



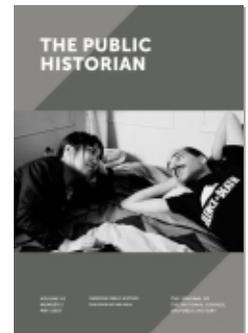
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Just Like You Want Me to Be?: Gay and Lesbian Oral History
Projects and the Frameworks of Public History

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Just Like You Want Me to Be?

Gay and Lesbian Oral History Projects and the Frameworks of Public History

Jodie Boyd

ABSTRACT: In this article I throw off my designated subject position as the “narrator” and step into the critical historian’s role of interpreter to interrogate my experience of being interviewed for a large-scale lesbian and gay oral history project. From this position I came to recognize that, despite having volunteered for the project, I was wary of the “gay-life framework” I felt had been imposed on the story of my life. In addressing the narrator’s experience of the interview and the narrator’s apparent exclusion from the afterlife of the interview, I claim both a critical space for the narrator but also offer an evolving reflection on the ambivalent power of the institution and, unexpectedly, on the continuing power of heterocentric and silencing discourses.

KEY WORDS: narrator ethics, institutional power, lesbian and gay, critical space, interpretive authority

Preface

In November 2013 I sat down with an interviewer from a lesbian and gay oral history project and over the next few hours spoke about my forty-plus years of growing up and living as a lesbian in the suburbs of Melbourne, Australia.¹ In the aftermath of the interview, I found myself unsettled: uncomfortable with the “self” recorded and preserved for posterity at the National Library of Australia, and with the interview process itself. This article is, in part, an outcome of my subsequent efforts to interrogate this unexpectedly discomfited response to the interview. It traces how I came to step into the role of critical interpreter of this interview, a role

¹ The interview was conducted as part of the 2014 Australian Research Council Linkage Scheme funded project “Australian Lesbian and Gay Life Stories” by Macquarie University in partnership with the National Library of Australia, University of Melbourne, and University of Queensland. I have identified the project by name for the purposes of transparency. However, I want to emphasize that my focus is on the practice of identity-targeted oral history “life story” approaches, rather than as comment on this particular project.

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usually held by project interviewers and researchers, with the aim of claiming a critical space for the narrator. It is also, however, an artifact of memory, forgetting, and the continuing impacts of the past in the present. What follows then, is a sometimes-contradictory account of two stages of reflection on my interview experience, as a narrator and then as a narrator who had become an interviewer. Given the peculiarities of memory, this should perhaps be restated as an account of what I now (at the time of writing) make of my experience as a narrator mediated through my subsequent engagement with oral history methodologies and scholarship.

As I originally conceived it, this article was to be a step into what appears to be the relatively uncharted territory of narrator-driven analysis of an oral history interview; turning the tables (as it were) in order to speak truth to the acknowledged lopsided power relationship embedded in academic oral history projects. It was intended as an act of resistance to what I had perceived as the “gay-life” narrative approach of the interview that, I felt, had imposed a structure on the tales I had told about my life. It was intended as a gesture towards the unelicited counter-narratives of the interview, the stories untold that did not fit into the “gay-life” narrative approach. By pointing to those parts of the interview in which I could hear myself resisting the mobilization of a “lesbian” subjectivity, my intention was to raise questions about the problematic impacts of interviews organized around a predefined notion of a lesbian identity. By extrapolation I wanted further to draw out the ethical implications of the commonplace omission of the narrator from the processes of interpretation, critical reflection, and the curation of outputs that can characterize the afterlife of an academic oral history project. This piece was to be an example of a rare instance of a narrator “talking back” to the project, of a narrator claiming a voice outside of the allotted space and moment of the interview.

Without compromising on the validity of these questions, my ability to ask them is admittedly complicated and made uneasy by virtue of the fact that, subsequent to my experience as a narrator, I moved over to the “other side” of the microphone as an interviewer. Now engaged as an academic and in possession of the implied authority of that role, as well as the relevant critical and analytic skills, I have a platform and a voice that is, I suggest, largely unavailable to the narrator for whom I am claiming to speak. The question is then, how can I authentically claim to be speaking as an interviewee outside of academia now that I am inside its walls engaged in oral history and other projects as an interviewer? I suggest that this blurring of my subject positions has generated a kind of productive double-vision about my experience. In one view, I can see how I came to understand my sense of discomfit as an outcome of problematic power relationships in the interview/project, and as a concern at the narrative framing that identity-based oral history projects may potentially impose on their participants. In the other view, however, oral history’s capacity to excavate the varying discursive foundations and the ever-changing narrative structures in which people build a story of their life also forced me to confront an alternative understanding of what my resistance to the “gay-life”

approach of the project meant and, eventually, to admit the continuing and often unconscious power of the formative discourses of youth.

On first reflection . . .

In the days and weeks after being interviewed as part of a lesbian and gay oral history project, I could not shake the feeling that somehow the story of my life captured and preserved for posterity was not right. Even with an understanding that any oral history interview, whatever the purpose or project focus, is not going to represent a complete life (and would no doubt be told differently on any given day, and to a different interviewer),² the interview preyed on my consciousness. I replayed it in my mind and worried at the things left out, the stories untold. A feeling of frustration and disappointment about the interview dogged me in a way that I felt was probably unreasonable. It was, after all, an interview that went well. It was conducted in good humor and with respect and warmth. Nevertheless, those feelings of frustration and disappointment nagged at me. The question I came to ask myself was, why is it that in participating in a project that described one of its goals as being to give voice to marginalized and excluded narratives, I felt invisible and somehow silenced?³

In the scarce literature on the narrators' experience of the oral history interview and its aftermath, Valerie Yow speculated that being interviewed and telling a life story may stimulate a process of further reflection on the part of the narrator.⁴ This was certainly true in my experience and is at the foundation of how I found myself (at risk of accusations of narcissism) writing on the topic of my personal experience as an oral history narrator.⁵ In the year after the interview, I enrolled in an oral history course at a university, prompted largely by this experience with the methodology that, despite holding a PhD in history, I had not encountered in any substantial way. From there I took on roles as an interviewer in a range of oral history projects. As my skill as an interviewer developed, my own experience of being interviewed hovered close by—a version, if you will, of Alessandro Portelli's

2 See especially Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 54–55.

3 The claim to be giving a voice is frequently made by many oral history projects. See for instance the “About Us” pages of the various US-based projects collected together at “Oral History Hub/LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory,” <http://lgbtqdigitalcollaboratory.org/oral-history-hub/>. For discussion of oral history as a “neutral tool used for emancipatory purposes” see Alexander Freund, “Confessing Animals: Toward a Longue Durée History of the Oral History Interview,” *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2014): 23.

