

## Telling Our Truths: Oral History, Social Justice, and Queer Refugees

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I remember when I finally said to the judge in my refugee hearing, I said to him, *“I didn't know that as a minority, as a gay male, as a GLBT person, I grew up, the way I grew up, I didn't think I had any rights.”* I thought somehow, by the fact of being gay, I had given up ownership on my rights as a human person. So, I thought I had no rights. I didn't think. I didn't know.

And I told this at my refugee hearing, I said, *“I didn't think that there were people on this planet that would be so amazing as to actually offer me my real rights back.”* You know, saying *“you are a person and you deserve dignity, and you deserve respect”* I thought I didn't deserve anything because I had crossed a big barrier in my culture as a male homosexual. I had almost, in the eyes of society and in my eyes living there, have become almost like a female. You know, to be a male and to be gay then that is kind of a big no-no in my culture. At least that's kind of like the idea of the culture where I come from. You know, you have become less than a man.

So, for me, coming to Canada to make a refugee claim was like coming to a place where I could be really me. I was thinking, *“Is it real? These people really mean it what they are saying? I can be treated with respect?”* I wasn't sure, I didn't know what to expect, because for me everything was brand new. I never knew that this could be my reality.

But I remember telling the judge, *“Why is it”* - I said to the judge *“why is it that you guys don't put big billboards at airports or at railroad crossings for people to read that tells us that we deserve rights and to be heard?”* You know, for GLBT people like me to know? If I would have known this I would have saved myself so much pain and so much misery. You know, that actually as GLBT people we are people and we have rights. We deserve to be listened to. I thought we didn't. For so many years, I thought we didn't. I didn't know that there was another way.

**-Hector**, gay-identified cisgender man, Early 40s, queer refugee living in Canada for over 5 years, Latino, South America.

Stories matter for refugees. Refugees make sense of their past and present experiences, claim identities, interact with each other, and participate in cultural, political, and social conversations through the sharing of their stories.<sup>1</sup> When we record oral histories, we not only capture important narratives about the lived-experiences and lived-histories of refugees, we also see how the narratives themselves “represent the constantly evolving ways in which migrants make their lives through stories.”<sup>2</sup>

For those forced to migrate from their home countries and resettle elsewhere, oral history functions as a fundamental link between the past, present, and future, which helps refugees and their communities heal and socially repair. When refugees share their stories with each other, they build a sense of belonging and community by creating a bond among individuals through communal experiences, beliefs, and stories.<sup>3</sup> Sharing a personal story can be therapeutic as it helps individuals bear the hardships of transplantation and emigration to a foreign land or culture.<sup>4</sup>

Oral history can also serve as a mechanism for social justice on behalf of many refugee communities. Community-based oral history projects with refugee communities from Palestine<sup>5</sup>, Columbia<sup>6</sup> and Cambodia<sup>7</sup> have been used in public awareness campaigns addressing past and ongoing occupation, genocide, and conflict in their home countries. These oral history projects serve as a valuable resource for refugees to represent their communities, voice their dissent, and demand justice in the diaspora. It is important, though, to remember that these community-based refugee oral history projects may not be accessible for all and could even put certain individuals at risk. For those claiming asylum based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, participation in a community-based

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<sup>1</sup> Langellier, Kristin and Peterson, Eric. *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2011), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Thomson, Alistair. “Moving Stories: Oral History and Migration Studies.” *Oral History*, 27, no.1 (1999): 36.

<sup>3</sup> Rosinska, Zofia, “Migratory Experienced,” in *Memory and Migration: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Memory Studies*, ed. Julia Creet and Andrea Kitzman (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2011), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Abd al-Salam Aql, “Palestinian Refugees of Lebanon Speak.” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 25, no. 1 (1995): 54-60; Anette Day, “They Listened to my Voice’: The Refugee Communities History Project and Belonging: Voices of London’s Refugees.” *Oral History* 37, no. 1 (2009): 95-106.

<sup>6</sup> Pilar Riaño Alcalá, Martha Colorado, and Patricia Díaz, *Forced Migration of Columbians: Columbia, Ecuador, Canada* (Medellin, Colombia: Corporación Región, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Natalie North, “Narratives of Cambodian Refugees: Issues in the Collection of Refugee Stories.” *Oral History*, 23, no. 2 (1995): 32-39.

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refugee oral history project may be severely limited because of possible homophobia and transphobia within the host and larger refugee community.

The functions of oral history for identity, community, and justice are especially complex in the case of sexual and gender minority refugees in Canada. While empowering, the telling of their history also serves as the primary means through which claimants must argue their case to the Immigration Refugee Board 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 sexual and gender minorities is often hidden in the everyday violence of homophobia and transphobia. Even in countries where homosexuality is criminalized, queer refugees must still prove to the Immigration and Refugee Board their fear of persecution if they were to be sent back to their country of origin.

In testimony at their refugee hearing, queer refugees share their life story to a judge of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). For many, this moment is the first time that they have ever spoken aloud to a state representative about their life as a gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender person. Queer refugees must not only prove to the IRB judge their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, but must also show convincing proof of their fear of persecution. The emotional cost of sharing such intimate stories with an outsider, no less a representative of the state, is considerable. The process is subjective to the IRB judge's own conceptions of sexuality and proof of fear, and because of this, can sometimes be cruelly unfair.

Yet, for many of the refugees I have worked with, the telling of their life history to the IRB judge is also a moment of social justice. To be in a room and tell a state representative their story without being silenced or persecuted is a moment that many asylum seekers have never had before. As one queer refugee said to me after his hearing, "I feel like my truths have been finally validated. It is an incredible feeling." Even though their stories never leave the hearing room of the IRB, there is a sense of justice in being able to speak one's true story.

Queer refugees claim asylum on account of their persecution as a sexual and gender minority, yet this persecution is always connected to larger structures of violence -social inequality, militarism, nationalism- that impact the society from which they came. Violence against queer persons doesn't happen in a vacuum. Yet, it is almost always treated as a separate issue. Queer refugees are often left out of the conversation of social repair, justice, and healing because of underlying heteronormativity. Queer refugees are either silenced by the larger refugee community out of homophobia or transphobia, or they are seen as not being a part of the issue and/or refugee community by researchers or oral

historians. The challenge for any community-based oral history project with refugees is to acknowledge the interconnection of violence and identity and to work for a more inclusive space where all can participate equally.

It is important therefore to think of social justice and oral history as not one thing or one singular practice, but how the various ways the telling of our stories can bring feelings of validation, respect, and dignity to those who have been denied. We need to further explore the mechanisms and institutions that allow or dissuade individuals to tell their truths, and to encourage full participation of all members of the refugee community to share their stories.