority of the participants. I will review the challenges I encountered when conducting oral histories with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) refugees, and discuss how critical Indigenous theory provided a useful tool in understanding, acknowledging, and representing participants' agency. In this way, I will intersect critical Indigenous theory with the methodology of feminist oral history and move previous discussions on power and interpretative authority away from focusing just on the role of the researcher and toward embracing the role of the participant as well.

Keywords: feminist methodology, feminist oral history, critical Indigenous theory, forced migration, queer studies, LGBT refugees

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Devran: Coming here, leaving everything behind, coming here making a refugee claim, and then facing all the isolation, stress, and fear... Well, difficult is not enough to explain it.

Kat: I can only imagine.

Devran: No, you can't. You can't imagine what it is like. That's okay. But you can't understand what it is like.

I open this discussion with an excerpt from an oral history interview I conducted with Devran, a gay/bisexual-identified cisgender man from the Middle East who made a refugee claim based on sexual orientation in Canada in 2011.¹ Devran and I met on three separate occasions, for two to three hours each, to record his oral history. Devran was a participant in my doctoral research that looked at the settlement experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) refugees in Canada.² I conducted multiple extended oral history interviews with fifteen LGBT refugees. The experience was enriching and highly informative on

many fronts. The oral histories collected were diverse, complex, and incredibly engaging. These histories are also a valuable archive of voices and experiences of a population that is underrepresented both in forced migration studies and in histories of queer populations in North America.³

Another aspect of this project was my experience as a feminist oral historian working with LGBT refugees. I researched the methodology of feminist oral history extensively in preparation for my doctoral research. Reading feminist oral historians' works was immensely helpful in designing the project. It allowed me to critically reflect on my own positionality as a white queer immigrant cisgender scholar doing research with racialized LGBT refugees. Most importantly, it pushed me to confront historical, structural, and social inequalities underlying academic research. I considered the intended and unintended effects of my work on my participants and on the larger LGBT refugee community. I worked to design a project that was collaborative and nonexploitative, and would not reproduce harmful social norms.

This preparation was extremely valuable. However, as with many other research experiences, once you are in the thick of the research process, everything changes. You find yourself faced with much more complicated situations and challenges that were not touched upon or sufficiently covered in the methodological and theoretical literature. These complicating aspects arise both from the specifics of the research and from your participation in it. This is one of the reasons why, however diligent you are in your preparation, and regardless of how many books you read on a particular topic or methodology, things will inevitably be different once you are in the "field." So it came as no surprise that in my feminist oral history project I was confronted with situations and ethical dilemmas that were not covered in the feminist oral history literature. What was surprising, however, was how little discussion there was in this literature in regards to participants' interpretative authority.

This article interrogates interpretative authority in feminist oral history through a critical Indigenous lens. I bring to this discussion my experiences of conducting feminist oral history research with LGBT refugees. I argue that critical Indigenous theory provides a useful and much needed understanding of participants' agency and the active role they have in shaping the research. Feminist oral history as a methodology has a long and well-established lineage of exploring difficult questions of power in the relationship between the researcher and the participants. While many feminist oral historians have actively interrogated issues surrounding power within their own research, there are relatively few works that press beyond looking at the one-sided hierarchical relationship between the oral historian and the research participants. Critical discussion on the ethics of interpretative authority has remained primarily focused on the oral historian's role in the project. This is not to say that the role oral historians play in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of oral histories is not important or does not warrant critical discussion. However, by focusing just on the role of the oral historian, we negate the interpretative authority and agency of the participants in crafting their story and shaping the research. In addition, discussions on the role of the oral historian have become too standardized and do not take into account the shifting social positions, relationships, institutional constraints, and demands that may shape the historian's interaction with her or his research participants, as well as their authority in interpreting collected oral histories.

An Overview of Feminist Oral History and Interpretative Authority

Since its inception in the 1960s, feminist oral history has forged a strong connection between women's history and politics (Thurner 1997). Coming out of the feminist movements in North America and Europe, feminist oral historians built upon the support earlier work by oral historians created for recording marginalized communities and upon this work's potential for fostering social justice. They emphasized that recording

women's voices would not only be empowering for women but a political act against androcentrism and patriarchy.

By the late 1970s, feminist oral historians challenged oral history for continuing to ignore the basic insights that grew out of the women's liberation movement, most importantly that the personal is political, and the feminist conviction that women's experiences were inherently valuable and unique. Feminist oral historians believed that the interview process was a shared gendered experience between women oral historians and their female research subjects (Gluck 2008). When a woman was the researcher, there would be no structural or linguistic barriers that would limit a female participant's voice. Feminist ethnographers argued that female interviewers had better access and understanding of the subtle frameworks of social communication that women use to narrate their stories (Minister 1991). The feminist oral historian and the female subject were seen in coalition, working together to make audible the silenced voices of women and to empower the collective female community. Women's experience alone was considered a social fact that was unmediated by the research process and which the researcher needed only to collect and make an argument from (Gluck 2008).