4 Valerie Yow quoted in Stephen Sloan, “On the Other Foot: Oral History Students as Narrators,” *The Oral History Review* 39, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2012): 301.

5 I have opted to use the designation of “narrator” rather than “interviewee,” following Portelli's emphasis on the narrativity of oral history sources: that is “narratives where the boundary between what takes place outside the narrator and what happens inside, between what concerns him or her and what concerns the group” are blended. See Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *History Workshop Journal* 12 (Autumn 1981): 99. See also Kevin P. Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Jason Ruiz, “What Makes Queer Oral History Different,” *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 2016): 2; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 22–23.

“spectre.”⁶ To stretch the analogy, the interviews I conducted were haunted by my own experience as a narrator and I was increasingly troubled, not so much by the lack of any comprehensive body of literature examining the narrator experience, but that the literature, and therefore the knowledge about that experience, is rarely created by the narrator.⁷

Like Wendy Rickard in 1998, I “looked fruitlessly for accounts written spontaneously by interviewees on how they felt about being interviewed.”⁸ The closest I found was produced by oral history educator Stephen Sloan, who wrote about his efforts to gain understanding of the narrator’s experience of being interviewed by means of a pedagogical experiment. Sloan placed his students in the position of narrators and asked them to reflect on what it felt like to be interviewed. This experiment prompted numerous valuable insights, but it remains the case that Sloan’s student narrators were given a power of authorship over those insights not generally afforded to “real” narrator participants in an oral history project.⁹ Sloan himself acknowledges the “stark differences between interviewer and interviewee” exposed by his experiment,¹⁰ a recognition also made by countless other oral historians of the fundamental imbalance of power in the interview encounter that I eventually came to realize was an important factor in my post-interview unease.¹¹

Oral historians remain alive to the inherent inequalities in the relationship between interviewer and narrator. Indeed, consciousness of the imbalance of power in the interview relationship, and the impulse to ameliorate this, has driven significant methodological innovation and the growth of an extensive body of literature focused on the “ethics of inequality.”¹² Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki suggest that, since the late 1980s, “[t]he power differential between interviewer and narrator was a particular source of anxiety for [. . .] practitioners as they tried to create equality in the interview.”¹³ One of the most compelling theoretical tools to emerge from this anxiety, of course, was Michael Frisch’s concept of “shared authority” which sought, not equality as such, but as Sheftel and Zembrzycki neatly put it, “an acceptance of both the experiential authority that narrators bring to the interview and the scholarly authority that researchers offer to the exchange.”¹⁴ Frisch’s concept, as Amy Starecheski points out, has become something of a “mandate” to oral historians. Most oral historians are keenly aware that if

6 Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” 96.

7 Louisa Allen, “Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher: The Relationship(?) Between Researcher Identity and Anti-Normative Knowledge,” *Feminism & Psychology* 20, no. 2 (May 2010): 148.

8 Wendy Rickard, “Oral History—‘More Dangerous than Therapy?’: Interviewees’ Reflections on Recording Traumatic or Taboo Issues,” *Oral History* 26, no. 2 (Autumn 1998): 35.

9 Sloan, “On the Other Foot.”

10 *Ibid.*, 311.

11 Abrams writes, “we have to acknowledge the power imbalances and do our best to minimize them.” See Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 166.

12 Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki, “Who’s Afraid of Oral History? Fifty Years of Debates and Anxiety about Ethics,” *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2016): 348.

13 Sheftel and Zembrzycki, “Who’s Afraid of Oral History?,” 347.

14 *Ibid.*, 350.

the democratic, emancipatory, and social justice imperatives of many oral history projects are to be served then attention must necessarily be given to the narrator's position in the process and in the product.¹⁵

Some rich, interesting, and important work has emerged from this "mandate," particularly from advocacy and community projects (such as those described by Linda Shopes and Lyn Abrams.)¹⁶ Collaborative and ongoing dialogic relationships have resulted from oral history projects in which the experience, voice, and interpretive authority of narrators has sat alongside or even in opposition to the interpretive authority of the researcher/historian and the project's goals.¹⁷ Frequently, however, the notion of "shared authority"—understood either as an extant condition of an interview encounter or as something oral historians attempt to "do" after the event¹⁸—has devolved, as David Cline recently remarked, into a kind of "lip service" to a difficult and sometimes hazily grasped idea.¹⁹ "Shared authority," in too many projects, has been formalized in practice to little more than allowing a narrator to view, correct, or change his or her interview transcript, while democratic intentions are satisfied with the distribution of interviews via the internet.²⁰

Similarly, the shift since the late 1980s to subjectivity and identity construction as a focus for oral history research and the concurrent emphasis on self-reflexivity on the part of the interviewer/researcher has fostered the growth of theoretical depth and the expansion of the possibilities of oral history as a methodology of historical analysis and community benefit. Valerie Yow's seminal 1997 article, "Do I Like Them Too Much?: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa," exemplified the now well-accepted idea that an interview is potentially as revelatory of the interviewer's subjectivity as it can be of the narrator's.²¹ This self-reflexive afterlife of an interview or project, in which the interviewer/researcher has scope to digest its impact and ripples on the process and on themselves, is, however, a domain mostly closed to the narrator. Indeed, as Lorraine Sizia admitted, sometimes the narrator must be deliberately excised from the

15 Amy Starecheski, "A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History," by Michael Frisch (review), *The Oral History Review* 44, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2017): 379.

16 Linda Shopes, "Community Oral History: Where We Have Been, Where We Are Going," *Oral History* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 102; Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 166–69. See also Daniel Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is: Using Oral History to Develop a Collaborative Analysis of Homelessness from the Bottom Up," *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2003): 27–45.

17 See, for instance Pamela Sugiman, "I Can Hear Lois Now: Corrections to My Story of the Internment of Japanese Canadians—'For the Record,'" in *Oral History Off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, ed. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 149–69; Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is," 36–37.

