

Resisting the Trauma Story: Ethical Concerns in the Oral History Archive

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Abstract

This short article presents an oral history project undertaken with refugees resettled in Southwest Virginia. From this project has emerged an understanding of refugees as curators of a personal archive of stories. A birth-to-present oral history approach can resist the reductive trauma narratives refugees are often expected to tell, yet oral historians and archivists must also be aware of the story told by the archive framework itself. The authors explore the ethical challenges of amplifying oral histories from refugees in a way that inspires action without centering the trauma story, and leave readers with questions for reflection.

Article

In the fall of 2016, in the midst of the largest global refugee crisis on record, our university town of Blacksburg, Virginia, USA welcomed its first refugee newcomers in over a decade. Shortly following their arrival, the current presidential administration's infamous "travel ban" was signed, severely restricting the ability of many Muslim refugees to enter the United States. Each subsequent year has seen a dramatic reduction in resettlement numbers in the US, with a 2019-2020 admission ceiling of only 18,000 (before the COVID-19 crisis shut the resettlement program down entirely). This federally sanctioned anti-refugee sentiment, combined with the needs of a refugee community close to home, has prompted many of us at Virginia Tech to reflect on our responsibility--both as community members and as researchers--to push back against hostile discourse regarding refugees in the United States. Where are opportunities for intervention? How might we use our expertise to offer a counternarrative, especially in an area of the US that is politically conservative?

With these questions in mind, our research team, with a collective background in forced migration and displacement studies, has used oral history methodology to gather stories from newcomers resettled in the Appalachian region of Virginia. Along with the gathering of stories, we have experimented with two methods of making this archive of stories visible. First, we have hosted community workshops for displaced persons and other community members with the goal of making a collection of stories and documents that is largely kept private. In these workshops we provided workbooks with questions such as "What makes a place home?" and "What are your memories of home?" that could be answered with text, pictures, or even verbally with a neighbor. We had photo printers available, as well as Polaroid cameras on-site, in order to print and develop photos of family, friends, and home to be inserted into the workbook. Though some

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participants shared elements of these workbooks with us, generally the stories compiled within them were kept only for personal use and record-keeping.

Second, we have launched *In Place*, a podcast designed to bring an oral history archive into a public, more accessible space. After gathering interviews, our team frames them with narration that provides more background into the issue being discussed. It is this project that has prompted us to consider more of the ethical issues of oral history archival work, specifically the part of that work that considers a public audience. In the Trump era, and particularly in a geographic region of the United States that is largely conservative, our research team has had many conversations about the ethics of not only gathering stories, but also the making public--and even amplification--of those stories in an effort to persuade listeners toward specific attitudes or actions regarding newcomer populations. We have felt the responsibility of framing these stories in an appropriate way, and look to *Displaced Voices* as a place where we might have ongoing conversations with other researchers and community members about best practices in oral history publication.

As a research team concerned with both what narratives *are* (a representation of identity) and what narratives can *do*, we focus on the responsibility researchers have in collecting these histories. We see a story, itself, as an archive: a repository of information pertaining to an individual's life, curated by memory and used as a representation of their life. This is what makes the collection of oral histories so compelling. Unlike other forms of interviewing that may only ask perspectives about a certain time or event, our oral history methodology is informed by a "birth-to-present" approach (Mayotte and Keifer, 2018) and is an opportunity to learn from the personal curator of this story-archive what information is most important to them in relation to their lives as a whole.

Considering autobiographical storytelling as an act of curation allows us as researchers to consider how storytellers make rhetorical choices in their oral histories depending on their audience and purpose. As O'Connor (2015) notes, the majority of refugee accounts that gain traction in Western countries are those which follow the expectations of the "trauma story"--the familiar trope of refugees as victims of violence, trauma, and oppression. Further, the trauma story is what forcibly displaced persons are *expected* to tell, and tell repeatedly, in order to gain access to the designation of "refugee" and subsequent asylum. Thus refugees are familiar with adapting their personal story to Western expectations (pp. 4-5). And, as Nikunen (2019) adds, a focus on victimization subsequently makes it "difficult...to speak from a refugee position without being drawn into the discourse of deservingness" (p. 154). Because refugee identity is built on

the telling of stories--in particular, telling the right story, with the appropriate amount of expected trauma, to the right government or agency official--these reductive stories then become the public perception of refugee identity (Maalki 1995, Powell 2015).

Since certain parts of an individual's life archive are presented to certain audiences for certain purposes, collecting a robust oral history can push back against the reduction of a forcibly displaced person to the most traumatic parts of their story. Previous research has found that, because the "refugee" label is associated with non-agential status, a recognition of pre-conflict identity can help avoid reducing refugee-background individuals solely to an identity of deficit or humanitarian need (Kyriakides et al 2019). And because such a reduction often means the refugee label comes with social stigma and negative stereotypes (Ludwig 2013), we also ask ourselves, "When is a refugee no longer a refugee?" This question informs how we contextualize stories, particularly in our public-facing podcast. After all, an institutional archive also tells a story: What is its purpose? What information is relevant? What key moments or events does it capture? Just as a refugee tells a certain story in order to access political identity and safety, often the purpose of collecting the oral histories of displaced persons is to sway a public or influence a policy decision. And just as the story a refugee tells to a government official must be one of sufficient trauma, there is a temptation in an oral history collection to foreground "the refugee identity," with the trauma both implied and made explicit, to achieve a certain response from an audience. Thus the role of the oral historian and archivist is not only to collect or document experiences, but to recognize how these experiences are *framed*--what story the archive itself is telling.

The role of such an archive, then, should be to support the rights of refugees and migrants without the presentation of such individuals as Refugees or Migrants, either to be pitied for their loss or praised for their resilience but always with a proper and fixed identity that makes them Other. One of the goals of our research team has been to figure out an accessible, ethical way to make an archive of oral histories visible--to bring the archive to spaces where they might influence public and political attitudes--without relying on the tropes of the trauma story that risks making the refugee identity one of permanent deficit. Yet as we continue in this project, many concerns remain about the ethics of such work, including a few major questions that remain a point of discussion among our team:

- 1) How can an archive of refugee oral histories resist an essentialized and static refugee identity?

- 2) If such an archive is a tool for political and social persuasion, how can refugee stories be framed to resist the trauma story while also demonstrating why refugee support is needed?
- 3) What are the risks of making a refugee oral history archive available to a potentially hostile public?

We hope that by extending these questions to other researchers and community members, we can collectively find an ethical path forward as the global displacement crisis remains ongoing.

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