Yet, even with this enthusiasm to record and reconstruct women's histories, feminist oral historians in the 1970s were quick to point out that the oral history interview was not necessarily an equal relationship (Abrams 2010, 163). In order to counteract power and social differentials between the feminist researcher and her subject, Ann Oakley advocated equalizing the relationship between the oral historian and narrator by transforming it from a single-sided interview to an interactive dialogue designed to promote trust, friendship, and community (Gluck 2008, 118). Oakley argued for oral historians to focus not only on the data or oral histories themselves but also on their own interactions with the subjects of their research (Patai 1991). Women historians were also confronted with the dilemmas of subjectivity and memory that mediated women's oral histories. Susan Armitage noted that while women's oral histories may allow women to express their personal thoughts and interpret past experiences, often they do not foster such expression and interpretation. It is therefore, ultimately, the job of the researcher to analyze meaning, which in turn leaves ideas about shared meaning, collaboration, and mutual empowerment in women's oral history open to critical questioning (Anderson et al. 1987, 104).

The claims of early feminist oral historians on accessibility, empowerment, universality, and equality in women's oral history were further challenged by a new wave of black, Latina, Indigenous, and Asian feminists. The "innocent assumptions" (Gluck and Patai 1991, 2) that early feminist researchers made about women being more powerfully united by gender than divided by race and class were soon challenged as privileged and ethnocentric by racialized, disabled, working class, and gay feminists (Ang 2003). Women of color and Indigenous and non-Western feminists argued against the universal commonality of women as a normative assumption that was based on a Western, white, heterosexual, middle-class, and cisgendered woman (Rich 2003). Marginality could no longer be assumed to be monolithic, homogenous, and shared equally by all on the basis of their gender alone, but was argued to be relational and intersectional in regard to an individual's experience in their daily lives as well as their position in the research process. At the same time, black and Latina feminists in North America critiqued white feminists' emphasis on the narrative self as the center of the universe and the notion that the individual was more important than the group as not only normalizing but silencing racialized women's subjectivity, experiences, and positionality (Etter-Lewis 1991).

By the late 1980s, women's oral history changed from women doing history "with, about, and for women" to feminist practices of oral history that called for challenging normative and unequal power relations in

the research process, while still emphasizing the importance of collecting and analyzing oral histories of marginalized communities in order to provide alternative histories and challenge oppression (Gluck 2008, 128). Since the 1980s, poststructuralists have argued that power is neither monolithic nor stagnant but rather a discursive process that flows from shifting negotiations, positions, and outcomes. Instead of focusing just on women as the subject of history, feminist oral historians took on a more reflective tone in their analysis (Bornat and Diamond 2007, 27). Feminist framings of oral history moved from the belief in a shared goal of collecting texts of women to understanding how collaboration in the research is a dynamic process. Before feminist oral historians build a record of the narrators' lives, interviewers must position themselves subjectively within the research. Oral history interview became a conversational hybrid in which the oral history was a communicated event that was shaped by the narrator and the interviewer's cultural understandings, desires, and positionings (Kratz 2001).

The emphasis on the subjective relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee showed that the oral historian could not be considered a neutral party in the interview process, and that both the narrator and the interviewer were subjective forces that shaped the text. The narrator occupied a structural position, and the oral historian's age, gender, race, sexuality, ability, and class background influenced how they both interacted together, as well as how the interviewer analyzed the text (Yow 1999). Oral history was argued to be a partial history in which the interviewer would obtain different partial truths contingent on his or her positionality (Gluck 2008). Reflexivity was not only about acknowledging how the oral history/text was shaped by the researcher's and narrator's positionality, but also led to the recognition that the oral history was a historical document created by the agency of both the interviewer and the interviewee (Sangster 1994, 11).

Since the 1990s, feminist oral historians have consistently reflected upon their methodological practice and theoretical position(s) (Scanlon 1993). Because feminist research was founded on the political premise of tearing down exploitative and hierarchal systems of power and knowledge production, the search for finding alternative and empowering research practices is still a pressing need. Moreover, in the face of ongoing class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, and racial inequalities, or when the interviewer represents the oppressor, settler, or colonizer, questions of interpretative authority are a critical concern. While there are many feminist oral historians who seek such critical engagement and continue to write reflective works on interpretative authority in oral history research, in the context of the growing quantity of oral history research being produced, they remain a minority even today. What is particularly concerning is that the discussion of interpretative authority has remained rather one-sided, favoring the researcher. While feminist oral historians have talked about the oral history interview as a dynamic process and recognized the agency of participants and their role in the research, often these recognitions are fleeting or reduced to one-line mentions. Rare are the publications that actively engage in discussing the participants' interpretative authority on the research and the finished work.

In the face of all these challenges and concerns, how can oral history research reflect the interpretative authority of both the researcher *and* the participants? Where does the discussion of power and knowledge production in oral history go if the participants are seen as having their own agency and power? I agree with all of the aforementioned critiques by feminist oral historians and critical race scholars who have questioned claims of equality and empowerment in the face of continued material and structural inequality. However, questions and possible answers with the aim to establishing nonexploitative shared authority between the researcher and the participant need to take into account the hard work participants do in telling their story.

In the next two sections, I will review the challenges I encountered when conducting oral histories with LGBT refugees and outline how critical Indigenous theory provided a useful tool in understanding,

acknowledging, and representing participants' agency. In this way, I will intersect critical Indigenous theory with the methodology of feminist oral history and move previous discussions on power and interpretative authority away from focusing just on the role of the researcher and toward embracing the role of the participant as well.