18 Shopes, "Community Oral History," 104–5.

19 David Cline, "A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History," by Michael Frisch (review), *The Oral History Review* 44, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2017): 372.

20 Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 173.

21 Valerie Yow, "Do I like Them Too Much?: Effects of the Oral History Interview on the Interviewer and Vice-Versa," *The Oral History Review* 24, no. 1 (Winter/Spring 1997): 55–79; See also Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 56–57.

interview's reflexive afterlife if the researcher is to be "more critical and more honest," and able to "highlight problems without undue concern for [her narrator's] reaction" to her critical and candid conclusions.²² Similarly, Pamela Sugiman has written of her struggle over the ethics of whether she should keep "off the record" the views of a correspondent she saw as "misguided, heretical, and dangerous to [her] larger political objectives."²³ Sitzia's and Sugiman's admissions are, of course, in themselves intentionally provocative of further reflection on the production of academic knowledge by making starkly visible the otherwise elided institutional rhetorics that operate within the relationships formed around the oral history interview, particularly, I would argue, those conducted as part of academic rather than community projects.²⁴

In a very real sense, the production of knowledge about the narrator's experience of an interview encounter and the aftermath of an interview remains mostly the job of the interviewer/researcher, often because of an assumed "comprehension gap" between researcher and narrator.²⁵ In other words, the reflexive work is most often fenced off from narrators, presented in a language intelligible only to academics, and, importantly, presented to an audience that does not often include the narrator. One of the "stark differences between interviewer and interviewee" is that the narrator's voice is usually heard only in the interview, while the interviewer's voice continues to be heard, although not often by the narrator.²⁶ In this aspect, I share Yvette Taylor's concern about "who gets to talk—and who gets listened to." And like Taylor, I favor efforts to shift the focus of narrator experience from "a specific methodological approach and moment; to the general creation of academic knowledge."²⁷ In this sense I accepted that by volunteering to be a subject and a narrator in a project about lesbian and gay Australians, my voice had indeed been heard, and a narrative of my life elicited. But I began to ponder the question of whether I had given up control over the narratives and stories that my voice would or would not be used to tell, and the knowledge about gay and lesbian lives it would be used to produce. Despite the restrictions and control enabled by the consent

22 Lorraine Sitzia, "A Shared Authority: An Impossible Goal?," *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (Winter-Spring 2003): 99. See also Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 168.

23 Sugiman, "I Can Hear Lois Now," 153.

24 For more on the methodologies of cultural rhetorics see Andrea M. Riley Mukavetz, "Towards a Cultural Rhetorics Methodology: Making Research Matter with Multi-Generational Women from the Little Traverse Bay Band," *Professional Communication* 5, no. 1 (2014): 109–10; Qwo-Li Driskill, "Doubleweaving Two-Spirit Critiques: Building Alliances Between Native and Queer Studies," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1–2 (2010): 69–92; see also James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium, "Institutional Ethnography: Using Interviews to Investigate Ruling Relations," in *Inside Interviewing: New Lenses, New Concerns*, ed. Holstein and Gubrium (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003), 368–94.

25 Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 167.

26 For a notable exception, see Kerr, "We Know What the Problem Is."

27 Yvette Taylor, "The 'Outness' of Queer: Class and Sexual Intersections," in *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*, ed. Kath Brown and Catherine J. Nash (New York: Routledge, 2016), 71.

form I had signed setting out the conditions of its use,²⁸ the recording of my interview had effectively become a text or dataset to be read or utilized in ways over which I could exercise little to no agency.

“there are other things”

In a number of ways, the National Library of Australia’s catalogue record of my interview (pictured below) provided the cipher for my process of reflection on the interview and its aftermath. The subject headings, “Lesbians—Victoria—Interviews,” and “Lesbians—Victoria—History” became emblematic of aspects of my disquiet. Seeing the catalogue record of my interview, my name juxtaposed with the stark categorization imposed by the subject headings, I felt vaguely confronted and exposed.²⁹ This catalogue record seemed to represent the first time, outside of self-consciously homosexual spaces (such as lesbian bars), or indeed, other than derogatory name-calling on the street, that I could recall being labeled as “lesbian.” The catalogue record represented a disconcerting and strangely disempowering moment of objectification quite different from my own use of the term to describe myself. Even acknowledging that I had volunteered for the project, a project explicitly seeking to interview self-identified gay and lesbian people, this felt different—an identification and categorization that was happening without me every time somebody called up my name on the catalogue.³⁰ My participation in the oral history project was based on my overt and willing identification as a lesbian and, as such, I had accepted without qualm the stated assumption of the project that I was one of those individuals in Australia who “continue to organize a life (at least partially) around being lesbian or gay.”³¹ In light of my response to the catalogue record and looking back at my feelings in the aftermath of the interview, I began to see my experience differently. I began to recall the notes of reluctance I

28 The consent form set out permissions relating to identification in research outputs and the conditions of availability to be imposed on the audio recording. The form also emphasized that these conditions and permissions could be altered at any time by the narrator. My interview recording is held under the condition that it is not available online for a certain period, but that it is available to individuals on request for research purposes.

29 The film director Desiree Akhavan recently expressed a similar response to being introduced in interviews as “the bisexual film-maker”: “It wasn’t that it was untrue; the film was about a bisexual character and Akhavan wasn’t hiding her own bisexuality. ‘But for some reason, when I heard it, it just felt deeply humiliating and personal, like, “the bedwetter Desiree Akhavan.””” See Rebecca Nicholson, “From Duplicitous Villains to Fleshed out Characters: Is TV Finally Getting Bisexuality Right?,” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2018.

30 Hope Olson has written extensively on the power of the catalogue. See, for instance Hope A. Olson, “The Power to Name: Representation in Library Catalogs,” *Signs* 26, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 639–68; Hope A. Olson, “How We Construct Subjects: A Feminist Analysis,” *LibraryTrends* 56, no. 2 (Fall 2007): 509–41. See also Emily Drabinski, “Queering the Catalog: Queer Theory and the Politics of Correction,” *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 83, no. 2 (April 2013): 94–111; Amelia Bowen Koford, “Engaging an Author in a Critical Reading of Subject Headings,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 1 (2017).

