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Words and Silences
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“Memory and Narration”

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NOT TO BE QUOTED WITHOUT PERMISSION

Intro from Dr. Norkunas:

In the summer of 2016 I was invited to give a talk at the closing plenary panel at the International Oral History Conference in Bangalore, India. This was a full year before the #MeToo movement emerged. Looking back I think my talk was a part of the electric atmosphere that presaged the movement and ultimately led to broad public outrage. At the time I thought that as I had an opportunity to speak to an international audience, I wanted to use it to say something important. Nothing felt more urgent to me than the oppression of women. As I have done with so much of my writing, I located the larger ideas of misogyny, harassment, and restricting women's movement in public space in my own experience. Now that #MeToo has become internationally important, talks like mine are more common. Publishing this now will help scholars appreciate that #MeToo emerged from many different sources, as though there were fires in hundreds of places that burst into one giant flame.

Martha Norkunas, summer 2019

I believe that women are the single most oppressed group on earth. Regardless of our race, class, ethnicity, country of origin, skin color, intelligence, achievements, and personality, our bodies have been restricted in physical, social, cultural and economic space. In many cultures of the world, women are taught from an early age to fear public space, especially after dark, and to restrict their movement. As feminist geographers and scholars working in areas of racialized and gendered space have pointed out, these restrictions in space are correlated with restrictions in the spheres of capitalism and political and social power.

I once worked with graduate student women at the University of Texas at Austin to imagine and design a feminist city. What I wanted most of all was to walk anywhere, at any time: I wanted my body to be able to move freely through the space of the city.

In the late 1990s I was on Main Street in Disney World in Florida, a place made to resemble an ideal version of Main Street in an ideal American town. My family was on a ride in a different kingdom in Disney World. I experienced a sense of exhilaration I had never known before. What was it? It was 11:30 at night, it was dark, I was in an unfamiliar pseudo-city, I was alone and I felt safe.

As with most women, when I was growing up I was constantly harassed in public space. I was touched, gazed at, my body commented upon. Later, as an adult, I was twice threatened with rape (once by a policeman and once by a neighbor), subjected to a man showing me he was engaging in self-sex next to my car, received threatening phone calls for a period of four months,

kissed on the mouth by a professor, and told by a famous radio personality what sex would be like with me—and this is only a partial list. When I travelled it was much the same.

When my hair turned white and I was post-menopausal, I thought I would gain a certain freedom to move in public space. I thought the space would be less gendered because of my age. In the summer of 2015, while walking in broad daylight with a male friend in Istanbul, a man walked by me, cupped his hand on my buttox and squeezed it. Then he moved past me, staring straight ahead. I know the look now as this was not the first time it happened to me since my hair turned white, though I remained surprised. He too was white haired. What was the social message he was trying to convey? Was he reminding me that regardless of my age and relationship to fertility, I was still not permitted to move freely in the public sphere? That I remained sexualized regardless of my age? Was he reminding me of his power in the patriarchy and my intended subordination? Was he reminding me that my restrictions extended well beyond the physical sphere to the political, economic and social spheres?

I think a good deal about boundaries and movement across various types of spaces, both the great movements of peoples across vast spaces such as the migration of millions of refugees to places of relative safety, and the gradations of movement in the microgeographies of racialized and gendered spaces in cities and towns and how people learn the rules of movement in each kind of space. Which bodies move where and why? Which bodies are constrained in particular ways? How do female bodies and bodies of color—marked bodies—learn the rules of movement through racialized and gendered landscapes? Who constrains their movement and why? What is the cultural logic that organizes geographies of power?

Narratives bring us into the intimate worlds of people. In my work I am particularly interested in people of color and especially women, and their experiences of movement in the landscapes of daily life. Oral historians have, by and large, listened to the stories of the poor, the working classes, the marginalized, and the oppressed. We bring to history a knowledge that can be gained only by listening to people who have struggled and then thinking about what the stories mean historically, culturally, socially, and theoretically. By putting the stories in historical contexts oral historians create theories about the ways in which power works and can then use this knowledge to advocate for human rights. The stories themselves often detail challenges to power, both on the individual and the social levels.

The world is in an interesting period of transformation, at the intersections of late and some say extreme capitalism, the early digital age, globalization/ transnationalism, climate change, and broadening inequality. Centers of power are shifting globally. The nation state is less politically relevant as multinational corporations and super citizens negotiate economic policy. Capital is turning its attention to the emerging markets of India and China as the American middle class gradually devolves. Globalization brings with it thrilling possibilities of connection as well as the dangers of a choking homogenization, and instability in the very bases of knowledge with ever shifting websites. In reaction we see attempts to redraw boundaries around older, nationalistic or ethnocentric centers of identity. The early digital age has created new spaces that were unimaginable decades ago, and poses questions about the relationship of the physical self to the digital self. Climate change will reorder life as it shifts major populations, and places of power

demand that critical natural environments be preserved in parts of the world that were not industrialized. In the United States there is a dramatic shift in city centers, as the working classes are pushed to the peripheries by a new urban elite that brings with it the infrastructures of wealth—technology centers, restaurants, specialty shops, cafes and bars.

Even in this new digital realm, old power structures reassert themselves. Women are harassed and threatened online when they express their opinions or participate in online public life. My daughter, Jasmine Erdener, noted that “these threats communicate that women should return to the home, stay off the internet, and remove themselves from public discourse in order to ensure their safety.”

In times of crisis, as societies constrict the rights of their people, they typically begin by constricting the rights of women. Which bodies will move across what spaces in this new age and why? How will power be manifested and restrained? How will women’s movement in the interconnected spheres of the physical and the digital be regulated and how will we respond? Who will listen to people, especially to women, as they narrate the meanings of their movements in the various spheres?