“Do You Understand?”: Recognizing the Agency of Research Participants

Amira: It's tiring having to tell your story over and over again. Everywhere you go, you have to repeat yourself. It's not just the refugee process where you tell your story, but every person you meet, every office you go to, you have to tell your story. They want to know why you are here and what you want from them. You get used to it. It takes a lot of work to make people understand.⁴

In making a claim for asylum in Canada, LGBT refugees must write down their story and share it with the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). Oftentimes it is their story that serves as the only proof of persecution and need for asylum. Unlike refugees claiming political, ethnic, or religious persecution, where there may be clear evidence of direct persecution by the state and society, persecution of LGBT persons is often hidden in the everyday violence of homophobia and transphobia. LGBT refugees not only must prove their sexual orientation and/or gender identity to the IRB but also show convincing proof of their fear of persecution. Mere criminalization of same-sex sexuality or same-sex acts by their state of origin is not enough to be equated with persecution, and thus not enough proof to guarantee asylum.

LGBT refugees put considerable effort into writing their asylum claim stories. At their asylum hearing, they must answer a series of questions by the deciding member of the IRB about their life and what happened to them. Sharing their story with strangers and state officials can be intensely difficult and sometimes traumatizing for all refugees. For LGBT refugees, there is the added fear and shame of talking about their sexuality and/or gender identity. The emotional cost of sharing such intimate and private aspects of their lives with an outsider is considerable. There is a legitimate fear of being misheard or seen as not being consistent and/or credible: a slight variation of a retelling of an event or a mixing up of a date can be enough grounds for the IRB member to deem the person as not credible and therefore not eligible for asylum. The testimonies of LGBT refugees are picked apart by the deciding IRB official in order to find any inconsistency that can allow the refugee claim to be rejected. Their stories are often misheard because of cultural differences in storytelling and the IRB members' own biases or stereotypes regarding gender and sexuality. Even with the increased understanding about the fluidity of sexuality and gender across cultures, an LGBT refugee claimant may still run the risk of being rejected because they did not appear to be gay or trans “enough.” Put simply, they might not be recognized as gay or trans by the IRB member deciding on their fate.

In the face of such challenges, LGBT refugees work very hard in telling their story and making sure that they are not misheard. However, their storytelling does not stop there. As Amira explained to me, refugees must constantly share their story in order to get the social services and resources needed to survive. Visiting a social worker, a doctor, or a government clerk, even applying for a job or obtaining an apartment, will involve telling your story of how you came to Canada and why you are a refugee. Stories become a necessary tool in accessing social services and goods. Sharing your story is also needed when navigating various LGBT communities in Canada. Canada has a wide array of LGBT communities, but the majority of LGBT centers and gay and lesbian social places cater to mostly white and middle-class clientele. People usually ask LGBT refugees they meet at these places to share their story and explain why they are refugees. There is often an

added expectation that the refugee will talk about how much better Canada is than their home country and how grateful they are to be refugees. LGBT refugees resist as well as strategically play into these narratives as they interact with the LGBT communities they encounter.

When I started this research project, I wanted to know more about LGBT refugees' experiences of home and belonging in Canada. I wanted to get past what I saw as the forced-upon and flattened narrative of the "grateful refugee" promoted by the Canadian state and Immigration and Refugee Board, as well as by the general public. I wanted to complicate the one-dimensional picture of LGBT refugees portrayed in the media as people escaping backward homophobic countries and finding freedom and happiness in the supposedly progressive and "gay-friendly" Canada. I was prepared for the time and multiple conversations needed to gain the participants' trust.

Consent was rolling in this project, and I made sure to check in with the participants several times during our interviews to answer any questions they had about me or the research. Participants could leave the project at any time, at which point their oral histories would be given back to them. Participants had final approval of the written transcripts. At the start of every interview, we would review the previous transcript for errors, clarifications, or changes. Yet, despite my careful consideration and efforts to make the participants as relaxed and comfortable as possible, it took much longer than I expected for them to open up about their experiences. It was not until I turned to critical Indigenous theory that I realized how much I was ignoring the participants' agency in telling their story.

Oral history is not a neutral methodology. Some oral history projects have pathologized or fetishized voices, and have also turned the narrators into one-dimensional victims or removed their agency. Likewise, some oral history projects can silence groups or individuals by not recognizing their agency and authority in the research. Critical Indigenous theory has its roots in the civil rights, feminist, and Indigenous rights movements of the 1960s. For critical Indigenous scholars in Australia and North and South America, Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000, originally published in 1968) became a significant influence on their movement. Critical Indigenous scholars took from Freire the call for knowledge production to be based on the lived experiences and realities of oppressed Indigenous populations by exposing how imperialism and globalization have taken Indigenous knowledge away from Indigenous communities, replacing it with Western knowledge that was used to further damage and violently oppress and destroy Indigenous societies. By rooting knowledge in Indigenous realities, Indigenous scholars and activists reclaim their knowledge and sovereignty, as well as challenge and deconstruct the norms of Western education and research pedagogies.

Basing knowledge production on Indigenous realities cannot be achieved without systemically questioning, deconstructing, and challenging established Western pedagogies and research practices. In *Decolonizing Methodologies*, Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues that researchers must go beyond simply recognizing that personal beliefs and assumptions will affect their interactions. Researchers must understand the underlying assumptions, motivations, and values, as well as the psychological, discursive, and material effects that their research will have (1999, 173). Grounding yourself in the research location means not only gaining knowledge and understanding of the historical and current social, economic, and political environment of the individuals and communities involved, but also recognizing and understanding the assumptions, experiences, and storytelling practices of the participants, which inform the research process and its results (Tuhiwai Smith 1999, 186).