31 Robert Reynolds and Shirleene Robinson, “Australian Lesbian and Gay Life Stories: A National Oral History Project,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 31, no. 89 (2016): 368.

Jodie Boyd interviewed by Julia Miller in the Australian lesbian and gay life stories oral history project

Bib ID	6390119
Format	 Audio [spoken word]
Author	Boyd, Jodie, 1970-, Interviewee
Access Conditions	Access open for research, personal copies and public use.
Description	2013 2 sound files (approximately 222 min.)
Series	Australian lesbian and gay life stories oral history project.
Notes	Recorded on 22 November 2013 in Reservoir, Victoria. Digital master available National Library of Australia;
Index/Finding Aid Note	Timed summary (9 pages)
Subjects	Boyd, Jodie, 1970- -- Interviews. Lesbians -- Victoria -- Interviews. Academic librarians -- Victoria -- Interviews. Lesbians -- Victoria -- History.
Occupation	Librarians.
Other authors/contributors	Miller, Julia, Interviewer

Catalogue record of the oral history interview. (National Library of Australia: <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6390119>)

demonstrated during the interview to fit into the “gay-life” narrative, indeed, my willingness to talk about anything other than matters of sexuality. I began to think that rather than having been given a “voice,” I had instead been “packaged”—that the encounter captured in the interview was actually not an authentic insight into my life, as I was more than the category of “lesbian” allowed. I decided that the “self” recorded in the interview and described in the subject headings of its catalogue record was, in this sense, not “real” given that I had not organized my life around being lesbian. By privileging “lesbian” above all other aspects of my life, I felt myself to be misrepresented. That person in the audio recording and represented in the catalogue was, rather, a production of what I was expected to be.

In 2003 James Holstein pointed to the oddity of the “very idea that various types of people named homosexuals or gays or lesbians can simply be called up for interviews.” He asked the following question: “If one is successfully coaxed into giving voice to one’s experience in an interview, what are the chances that one will become the Other in the process?” He argues that:

Homosexuals, gays, bisexuals, transgenders, lesbians, even “queer” subjects have typically been homogenized and cast into some role of Other and thus seriously misrepresented, their thoughts, language, and sentiments collapsed into categories foreign to, if not destructive of, experience.³²

³² James Holstein, “Queering the Interview,” in Holstein and Gubrium, *Inside Interviewing*, 96.

Holstein's argument was useful in explaining something of that frustration I felt in the aftermath of the interview. It articulated my early sense that in agreeing to participate in the project as an interview subject I had voluntarily exposed myself to a process of "othering"—allowing myself to be carved out as different to or outside of the common stories and experiences of my society and culture.³³ Indeed, I wondered at the level of hypocrisy I displayed by volunteering for a project organized around the goal of capturing the voices and experiences of lesbians and gay men and yet continuing to insist, as I did in the interview, that I did not see sexuality as a defining or important feature in my sense of self and in my life's experiences.

My conundrum revolved then around what appeared to be the apparently insoluble contradiction between my willingness to identify as a lesbian for the purposes of the project and a simultaneous defiance of the applicability of this category of sexuality to me and my life. After all, as queer theorists and oral historians Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez articulate, "Queer oral histories begin with an agreement between a narrator and a researcher to record memories of queer genders, sexualities, and desires."³⁴ I had volunteered and agreed to be interviewed in order to share my story of lesbian identity, so why should I resist and be discomfited by an interview which, as per that agreement, sought to place that identity at its center? And further, why did I perceive my participation in the project as an experience of "othering" from broader society and culture rather than with a sense of inclusion or identification with the community, history, and culture of the lesbian and gay community that I had lived with and been a part of for decades?

Boyd has pointed to the need for some mindfulness in regard to gay and lesbian oral history projects. She writes that "privileging the experiences of gay identity isolates sexuality and removes it from everyday life."³⁵ Despite this potential, however, oral history's value is unquestioned as a method committed to the creation of "evidence of the existence of queer lives" that, as Ramirez and Boyd note in *Bodies of Evidence*, "often go unmentioned in mainstream historical texts" or for which "no documents or acid free folders" exist.³⁶ Nevertheless, listening to myself in the interview I can hear myself struggling to downplay my sexuality and make it something that is not exceptional or noteworthy. In the interview I can hear myself resisting an identification solely according to a category of sexuality. I insist in the interview that my sexuality is not constitutive of

33 Day Wong, "Beyond Identity Politics: The Making of an Oral History of Hong Kong Women Who Love Women," *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 10, no. 3-4 (2007): 31, 36-37.

34 Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 12.

35 Nan Alamilla Boyd, "Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (May 2008): 186-87.

36 Boyd and Ramirez, *Bodies of Evidence*.

my sense of self and is not the lens through which I understand myself and the world. In short, I am asking the interviewer to see and understand me beyond the category of sexuality:

[me]: It's just how it is and they don't really give a crap, so . . . which is great . . .

[interviewer]: yeah

[me]: that's how I would like it to be so, you know, it's not um . . . it doesn't set me apart, I'm quite ordinary . . . it's not even something that's on my mind, I don't think about it . . .

[interviewer]: you don't walk around . . . yeah . . .

[me]: . . . with a rainbow flag tattooed to my arm

[laughter]

[me]: no, not at all, and ah, yeah, there are other things that have had an impact on my life than sexuality, I would think. It's not the defining feature of my life I don't think . . .

[interviewer] . . . not for you . . .

[me]: no

[interviewer]: so what would you say would be . . . maybe your childhood, or . . .

[me] class, probably . . .

[interviewer]: working class?

[me]: yeah . . . and that has been the biggest . . .

[interviewer]: shaper

[me]: inhibitor, as well, absolutely, shaper, inhibitor, the thing that's had the most impact on me getting anywhere. It's that lack of knowledge of how the middle-class world works . . . it's never been a matter of sexuality that's been the factor in my life . . . it's had an impact obviously, but I think class and being somebody who grew up on welfare and things like that . . .

. . .

[Me]: I never felt part of it anyway, to a large extent . . . I enjoyed going out and going to clubs and things, and meeting women obviously, um . . . but there was a large group of people, for instance, this group we went to Mardi Gras with, one of them had this big rainbow flag tattooed on her arm . . .

[interviewer]: oh yes . . .