Feminist geographer Mona Domosh wrote that landscapes and places are, “shaped by gendered relationships, discourses, practices and other topologies of power, including race, class and sexuality.”¹ George Lipsitz wrote of racialized geographies, noting the “fatal links that connect race, place, and power” that expose people of color to a shared system of exclusion and inclusion that privileges whiteness and skews opportunities and life chances along racial lines...ensuring “the accumulation of wealth for some while denying it to others.”²

The oral histories my graduate students and I have co-created with African American men and women in the last twelve years detail the complexity of the racialized and gendered American landscape, and the profound implications that has not only for African Americans but for one of the most significant challenges that U.S. faces: the ability of a democracy to address radical structural racial and gender inequality.³

Oral historians documented the stories of grassroots civil rights activists prior to the 1950s when racial segregation was legal in the United States. Lipsitz reminds us that much of that activity was in the context of space: occupying the spaces denied to people of color. Then oral historians worked with leaders of the American Civil Rights Movement to tell their stories: what they did, the risks they took, the hard won achievements and the ongoing struggles. Contemporary schools

¹ Domosh, Mona, “Toward a Gendered Historical Geography of North America,” pp. 291-306, In Craig E. Colten and Geoffrey L. Buckley (eds.). *North American Odyssey: Historical Geographies for the Twenty-first Century*, 2014, p. 291.

² Lipsitz, George, The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race, *Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape*, *Landscape Journal* v. 26, no. 1, 2007, pp. 10-23.

³ See “Women’s Narratives of Racialized and Gendered Space in Austin, Texas,” *Etnološka Tribina*, *Journal of the Croatian Ethnological Society* v. 36, no. 39 (December 2016): 139-156 and “Narrating the Racialization of Space in Austin, Texas and Nashville, Tennessee,” *Colloquia Humanistica, Neighborhood as a Cultural and Social Problem* Institute of Slavic Studies of the Polish Academy of Sciences, no. 4 (2015): 11-25.

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are increasingly resegregated along racial lines in the United States. Activists in Black Lives Matter demonstrate to reclaim their movement in the public sphere, free from police and citizen violence. The fatal links that connect race, place, gender and power have assumed new forms, but are just as virulent. Again, oral historians record voices, both during the periods of intense activism and later, when the activists have been able to reflect on their lives and work. Some of the oral histories with activists focused on women's activism in the Civil Rights Movement, but this generally came only later.

The role of the oral historian has changed in the digital age: we listen intently but the emphasis is less on amplifying voices—the internet offers anyone an opportunity to do that—than on interpreting the details of daily life in an historical context, as clues to the structures of power and how they operate in the lives of women and minorities in the new age. For those of us who worked with people at political risk, and this group is increasingly widening, we have new concerns about exposing them to greater peril by recording their stories and posting them online. Our colleagues at the International Oral History Association meetings have so thoughtfully discussed and debated the ethical issues we face in thinking about the tensions between providing access—the enormous potential of web 3.0 to crosslink databases—and protecting vulnerable narrators from state and other forms of intrusion now or in a future we cannot yet imagine. I err on the side of less access and more protection. What would happen to the women we have interviewed, for example, if their most personal stories, shared in an atmosphere of trust between listener and narrator, were available to anyone across the globe in cross referenced platforms? We begin with an interest in making narratives available to historians to further knowledge and promote human rights, but what new boundaries and threats of violence, what forms of coercive power might instead result? Yet oral history offers insights that have revolutionized our understanding of history and the lives of marginalized groups.

What can listening to women add to our understanding of how the structure of power operates historically and in our contemporary world? As Sherna Gluck and others reminded us so long ago as they explored the feminist practice of oral history,⁴ women narrate differently from men, placing their stories in the context of their meaningful identity groups, rarely putting themselves at the center of the narrative. The form of the narrative we use is so gendered that when we construct biographical abstracts, we refer only to the individual's actions in the public sphere: he was a businessman who ran for Congress and was instrumental in passing legislation. How do we construct respectful biographies of the millions of women who were restricted from the public sphere? These millions of women can explain to us how they experience the gender dynamics of daily life, how they move through and navigate structures of power, if we will listen.

Our role in identifying important human rights issues and how they manifest in the lives of people remains significant. International oral historians are doing important oral history projects in human rights, often working with the most marginalized of populations. In this way we play a key role in understanding and shaping the modern historical moment. Social change comes in

⁴ See Gluck, Sherna Berger, Patai, Daphne (eds.), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*. New York: Routledge, 1991 and Srigley, Katrina, Zembrzycki, Stacey, Iacovetta, Franca (eds.), *Beyond Women's Words, Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century*, Routledge, 2018.

large and dramatic actions, but it also comes in small moments through the work we do. The narratives I have listened to brought me into the intimate worlds of how people experience movement, boundaries, racialized and gendered space, and, between the lines, the subtle ways these were correlated to restrictions in physical, economic and social spheres. It is through the stories of daily life that we know how the gender of space operates in the lives of women, and how the threats of violence and domination have become so commonplace for women around the world that they have become normalized, and are hardly worth mentioning. In these details, in these stories of the unremarkable, we can engage in small moments of social change, by revealing them and how the structures of power operate.

It is critical to include the voices of women in all oral history projects, regardless of the topic, regardless of whether the oral historian is male or female. Oral history can be a powerful tool to realign structures of power, and to imagine a geography where it is not a woman's responsibility to restrict her movement in physical, social, economic and political space, but society's responsibility to ensure her freedom to go anywhere.