Grounding myself in the location of my research site involved understanding the political, economic, and social environment that LGBT refugees navigate through as they traverse the refugee process and settle in Canada. Before conducting my oral history interviews, I met with immigration lawyers and settlement

workers to talk about the difficulties and challenges of making a refugee claim. I visited immigration social service offices and interviewed social workers. I attended several workshops on refugee asylum, as well as training and information classes on immigration housing and social services. These experiences helped to inform me of the complex and very much unequal social, political, and economic situation that LGBT refugees find themselves in once they make a refugee claim in Canada.

It was not until I volunteered with Rainbow Refugee—a social support group for refugees claiming asylum on sexual orientation, gender identity, and HIV status based in Vancouver, British Columbia—that I began to fully understand the hard work that LGBT refugees must do in order for outsiders to understand their story. I saw the amount of effort they took in explaining their situation to the IRB and to various social service workers. They bore the burden of explaining to a Western audience what being a sexual and/or gender minority was like in their country of origin. They had to translate complex and culturally specific ways in which sexuality and gender were constructed and performed in their country of origin. As many queer scholars have pointed out, there is a wide array of variation in regard to sexuality and gender that is often culturally, socially, and location specific. Western-based sexual or gender identity categories and lifestyles do not easily or exactly translate across geographical borders. The majority of persons claiming asylum on the basis of sexuality and/or gender identity do use Western identity categories such as gay, bisexual, lesbian, or trans to describe themselves. However, what it means to be a gay cisgender man in Somalia or Mexico can be very different from what it means to be a gay cisgender man in Canada. Add to this other distinguishing factors like ethnicity, religion, class, and/or ability, and what it means to be a sexual and/or gender minority in these countries can vary greatly depending on the person. A lesbian, gay, or bisexual refugee claimant must work with and against common perceptions of what it means to be a person attracted to someone of the same sex or gender in the West and what it means to be a person attracted to someone of the same sex or gender in their country of origin. A trans person faces the added difficulty of having to explain not only their gender identity but also their sexual orientation to a mostly cisgender Western audience. LGBT refugees not only have to tell their story over and over again to each new person they meet; they must craft a story that is understandable and credible in order to receive asylum.

By the time participants came to sit down with me and be interviewed, they were well-rehearsed and efficient storytellers. I was not the first person they told their story to, and most likely I would not be the last. I was so focused on my role in the research that I did not recognize at first that I was interviewing well-accomplished storytellers. What first appeared to me as a very straightforward story of persecution and migration was actually a story that the participants had put a lot of time and energy into. I did not see how hard they worked to craft their story. I did not fully understand how important that story was to them. I mistakenly thought that I was the one influencing and controlling the interview. I would worry about making sure that the participants felt safe in talking to me. I wanted to find new ways for them to feel comfortable and confident in talking about the challenges of settling in Canada. I did not recognize that in telling their story they were showing me their tenacity, bravery, and creativity. I was too blind and too focused on my position as the researcher to see their power and control over the interview.

As a volunteer for Rainbow Refugee, I sit down every week with LGBT refugee claimants to answer any questions they have about the refugee process. These sit-down meetings always last over an hour for each claimant. We talk about the refugee process and what to expect. Most of the time, I am listening to the person as they talk about their past experiences and present challenges. One of the most common questions refugee claimants ask me is, “Do you understand?” They ask this because it is important for them to have

me understand their story and situation in order to help them prepare for the refugee hearing. They also ask this of me to get assurance that what they are saying is making sense to an outsider.

“Do you understand?” followed me when I conducted my oral history interviews. This question would come up repeatedly. I first thought that it was rhetorical, something to stimulate the conversation. I soon discovered this was not a rhetorical question. It was a way for the participants to show their agency in telling their story as important knowledge producers. By focusing only on the role of the researcher and their position of power in the research, participants’ authority over knowledge can be masked (Stearns 1998). It can also create a false impression that the participants themselves are not the “authorities on the issue of their own authority” (Kim 2008, 1352). Soon Nam Kim (2008) and Soyini Madison (1993) write that people who occupy a marginalized position in a culture are the most astute to the workings of both the dominant culture and their own marginal one. Authority, power, and agency are at the core of their daily resistance against oppression. Even in the most extreme situations, individuals have agency. While their voices may not be represented by mainstream or popular history, in their daily lives and within their various communities they are most certainly not silenced. To talk about interpretative authority from only the researcher’s perspective leaves behind the authority of the participant as knowledge producers. As important knowledge producers, participants are constantly questioning the researcher and the research. Questioning is never one-sided. As much as oral historians may be assessing and questioning the narrator, the narrator is also questioning and assessing the interviewer. As Michael Frisch writes, “You cannot open a question without leaving yourself open to it. You cannot scrutinize a ‘subject’ without being scrutinized by it. You cannot do any of these things without renewing ties with the season of childhoods, the season of the mind’s possibilities” (1990, 189). The researcher must offer their experience up to the same scrutiny and rigor that they place on the text they collect.

My experience was very similar to Amy Best’s (2003) ethnography of high school proms, in which the cultural practice of whiteness is actively negotiated and differently articulated by both racialized and white participants. In interviewing two black and Latina female high school students, what was first seen by Best as an awkward interview with too many false starts, gaps, silences, and “You know what I mean?” questions became a richly textured dialogue that provided significant insight into how race is practiced within the interview as well as how the participants actively and assertively negotiate the interview process. In rereading the interview, Best shows how the two women purposefully shaped and reshaped their narratives with the understanding that Best, a middle-class white educated woman, may not be able to make full sense of what they have to say or is likely to miss important parts of their story. As Best writes, “They seem to recognize almost intuitively that there are different modes of hearing and listening (just as there are different ways of seeing) and that these differences might be traceable to social location” (2003, 902). The repeated question “You know what I mean?” asked by these young women was not rhetorical but a direct request to Best to acknowledge their social position and to clarify their important points. “You know what I mean?” also points to the social reality these racialized young women face as they struggle to translate their realities to others and in the process are often *misheard* (2003, 902). The interview becomes a site in which the two women provide a counternarrative to unquestioned assumptions about race, and in doing so demonstrate the ways in which race is woven into and constituted through the research process itself.