[me]: . . . and even then I thought, mmm really?

[laughter]

[me]: . . . it's a bit tacky . . . but it was that sort of overt "look at me I'm special because I'm gay" sort of thing, and that was never part of my thing, you know . . . it was never a declaration thing for me, whereas, a lot of these people, that was all important to them, you know.

[interviewer]: you weren't into showmanship or . . .

[me]: no. It drives [partner] crazy because I won't even hold her hand . . .

[interviewer]: you won't walk down the street together . . .

[me]: no . . . I still can't bring myself to do it, it's ridiculous I know . . .

Listening to those excerpts, I heard what Yvette Taylor has called on researchers to be attentive to: "the subject positions mobilised or refused in and beyond the interview encounter."³⁷ Regardless of the fact that I had self-identified and put myself in that category quite literally by my attendance at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi-Gras, I hear my unconscious resistance to the categorization being mobilized in the interview, a rejection of the assumption or expectation that my sexuality was "the pre-eminent characteristic around which all others are to be arrayed."³⁸ In the interview I offer a refusal of my subject position and attempt to present myself as somebody formed, as we all are, by multiple factors. But of course, the point of the project for which I was being interviewed was to tell my story as a lesbian—that is what I volunteered for—to provide information to researchers about a homosexual life.³⁹ My stories about my life were, however, about a range of things above and beyond the social and legal position imposed on me, I felt, by my erotic interests: poverty, grief, education, illness, aging, ambition, and disappointment—the "multiple narrative logics and temporal frames"⁴⁰ that are constitutive of my lesbian life as much as they are constitutive of a person with heterosexual or other erotic interests. But is this what the researcher/interviewer was looking for? Was any of this of value to the project?

"it's all very tedious . . ."

In an influential 2008 article Boyd recalls a luckless effort to elicit from her oral history interview subjects stories of gay and lesbian lives that did not replicate

37 Taylor, "The 'Outness' of Queer," 72.

38 Ellen Lewin, "Writing Lesbian and Gay Culture: What the Natives Have to Say for Themselves," *American Ethnologist* 18, no. 4 (November 1991): 788.

39 Publicity around the project and the project's own call for expressions of interest from participants stated that it sought "to interview members of the lesbian and gay community about their life histories" and expressed its goal as being to "expand understandings of Australian history by incorporating the voices of lesbian and gay people, who have often been excluded from national narratives." "Australian Lesbian and Gay Life Stories," <https://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/145897/20140821-1511/www.australianlesbianandgaylifestories.org.au/index.html>; see also "Historians Explore Oral History of Gay and Lesbian Australia," *Star Observer*, April 28, 2014.

40 Mary Jo Maynes, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Barbara Laslett, *Telling Stories: The Use of Personal Narratives in the Social Sciences and History* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 43.

“a predictable narrative structure that bound queer life to the emergence of specific identity formations.”⁴¹ She recounts that her narrators, in their desire to “reassure” her as “the authoritative researcher” of their value to the project and of their “authenticity as a speaking subject” ineluctably positioned themselves within a recognizable gay identity from which they insisted on speaking about their lives.⁴² She writes that despite asking questions related to matters outside of issues of personal identity formation, she “could not get [her] narrators to cooperate with [her] interest,”⁴³ repeatedly obtaining stories that “justified his or her historical value through a prideful claim to gay or lesbian identity.”⁴⁴ Boyd suggests that the narrators’ knowledge of the project’s purpose (i.e. that the interviews were being collected on behalf of a gay and lesbian historical society) encouraged them to shape their responses according to what they thought would be valuable to a gay and lesbian project, effectively frustrating Boyd’s broader research goals.

Boyd’s inability to elicit responses that cooperated with her interest, as she argues, points to the “limits of public speech” within established notions of the “historical record.” To make themselves intelligible, her narrators structured their stories in ways that would fit within already transmitted narratives and accepted teleologies of gay and lesbian life: tales of hardship and discrimination, stories of coming out, of increasing visibility and growing acceptance, for instance.⁴⁵ It also speaks, however, to what Alexander Freund has called “the interviewer’s potentially coercive role in the shaping of . . . narrator’s identities.”⁴⁶ Freund argues that interviewers “create and enter into a relationship of disciplinary power, a relationship that disciplines both . . . interviewees and [interviewers].”⁴⁷ In other words, on most occasions narrators do cooperate with their interviewers in order to provide useful and relevant content because, quite simply, as suggested earlier, that is the “agreement between a narrator and a researcher.”⁴⁸ Reflecting on my own experience as a narrator, however, I felt that I could not make myself intelligible as a “lesbian” because I could not (or would not) speak within the narrative parameters of lesbian identity anticipated (quite reasonably) by the interviewer.

In the following excerpt from my own interview, I can hear the tumbleweeds rolling around in the empty narrative space that my story was not filling, the gaps in the narrative plot-points that I was not conforming to:

[interviewer]: Ok so you weren't in the radical feminist movement at uni or anything . . .

[me]: No, no

41 Boyd, “Who Is the Subject?,” 187.

42 Ibid., 188.

43 Ibid., 187.

44 Ibid., 188.

45 Ibid., 189.

46 Freund, “Confessing Animals,” 23.

47 Ibid., 23.

48 Boyd and Ramirez, *Bodies of Evidence*.

[interviewer]: no?

[me]: no . . .

[interviewer]: no . . . so you weren't partying with the girls at this point

[me]: no . . . nothing . . . I told you, it's all very tedious [laughs]

[interviewer]: and you're living at home . . .

[me]: I'm living at home . . .

[interviewer]: yep . . .

[me]: there's no partying going on when you're living at home in a tiny, tiny house with cardboard walls, no way so . . .

[interviewer]: nothing's happening

[me]: Nothing at all . . . it was terrible

[interviewer]: so you didn't have any girlfriends at uni, you know, as in relationships?

[me]: no, no . . . I was ah . . .

[interviewer]: were you, ah, . . . um . . . so you hadn't come out to the public at that point

[me]: no

[interviewer]: no.

Though I was given space to speak, it was from a platform labeled “lesbian,” and, wittingly or not, I was encouraged, as Boyd has said, “to map [my] memories onto an intelligible gay/lesbian narrative structure.”⁴⁹ It felt to me that the plot points of my life were presumed known and my story was understandable only within the limits of that gay/lesbian paradigm—of self-recognition, of not fitting in, of fear of discovery, of first love, of “coming out,” of discrimination, of struggles for acceptance and equal treatment of our partnerships. The validity of Wendy Rickard’s 1998 comment is still current: “In interviewing the ‘less powerful’ about whom historical narratives have already been constructed, the interviewer is working within a generally accepted framework, even if he or she is working against it.”⁵⁰ Failing to make myself known within that framework effectively left me with nothing to say.

As a narrator, looking back, my unconscious efforts to work against the apparently known framework of gay lives conflicted with my wish to be useful and to be considered interesting. As the interview progressed, I had the feeling that my

49 Boyd, “Who Is the Subject?,” 188.

50 Rickard, “Oral History: ‘More Dangerous than Therapy?’,” 41.

stories about my life, which mostly had nothing to do with my lesbian identity, did not have traction. Areas of discussion that, in ordinary conversation, would likely have been followed up and explored were left unfinished and I perceived that my interviewer was struggling to “steer” me back towards areas of relevance. In the aftermath of the interview I was compelled to acknowledge that, during the interview, I had experienced something akin to that juvenile fear of not being picked for the netball team. A small part of my emotional engagement with the interview was guided by a need to demonstrate that I was worthy of selection for the project and, in all honesty, I feared that my stories would not be “chosen” by researchers in further work, that the interview will be perceived, within the pragmatic needs of the project, to have been a waste of time and effort. I took my cues accordingly.⁵¹

As Boyd, Freund, and many other oral history scholars accept, interviewers know the research goals and parameters of the project they are contributing to, and interviewees too are usually aware of these and will attempt to be “relevant” to those goals. In the excerpt below, my urge to be cooperative works hand-in-hand with the interviewer’s legitimate imperative to elicit a relevant testimony for the purposes of the project. In this part of the interview, as it was being wound up, I can hear how we both implicitly acknowledge the power of the “gay-life narrative” framework even as we recognize (and mock) it as a homogenizing normative trope.

[interviewer]: is there anything else that I haven't asked you that you think I might have . . . perhaps . . . you, you never really came out explicitly . . . I've got "when did come out as a lesbian" [referring to interview guidelines] but you didn't really come out explicitly at any particular time, did you . . .

[me]: no . . . it was a gradual recognition by people . . . I was just living my life and [intake of breath] there was no announcement, no party, no nuthin, I s'pose . . .

[interviewer]: "no party" [laughs]

[me]: yeah, it was just, it was never . . . you know how people have a moment where they came out to their parents and did that sort of thing . . .

[interviewer]: yeah, some people did that, yeah . . .

[me]: mmm . . . no I've never done that . . . never ever done that . . . so . . . I s'pose you could still . . . you could say I'm, you know . . . I never did, because . . . it's . . . they're all gone now, the family . . . I don't have much contact with them, so . . . they knew, they know . . . but only as a matter of seeing us together . . . you know, so nobody ever talked about it . . . so . . .

[interviewer]: didn't really . . . there's no heart to hearts?

⁵¹ Boyd refers to this as the “trap of subjectivity.” See Boyd, “Who Is the Subject?,” 189; Murphy, Pierce, and Ruiz, “What Makes Queer Oral History Different,” 7.

[me]: no . . . [laughing] . . . talking, what's that?

[interviewer]: I have to tell you something . . . [laughing]

[me]: no, never anything like that . . . never . . . as I said, the only person I ever, well the only two people I ever came out to . . . oh there was a third one actually, um . . . there was this one friend [. . .] who I went to library school with, she went to India at the same time as I met [former partner] . . . and I told her in a letter, because we wrote letters in those days . . . [laughs]

[interviewer]: oh yes . . . I remember those days . . .

[me]: . . . and, um, she did the same thing . . . she wrote back saying, "yeah, whatever . . . I already knew . . . I can't believe you didn't already tell me, I'm a bit annoyed about that" sort of thing, but um, yeah . . . They were the only three occasions where basically, you know, I wanted them to start acknowledging that I wasn't keeping it a secret anymore . . .

We both laugh at the pervasiveness, even cliché, of the “coming out” story and there is a clear recognition of its often distorting normative power with regard to the lives of homosexual people in western metropolitan discourses of gay life. Yet, in my desire to be “useful” to the project, I went against the greater weight of my story—a story of someone who did not go down the “coming out” path, as someone who does not have a “coming out story.” Despite this, I rummaged around in my memory to dredge up a story that might fit the bill so I/we could tick the “coming out story” box for the project.

Owning the critical space

Writing this paper has presented me with some significant moments of pause. It began life as a paper presented at a conference that, as I discovered when the program was published, also hosted the chief researchers of the project for which I had been a narrator. Indeed, as it turned out, one of them was in my audience listening as I gave the paper.⁵² Knowing this, I very nearly opted to avoid using any excerpts that included the interviewer's words or any commentary that could be construed as overtly critical of the interviewer or the project. Further, I came close to abandoning the paper, concerned at the possibility that my attempts to assert a narrator's viewpoint could be misconstrued as professionally discourteous criticism. In speaking to friends and colleagues about this dilemma, I came to recognize that my reluctance to offer critical observations of the interview encounter was embedded in my continuing consideration of the interview as a social/friendly encounter, governed by social and cultural rules which say that we don't

⁵² Jodie Boyd, “Changing Places: A Discontented Narrator and the Emotional Aftermath of a Problematic Interview,” conference presentation, Oral History Australia Conference, Sydney, Australia, 2017.

pick fault with our friends and colleagues or seek to hurt them in any way.⁵³ Work by Sugiman as well as Karen Olsen and Linda Shopes has, of course, since complicated my initial understanding of the oral history interview. They offer a different understanding of the space as one “where normal power relationships get blunted,” presenting the interview as something “not governed by the rules of ordinary interaction.”⁵⁴ This understanding, however, was not readily felt in my initial response to the interview from my position as narrator—as a narrator I was still governed by those rules of social interaction. From the narrator’s perspective, these rules can function in the oral history interview, potentially to inhibit criticism, or in the context of the project, to keep me as narrator/interviewee outside of the critical space reserved for the interviewers and researchers. In producing the interview excerpts in the face of these, to me, powerfully inhibiting social rules, I accomplished two things. One, I removed the interview encounter from its territory as a social/private event and thus relieved myself of those social inhibitors which would otherwise have me keep quiet. And, two, I placed the interview into its larger context as part of a publicly funded, institutionally backed project with its own goals and projected outputs. My capacity to relieve myself as narrator of the inhibitions of social rules was, of course, not unrelated to my acquisition of the language and position associated with becoming an oral history researcher.