Like Best, I also did not realize until later that I was not recognizing the participants’ agency as authoritative knowledge producers. I was not seeing their agency in telling their story to a white Western settler audience. I did not fully understand how important and significant that story was to their daily life. From my desire to know a different story about their life it did not follow that they had to tell it to me.

It was my privilege to ask for their story and their right to tell the story that they wanted to tell. “Do you understand?” was not only a request for me to pay attention but also a reflection on the struggle they have gone through in order to not be misheard. I thought that I was the one asking the questions, but they were asking questions right back at me. In their questioning of me they were confronting the unequal racial structures of knowledge production that silence and disregard their own important knowledge and voice. By doing this they were challenging my role as an outsider and the position of privilege I held in speaking and being listened to by people in power about refugee issues and concerns. “Do you understand?” was a way of speaking towards power in which I was held accountable for my actions. It was a political act based on personal experiences of fighting to be heard.

Navigating the Hyphen: Interpretative Authority and Collaboration

Well... The whole refugee process was traumatic. It was like being traumatized again. I aged from it. And the thing is, again, for a long time I think we thought that these people, the refugee decision makers... They really don't care...

That's why it was at that moment during my hearing that I will never forget that, the judge is asking me all these questions. And it was question after question. I just couldn't take it anymore. I punched the table and everything just flew all over the place and all of a sudden I opened my mouth and I couldn't speak, I couldn't breathe. The words... They just couldn't come out... I started to shake and cry. I couldn't even see straight. I just kept thinking that I just want to have a normal life. You know, with just one tiny little detail that I just love men, I don't love somebody female, I love male. That's the only detail, but other than that, leave me alone! I wanna have a life...

It was at the refugee hearing that something came out. I was fighting for my rights. I think for the first time for real. I just wanted the judge to hear me. Just hear what I was trying to say. I didn't care if I had to scream it at him. I needed him to understand. And I was lucky, so very blessed that he did. I thank God that he did. I still thank God...

The above excerpt is from Hector, a gay-identified cisgendered male refugee from South America who received his refugee status in the early 2000s and is now a Canadian citizen. Hector saw his refugee hearing as a defining moment for himself. Speaking out and telling the Immigration and Refugee Board member that he deserved to be treated with dignity and human rights was a political act for Hector after years of repression, discrimination, and violence. Hector was proud of his bravery that day. He felt that he finally stood up for himself and for others like him who have been and continue to be repressed by homophobia and transphobia. During our interviews, Hector was very vocal about the importance of having the ability to tell his story and having control of what his story meant. He would review the transcripts of our interviews. He would ask me questions on what I thought about his story, as well as my general conclusions about LGBT refugees' experiences. He provided very helpful and informative feedback on my research. Hector wanted to make sure not only that his story was not misheard but that I understood its political and social significance. Sharing his story was a political act, and he was taking a considerable leap of faith in trusting my abilities to interpret and convey his story to an outside audience.

Interpretative authority is both a necessary function in critical Indigenous theory and a political act. Reclaiming interpretative authority by Indigenous persons over Indigenous knowledge is seen as fundamental not only in promoting critical Indigenous voices but also in challenging destructive norms in

Western knowledge structures and pedagogies. Appropriating the language of the colonizers as the language of the colonized in order to “write back to the Empire” is argued by some Indigenous scholars to be a means to understand how the colonized actually use language to talk about their social realities in order to speak to both the audience of the colonized and the audience of the colonizers (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). This requires historicizing and contextualizing not only the use and power of language and discourse in the research, but also the effects of the project in various networks of discursive, structural, and material power.

For oral historians researching in highly politically charged environments, interpretative authority can be an opportunity to bring forth questions of confidentiality and accountability. Erin Jessee’s (2011) oral history work in Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina with survivors, ex-combatants, and perpetrators shows that despite her best intentions to provide an “intimate view from below” of the aftermath of mass atrocities, the project was quickly overwhelmed by conflicting political agendas of the informants, the ruling states, and herself as a Western academic researcher. Jessee was faced with the dilemma about the limits interpretative authority has in the context of highly charged political arenas. On the one hand, she wanted to give voice to those who were absent from the national histories of the Rwandan genocide and the Bosnian war. On the other, the choice of uncritically disseminating the narratives of complex political actors would risk propagating ethnically and nationally charged memories, scripts, and myths that could be used to promote further bloodshed. In addition, Jessee’s role as an outside Western researcher meant that her work would be intensely monitored by local officials, which could leave her participants vulnerable to policing and state sanctioning, as well as permanently restrict Jessee’s ability to enter Rwanda and Bosnia and Herzegovina again. In the end, Jessee writes that more theorization and discussion is needed on interpretative authority when doing oral history in highly politicized research settings. In these situations, interpretative authority, while still at the hand of the researcher, becomes a challenge when individual lives and community well-being are at stake.