Alexander Freund has argued that regardless of the emancipatory and democratic origins and aims of oral history methodology, we must understand “the oral history interview as a site of domination.”⁵⁵ While acknowledging the complications of such a potentially over-simplified linear understanding of power, particularly as articulated by Sherna Gluck, the point remains that an oral history interview, particularly one conducted for the purposes of a project run according to the rules and aims of institutionally backed academic research, can function as a site of domination in which the outputs are solely in the control and authorial voice of the interviewers and researchers.⁵⁶ As Katherine Fobear said recently, “rare are the publications that actively engage in discussing the participants’ interpretive authority on the research and on the finished work.”⁵⁷ My discomfort in raising a critical voice speaks to the fact of that unequal position of power and to the fact that I am, or at least felt myself to be, an awkward interloper into a critical space not intended for me.

53 See Lenore Layman, “Reticence in Oral History Interviews,” *The Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (Summer/Fall 2009): 216–17 for discussion of the “bounds of social discourse, governed primarily by cultural rules of politeness.” See also Yow, “Do I like Them Too Much?,” 79.

54 Karen Olsen and Linda Shopes quoted in Sugiman, “I Can Hear Lois Now,” 161.

55 Freund, “Confessing Animals,” 24.

56 Sherna Berger Gluck, “From California to Kufr Nameh and Back: Reflections on 40 Years of Feminist Oral History,” in *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*, ed. Anna Sheffel and Stacey Zembrzycki (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 25–41.

57 Katherine Fobear, “Do You Understand? Unsettling Interpretive Authority in Feminist Oral History,” *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 10 (Spring 2016): 64.

Michael Frisch was on to something when he told oral history researchers that “you cannot scrutinize a ‘subject’ without being scrutinized by it.”⁵⁸ However, there is an important distinction to be made in this apparent equality of scrutiny that Frisch mentions. Only one party in that relationship generally gets to decide the shape and content of the outputs that result from the analytical work done after the oral history interview is over. Once the interview is over, that recorded encounter becomes a document or text collected for the use of research and that is the end of your role as a narrator. As Daphne Patai remarked, “although our subjects agree to the interview and frequently seem to derive satisfaction from it, the fact remains that it is we who are using them for our books.”⁵⁹ The reduction of the interview to a catalogue record marks this transformation of myself as an active agent in the telling of my life stories into the static record or artifact that others will control. It is the recorded moment of the interview encounter that is analyzed and interpreted and used in research, not the inhabited person of the narrator. While this may be a statement of the obvious to the oral history researcher, it is not such an easy separation for the narrator.

My questions of “to what use will my voice be put?” and “how will my story be interpreted?” or “what will my voice be used to advocate for?” or “what will my words be made to say?” are asked not from a wish to have control over an oral historian’s work—not at all. In my own analytical work, I expect and claim that control.⁶⁰ But having experienced the aftermath of an interview as a narrator these questions express the reality of the narrator’s frequent lack of control over or knowledge of the afterlife of that interview. And this was at the heart of those feelings of frustration that flowed from my interview encounter. Seeing myself constructed, labeled under the subject heading of “lesbian,” hearing my resistance to being placed into the predictable narrative structure, and realizing the irresistible power, on both me and the interviewer, of the dominating narrative plots of “gay lives,” brought me to an acceptance of Holstein’s observation: that oral history projects have the potential to operate as a technology of power that can be “destructive of experience” rather than illuminating of it.⁶¹

Conclusion

My experience of being narrator prompted, as Yow suggested, a process of reflection, but one for which no receptive audience existed and for which there was no place in the project. Sherna Gluck’s admission that she “will never know how or even if [her] interviews impacted them [i.e. her narrators]” indicates that this is not

58 Michael Frisch quoted in Fobear, “Do You Understand?,” 68.

59 Patei quoted in Sloan, “On the Other Foot,” 299–300.

60 For instance, Jodie Boyd, “His Narrative, My History: Problematising Subjectivity and the Uses of Oral History Interviews,” *Oral History* 43, no. 2 (Autumn 2015): 62–69; Christina Twomey and Jodie Boyd, “Class, Social Equity and Higher Education in Postwar Australia,” *Australian Historical Studies* 47, no. 1 (2016): 8–24.

61 Holstein, “Queering the Interview,” 96.

exceptional.⁶² With the emergence of publications based on the interviews, it is evident that reflection on and analysis of the project has proceeded above and around me, but not with me.⁶³ My reflective urge to understand the rationale and aims of the process I had participated in prompted me toward an investigation of oral history and its methodologies, and, consequently, back to university. The academic tools I obtained there allowed me to reach an understanding of my own position as the dominated subject and a sharp and personal insight into the ideologies of sexuality that we all live with. It also, however, and, perhaps ironically, provided me with the platform from which I have claimed some critical space in which to speak about this experience. I have, however, only gained this voice by coming into the institutional space of the university. Without coming into the institution, it is unlikely that I would have this agency or be given legitimacy to speak critically about the project that I was a part of.

Soon Nam Kim has pointed to the long and ongoing struggle of scholars with “the issue of intellectual privilege and academic authority in oral history research on marginalized . . . groups” and the calls “for a critical and candid reflection on the politics of the knowledge production about marginalized peoples, the politics of location and representation, and ethical and moral responsibilities of researchers toward their research participants and readers.”⁶⁴ While I pose no answers and accept that it is no easy task, I suggest that this is a call that needs to be renewed. For many narrators, they remain outside, waiting for others to give them voice, or for others to decide that they don’t fit into a narrative. In this regard, if I may take off my narrator’s hat and put on my oral historian’s hat, it seems to me (and others) that it is this operation of power that is the real business of oral history. If it is to be a truly democratic and emancipatory methodology, then a genuine ethics of narrator participation, after the interview, has to be pursued.