The question becomes even further complicated when faced with participants whose accounts may reinforce hatred and oppression in the community. While the researcher may find these individuals’ accounts highly problematic or even ethically or morally repugnant, their authors are also contributing members to historical and present social reality, and are among those who have been silenced in the past. We cannot talk about giving voice to those who have been silenced without also acknowledging the difficulties voice and recognition have in certain contexts.

When debating interpretative authority, many feminist oral historians have come into serious conflict and been silenced due to institutional hierarchy of knowledge and national politics. As an educated working-class woman researching working-class women, Diane Reay (1996) writes about the challenges she faced adopting a working-class position and knowledge in her feminist research. Reay was left with the difficult task of trying to interpret and ultimately translate two different “truths”: one established from a working-class woman’s perspective and the other from that of institutionalized academia. Reay’s experience is not unique; many feminist, Indigenous, and critical race researchers have faced similar dilemmas working as “insiders” with marginalized populations. As far as feminist research has come, it is still situated in unequal institutions of power and knowledge. These gaps between power and knowledge become especially acute when researching racialized and migrant communities. Cynthia Brown (2006) notes that despite greater attention to the diversity of background and experience between or within migrant communities in oral history research, the politics of multiculturalism (in this case, British multiculturalism) have created a single-sided discourse in which questions regarding racism, inequality, and integration are directed only at racialized minorities. By doing this, socially and economically dominant white populations and institutions

need not engage with difficult conversations on race, nationalism, and settlement. Instead, the conversation is either left entirely ignored by those in power or forwarded to minority populations as *their* problem. This reinforces the imposition on racialized and migrant minorities of an ill-begotten victim status that they themselves oppose (Brown 2006).

As a PhD candidate in a large Canadian university, I am confronted with the institutional pressure of finishing my dissertation, publishing academic articles, and working in a very hierarchical and highly competitive academic environment. I am fortunate enough to have a committee made up of feminist researchers who work closely with various communities around the world as activists and academics for social justice. I am also very lucky to be in a program that emphasizes feminist and anti-oppressive research. Yet even in this positive feminist environment I am faced with institutional pressures of a tight timeline, limited funding, and a competitive job environment. These pressures create a significant amount of constraint in terms of collaboration between the participants and myself. Funding is not provided to researchers to engage with communities over a lengthy period of time in order to develop the trust and confidence necessary to form ethical collaborative relationships. Fieldwork is meant to last only a year, and you are expected to finish your dissertation within the following year. During this time, you are expected to apply for grants and publish academic articles. There is no time, let alone sufficient resources, to engage in other forms of knowledge production and activism. I would often hear from PhD students who got reprimanded by their supervisors because they spent too much time being an activist and not enough time being an academic. I am fortunate to be supported by my committee and program. Even so, I face pressures and significant amount of worry over trying to pursue activism and academia while still being able to financially support myself.

Many researchers doing social-justice work with marginalized communities share the same pressures I experience. The intense and competitive economic atmosphere of higher education has meant that academics must sacrifice valuable time and energy they might dedicate to local communities in order to keep being able to produce a high quantity of academic work and remain eligible for research grants. The work of these academics can both directly and indirectly benefit marginalized populations by confronting social and historical injustice, reforming policy, and creating greater public awareness. However, the neoliberal capitalist educational market forces academics to choose between their role as locally involved community activists and remaining employed in academia. One simply does not have time or capacity for both.

Through my own experience of trying to move forward in my work, I find a great amount of moral support in critical Indigenous theory and works by critical Indigenous writers. Critical Indigenous theory argues for the necessity of time to be devoted to collaboration in order for it to be empowering and nonexploitative. This time of listening, learning, and sharing experiences and knowledge allows individuals to not only understand one another but create opportunities for collaboration that go beyond Western and imperial institutions and knowledge structures. Empowering collaboration between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous researchers can allow for interpretative authority to be used for shared and, at times, different purposes on both sides of the research. An example of this can be found in Leslie Robertson's oral history work with members of the Kwagu'l Gixsam clan on their grandmother, and historically controversial figure, Jane Constance Cook. Robertson was invited by Jane Cook's descendants to help situate Cook's story within "particular historical contexts, cultural analyses, and their own family history" (Robertson and Kwagu'l Gixsam Clan 2012, 12). By gathering oral histories from elders, traveling to look at archival records, and collecting family artifacts, members of the Kwagu'l Gixsam clan worked together with Robertson to present a balanced conversation about Cook's life. Constant dialogue between the participants and

Robertson, which included as well interested family and community members, was a key aspect to this project as they balanced “academically positioned and community positioned narratives” to deconstruct and reconstruct the story of Jane Cook. Robertson writes that “members of all societies understand that history making requires acts of interpretation and documentation that generate powerful images for present reflection” (Robertson and Kwagu’l Gixsam Clan 2012, 12).

As the historian and ethnographer in charge of writing the book, Robertson held the interpretative authority of rendering all the various collaborators’ contributions and articulations of the past in telling Cook’s story. Throughout the text, many family members contributed written sections, footnotes, captions, and coanalysis with Robertson of Kwakawaka’wakw history. Robertson interspersed the documented history of Jane Cook and members of the Kwagu’l Gixsam clan with her ethnographic observations of important ceremonies and recorded conversations between family members. Because of the constant dialogue between the family members and herself, Robertson was not hindered in her interpretations of the collected historical material. As each chapter was finished and sent to the family members, engaging conversations between Robertson and them would ensue. What came out of this was a multivocal project that brought understanding to the ways in which particular “individuals represent themselves to *themselves* in history” and how that knowledge was brought forth through communal ‘namala relationships in the Kwagu’l Gixsam community (Robertson and Kwagu’l Gixsam Clan 2012, 12). The finished product becomes not just a historical account of Jane Cook but a multilayered discussion on the politics of memory, custom, state and Indigenous politics, and collaborative research.

Robertson’s work along with other critical Indigenous works provided me the moral support to take the time to get involved with the larger LGBT refugee community through my work at Rainbow Refugee and collaborating with my participants and other members of the LGBT refugee community on various public art projects and public events. When I first talked about collaboration and what it would entail with my participants, I was ready to hear their suggestions and work with them through the entire duration of the project. I had already written in my research proposal that I would give the participants a copy of the transcripts and that they would get final approval of each transcript. I offered them the opportunity to read and provide feedback on drafts of my dissertation, and told them their feedback would be incorporated into the finished dissertation. When we first met to talk about the research and their participation, I talked about what I hoped to produce from this project, namely my dissertation and possibly an academic article and/or a policy report. I provided them with copies of an article previously published on LGBT refugees by Sharalyn Jordan (2009), as well as a policy report on housing and refugee migration in Vancouver (Francis 2010), so that they would have an example of what I was intending to produce from my research.

In that first meeting and in subsequent meetings, we talked about what the participants wanted from the research and how they would like us to collaborate in carrying it out. They appreciated that they had final approval of the transcript and could provide feedback on the dissertation. For some of the participants, that was the extent of the involvement they wished to have in the project. Others wanted to keep meeting and talking about my research as it was coming along. Collaboration for them meant an ongoing conversation. It meant meeting over coffee, catching up with one another, and talking about the project. It allowed greater control of interpretative authority for the participants, as they could check back in with me and my work. These conversations over coffee became some of the most valuable research experiences I had. They informed my analysis to a great extent and ultimately allowed for a much richer result. Talking over and over again with the participants encouraged me to distribute the knowledge being produced in this research through alternative, nonacademic creative means. In the summer of 2014, I collaborated with participants

and others in the creation of a public mural that depicted the images and voices of LGBT refugees. In addition to the mural, I hosted a series of informational and artistic events on the violence of borders and the increasing restrictions of the asylum process in Canada for LGBT refugees. At these events, I invited LGBTQ refugees to speak and share their personal experiences. Several of the event participants were later interviewed by local journalists and invited by city officials to talk to them directly about the challenges LGBT refugees were facing in Vancouver.

These experiences were incredibly valuable. They allowed me to engage with the participants on a deeper level and provided more opportunities to share our different interpretative authority over the knowledge produced. It was in these multiple conversations that our differences in experience and social positioning were continuously confronted as we discussed our viewpoints and analysis of the research. Critical Indigenous scholars argue that empowering collaborative work between settler and Indigenous agents can be achieved, but it requires a reframing of the field in which researchers actively decenter the “Western academy as the exclusive locus of authorizing power that defines the research agenda” (Swadener and Mutua 2008, 38). By doing this, the validity of the research is defined, reconstituted, and reauthored by the power of the margins. The strategy calls on the researcher and the participant to rework the “hyphen” between colonizer-colonized, settler-aboriginal, non-Indigenous and Indigenous, majority-minority, and oppressor-oppressed (Jones and Jenkins 2008). Alison Jones and Kuni Jenkins (2008) argue that often the hyphen is softened when researchers seek mutual understanding through cross-cultural engagement, but that by softening the hyphen empathetic collaboration ceases to exist. In trying to gain a shared perspective, structural power differences, as well as other differences in perspective and history, are downplayed. Instead of being softened, the hyphen should remain nonnegotiable as a positive site for productive and empowering methodological work. The hyphen signifies not only a relationship between collaborating people but also their respective relationship to difference. Much like the critiques of universalism in Western white feminism voiced by critical race and postcolonial feminists, “us” cannot stand in place of the divide, the hyphen, but can only name an “always conditional relationship between” (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 475). In working the hyphen, researchers need to question what they mean by “shared speaking,” in order to not only make room for the voices of others and for learning from them but also recognize the privilege one has in asking for dialogue (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 478). As Jones and Jenkins write, “Indigenous access into the realms of meaning of the dominant Other is hardly required; members of marginalized/colonized groups are immersed in it daily. It is the colonizer, wishing to hear, who calls for dialogue” (478). Collaborative research across the hyphen entails the assertion that on some points of the research the Indigenous, colonized, minority, or oppressed will maintain a political and social identity distinct from that of the settler, colonizer, majority, or oppressor subject (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 475).

The challenge of the hyphen is something that needs to be looked at in all feminist oral history projects, whether or not individuals are working with marginalized communities, consider themselves to be minorities, or are working inside or outside their own communities. Marginality is not monolithic, and we all face inequality and oppression intersectionally; within any research, we are working a hyphen in some form. Working the hyphen “suggests hard work—not the work of face-to-face conversation in the name of liberatory practice, but the work of coming to know our own location in the Self-Other binary and accepting the difference marked by the hyphen.... What I learn is not about you, but I learn from you about difference” (Jones and Jenkins 2008, 482–83). In the creation of an oral history, interpretative authority is a joint dialogue between the “selves and roles of interviewee and interviewer within an interactive moment of creation” (Stuart 1993, 81). Working the hyphen requires that the oral historian cannot gain all knowledge

but must insist at times on ignorance and a lack of clarity and certainty. Empowering collaboration between the researcher and the participants can be achieved through hard-worked dialogue and commitment to understanding difference.