Postscript

A few days before the conference where a short version of this paper was presented, I was putting together a PowerPoint presentation and decided that I would go through my old photos on the off chance that there might be an image that would add a bit of color and distraction to my text heavy slides. And there it was—an image of a much younger version of me (sometime in the late 1990s)—heavy booted, with baggy jeans, grungy jacket, and short dyed bright red hair—standing next to my old car proudly displaying on its rear end a rainbow flag bumper sticker. My conviction during the interview and in my subsequent engagement with it that

62 Gluck, “From California to Kufr Nameh and Back,” 40.

63 Reynolds and Robinson, “Australian Lesbian and Gay Life Stories”; Robert Reynolds and Shirleene Robinson, *Gay and Lesbian, Then and Now: Australian Stories from a Social Revolution* (Carlton, Victoria: Black Inc, 2016).

64 Soon Nam Kim, “Whose Voice Is It Anyway? Rethinking the Oral History Method in Accounting Research on Race, Ethnicity and Gender,” *Critical Perspectives on Accounting* 19, no. 8 (2008): 1348.



A rainbow flag proudly displayed on the author's car, circa 1996. (Image courtesy of author)

I had never overtly displayed my sexuality, never expressed a public sense of “pride” and, explicitly, had never adorned myself with the “tacky” rainbow flag, collapsed in the steaming heap of abject contradiction that this photo represented. The image prompted a surge of memories that, somehow, had fallen out of my recollection and, consequently, from my narration of myself in the past.⁶⁵ Wondering how I could possibly have forgotten, especially given the amount of time I had spent ruminating about the past, I recalled also the huge rainbow flag that graced the lounge-room wall in my old shared house; I remembered too (how could I have forgotten?) that I had been a member of the political activist group “Queer Action” in the mid-1990s.

After some initial consternation, this clear contradiction between my assertions in the interview and the self-evident facts of the past revealed in the photograph set me onto a further path of reflection. Why had I redrawn the contours of my life around a completely different understanding of my life and my self? Why had

⁶⁵ Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson, eds., *Oral History and Photography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

I sidelined from my memory aspects of my life that no longer fit my present view of my life? Why was I not aware of this contradiction throughout the whole process of reflection and learning and writing about oral history that proceeded from my interview? To answer this, I believe my fixation on the (still valid) questions of power had diverted me away from one of the fundamental tenets of oral history that Portelli articulated: that memory is always constructed in the present.⁶⁶ The past is always being recast in order to give foundation to the meanings and understandings of the self in the present. In my case, it appears I had recast my sense of who I am and what my life means in the light of recent (and past) discourses of normalization and integration that demand that difference and exception be played down.⁶⁷

To my shame, I recognize in the interview and my subsequent response to it, not only the power of recent normalization discourses, but also the mobilization of what I now understand as a deeply ingrained and internalized homophobia. My mockery of the woman with the rainbow flag tattoo and my rejection of lesbian identity as a valid frame of experience speak directly to the insidious and relentless impacts of heterocentric discourses of value and belonging, and their production of my, perhaps, unwitting fear of and need to not be the focus of such mockery. It seems obvious in retrospect, but when I listen to the interview now, I hear the residual, unconscious traces of my formative teenage self and her terror at the prospect of being discovered, labeled, and “known” as a lesbian which, in the white suburban school grounds of the 1980s, could not be bested as a path to humiliation and social exclusion.

And this may be at the root of my oddly contradictory and, perhaps, ungenerous engagement with the project for which I had volunteered to be interviewed, and an

66 Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” 102–3; Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 37–38. See also Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, new ed. (Clayton, VIC: Monash University Pub, 2013).

67 For discussion on the trade-off between acceptance and a kind of “normalization” of homosexualities which privileges heterosexual social values and structures, see, for instance, Tammie M. Kennedy, “Sustaining White Homonormativity: *The Kids Are All Right* as Public Pedagogy,” *Journal of Lesbian Studies* 18, no. 2 (2014): 118; Louise Victoria Richardson-Self, “Coming Out and Fitting In: Same-Sex Marriage and the Politics of Difference,” *M/C Journal* 15, no. 6 (December 2012); Brandon Andrew Robinson, “Is This What Equality Looks Like?: How Assimilation Marginalizes the Dutch LGBT Community,” *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 9, no. 4 (December 2012): 327–36; S. Roseneil et al., “Changing Landscapes of Heteronormativity: The Regulation and Normalization of Same-Sex Sexualities in Europe,” *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2013): 165–99; Michael Warner, “Normal and Normaller: Beyond Gay Marriage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 5, no. 2 (1999): 119–71. It is also worth noting that the interview took place during a period in Australia in which the issue of equal marriage was undergoing fierce and divisive debate. This debate culminated in a widely condemned “postal survey” which asked the general population to say “yes” or “no” to the question of whether gay and lesbian Australians should be allowed access to legal marriage. For insights on the contours and impacts of this debate see Penny Wong, “It’s time,” *The Monthly*, February 2016; Simon Copland, “The Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey and the Limitations of Vulnerability-Based Politics,” *Australian Feminist Studies* 33, no. 96 (2018): 261–74.

allusive explanation of how I “forgot” or sidelined the narratives of my life that the project was seeking to elicit and preserve. While I was busy during the interview resisting the subject position of “lesbian” and framing my narrative according to what I thought was most important in the here and now, the interview also took place in the shadow and consequences of the past. Rather than asserting a counter-narrative against a “gay-life” frame, perhaps I was merely silencing myself, deploying the deeply embedded habit of deflecting the conversation away from my sexuality. Even now, looking back to the interview, I can recall the hum of anxiety I felt at talking to a stranger (was she gay?) so openly about something that I had kept so closely guarded for so long. And it is this aspect of the project I participated in, the stated wish of its authors to “deepen our understanding of the current moment” that gives this and other oral history projects their justification and value and demonstrates, as Ramirez and Boyd argue, the value of “listening carefully for what narrators’ recollections reveal about their time and place in history.”⁶⁸ In my case at least, it tells me that despite apparent progress of recent years in the acceptance of gay and lesbian lives, the past and its dangers and damage are not forgotten and never far away.

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⁶⁸ Reynolds and Robinson, “Australian Lesbian and Gay Life Stories,” 371; Boyd and Ramirez, *Bodies of Evidence*.