The hyphen continues to be present in my research and will remain after this project is “officially” finished. As a nonrefugee white queer settler, the difference between me and my participants is always present. Instead of seeing this as a disadvantage, an invitation to navel-gazing, or something to be smoothed over, I take the hyphen as an opportunity to poke and ultimately unsettle my position of power to speak next to LGBT refugees. I was given a great amount of responsibility and trust in documenting their stories to an outside world. With this great responsibility, I face internal and external confrontations and challenges as an outsider talking about LGBT refugee issues and concerns. I choose not to convey their stories in my own words in order to speak for and about refugee issues and concerns. Instead, I keep their words intact and speak in proximity to them (Minh-Ha 1989, 119). Within the finished text of my dissertation, I take every opportunity to show the authority of the participants in talking to power through their stories and lived experiences. That authority is something that needs to be acknowledged and respected. I leave the seams open by showing my interaction in the interview (Behar 1993). I make it clear in the dissertation where I am interpreting something and where my participants are interpreting. The dissertation is one form of knowledge production, but it isn’t the only form or the most effective for social change. In order to disseminate the knowledge provided and produced in my doctoral research to a wider and more diverse audience, I work with LGBT refugees and activists to provide new avenues and platforms for the refugees to speak directly to the public and people in positions of power. Their voices are much stronger than mine, and I feel honored that I can listen and learn from them. This process is not always smooth, but it is essential in sharing interpretative authority.

Conclusion: “I Learned that I Am Still Learning”

John: So what did you finally learn about us gay refugees?

Kat: I learned that I am still learning.

John: [laughs] Good work. You still have a lot to learn from us...⁵

Addressing interpretative authority in feminist oral history can be an overwhelming task. It was certainly an important learning curve for me in my work with LGBT refugees and their oral histories. My experiences are not unique. There is no community in the world that is exempt from troubling politics, from systems of power, and from structural violence. Research is embedded in systems of power whether research stems from educational institutions, political or activist initiatives, or community projects. The call for emancipation, shared authority, and empowerment through the collection, analysis, and dissemination of oral histories should always remain critical and reflexive. What oral histories actually do in intersecting networks of discourse and power is something that cannot always be fully determined when designing a research project, but the effects of such intersections should not be ignored. It would be a mistake to let sometimes unanswerable, difficult, and untidy questions of authority, power, and knowledge dissuade us from doing oral history work, or to only focus on the difficulties.

While there is no single way to execute oral history and no single solution to challenges of interpretative authority, engaging in critical self-examination of practices and developing a range of models according

to specific and unique research situations is the obligation of the researcher. In consistently questioning ourselves and our methods, we encourage dialogue both within and outside the feminist oral history community. The questions put forth by critical Indigenous scholars are an important contribution to this discussion. These questions about role, responsibility, and position of the researcher and the participants push the oral historian to fully address participants' authority in the research. It is not enough to simply state that research is inherently unequal or exploitative; instead, feminist oral historians need to work within their practice and address interpretative authority pragmatically. In questioning interpretative authority, I tried to address what I see as a lack of critical discourse on participants' interpretative authority in the research. Both the narrator and the oral historian are subjective and agentic beings in oral history. Both have authority in forming the text and shaping the analysis. As much as an oral historian should empathize and create solidarity with the narrator and their community, it is important to recognize the difference—the hyphen—between the narrator and the interviewer. Working the hyphen means to be in constant dialogue with the participants, as well as with yourself as the oral historian and with the larger structures of power that envelop the research. It is through this work that we can unsettle interpretative authority within feminist oral history projects and create new avenues for dialogue.

Notes

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1. All of the participants' names have been changed. Country of origin is only referenced as the general geographical location. Participants' gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and age were recorded, but other identifying information was not recorded in the finished transcript. Participants signed a confidentiality agreement and were given a copy of the signed agreement.

2. It is important to acknowledge the challenge of language used to refer to sexual and gender identity and orientation when working with refugee persons. All of the participants in this research self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or trans. I identified myself to the participants as a queer cisgender woman. These identity terms should not be seen as universal or monolithic, and particular attention must be paid to the ways in which persons use identity terms strategically, as well to how these terms may be adapted and transformed across locations, cultures, and communities.

3. The interview excerpts used in this article come from my 2013–15 doctoral research on landed lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans-identified (LGBT) refugees' experiences of settlement in Metro Vancouver. The focus of this study was to investigate how home and belonging inform and are informed by the affectual and material experiences and embodied memories of landed LGBT refugees living in Metro Vancouver.

The research used a mixed participatory methodology based on extended oral histories with fifteen LGBT refugees and participatory photography with six LGBT refugees. The interviews were conducted in English. I interviewed participants three times, with each interview lasting two to three hours. Finished transcripts were edited and approved by

the participants before being used in the dissertation. Participants received a copy of each finalized transcript for their own records.

Participatory photography took place with six LGBT refugees who had previously participated in the oral history interviews. Individuals were given a camera and asked to take or share photographs that represented or helped express home for them. Participants were given free direction to decide what photographs they wanted to take or share. After the photographs were taken, participants would sit with me and discuss each photograph. This discussion was recorded and transcribed. Participants reviewed and edited the finished transcript. Participants were able to keep a copy of the photographs and finalized transcription.

4. Amira is a lesbian-identified cisgender woman from the Middle East. She made her refugee claim in 2012 and was accepted in 2013.

5. John is a gay-identified cisgender man from Eastern Asia who made a refugee claim in 2011 and was accepted in 2012.

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