

***Dry Your Eyes, Princess: oral testimony and photography: a case study***

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**Abstract:**

This article explores *Dry Your Eyes, Princess*, a project that used oral testimony and photography to narrate the experiences of trans veterans of the British Armed Forces, an umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. It discusses the historical background of the underpinning research and the impact of the project. It also reflects on some of the methodological considerations that arose as a result of the close collaboration between an artist, a historian and the trans community, particularly in relation to queer oral history.

Keywords: photography, trans, public history, Armed Forces, queer oral history, co-creation

6,015 words

In November 2015, as part of the Outburst Queer Arts Festival, the Red Barn Gallery in Belfast exhibited a series of large-scale photographic portraits known collectively as *Dry Your Eyes, Princess*. The collection, which would later move to the Museum of Liverpool in December of the same year, depicted the 'pinnacle moments' of twelve trans veterans of the British Armed Forces. The aim of the photographer, Stephen King, was to produce 'moments of poignancy'; portraits '...not based on the physicality of identity but...on the social and cognitive landscapes surrounding the interviewees' experiences.'<sup>1</sup> One of the images depicts Caroline Paige, a former helicopter pilot with the Royal Air Force. In the image, Paige stands in a field of crops under a rolling sky, holding her decorated Royal Air Force No.1 jacket at arms' length. It is a photograph that encapsulates Paige's career, specifically her self-imposed solitude and her later success in challenging the Royal Air Force's reluctance to acknowledge gender diversity.<sup>2</sup> Caroline announced her decision to transition in 1998 after eighteen years of service. She remembered thinking: 'Hang on a minute. This is my life. I get one shot at this life and what the hell am I doing living it to somebody else's expectations. I need to move on. So I did.'<sup>3</sup> Caroline served for a further fifteen years and was the first officer to transition and serve openly in the British Armed Forces.



Any earlier, it would have been a disaster... ©Stephen King

These images represent the culmination of the wider project to document the experiences of trans veterans. I began the process of interviewing in 2014. My aim was to understand how each service understood gender variance and how personnel experienced that understanding. I also sought to document how veterans of the Armed Forces conceptualised their service and its relationship to their gender identity. Given the tendency of officials to conflate gender with same-sex desire and, moreover, because documents that relate to post-war policies are largely inaccessible owing to issues of data protection, I focused on collecting oral testimony. It was a process that illuminated the inconsistent, and sometimes brutal, approach of officers and senior officials towards trans personnel. Desai has remarked that the power of oral testimony 'lies in the ways we...use it to challenge dominant ways of knowing'.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, the project made visible the 'subjugated knowledge' of the trans

community, specifically in relation to their experiences of service. Those who possessed the expert knowledge in this project were not medical practitioners or senior policy makers but the veterans themselves. In total, I interviewed thirty female veterans from across the Army, Air Force and Royal Navy, all of whom had served from the 1970s through to the early 2000s. My early contact with the interviewees was facilitated by Fiona Dawson, the director of the film *Transgender, at War and in Love*, and the creator of the media project TransMilitary, which documents the lives of trans service personnel in the US military.<sup>5</sup> Dawson facilitated initial contact with a small group of veterans and they in turn shared my request for respondents amongst their networks, which led to more interviewees. I also used social media to contact some veterans, including the veteran Abi Austen, who was the subject of the 2008 Channel 4 documentary 'Sex Change Soldier'. The absence of trans men and transmasculine interviewees from the project is in no way a reflection of their lesser numbers in the Armed Forces and wider society. Perhaps the title of the project, *Dry Your Eyes, Princess*, a pejorative phrase that encourages male service personnel to regain their masculine composure, inadvertently gendered the research, thereby limiting the pool of future interviewees. Locating male veterans with a trans history is an ongoing priority for the future of the project.

During the interview phase of the project, I was contacted by the photographer Stephen King, an artist whose work focuses on themes relating to ownership, belonging and identity. King expressed an interest in working collaboratively with me on a project to capture the experiences of my interviewees through portraiture. We worked together on a bid to the Arts Council which, in 2015, which was successful. Our plan at that stage was to produce the

portraits and exhibit them in Liverpool and Belfast as part of two queer arts festivals.

Although I was initially concerned that my interviewees might be reluctant to participate in the project, King's intervention was welcomed enthusiastically. It gave the veterans a public platform and an opportunity, in some cases, to hold their former employers to account. The relationship that I had carefully established with each interviewee meant that they had confidence in both King and I to narrate their stories with sensitivity. As Selma Thomas notes, strong trust is required because in the context of a public exhibition, 'even the most painful recollections potentially will be shared with thousands, even millions of strangers.'<sup>6</sup> The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the project as a case study. It will examine the impact of the project on its participants and will reflect on some of the methodological considerations that emerged as a result of the work.

### *Historical background*

Historically, gender and sexual diversity has been problematized by the Armed Forces.<sup>7</sup> Before 1999, the discovery (or declaration) of same-sex activity or a lesbian, gay or bisexual identity was punishable under military law, often by immediate discharge. In 1999, the European Court of Human Rights lifted the ban on lesbian, gay and bisexual people serving in the British Armed Forces following a challenge by four former personnel. Trans people did not figure in the ban or in its lifting because the Ministry of Defence (MoD) did not recognise their existence. Despite the optimism of one senior official remarking on the case of Major Joanne Rushton in 1998 that, the Army 'does not have a policy on transsexuals as such because we are an equal opportunities employer', possessing a trans identity was a dischargeable offence.<sup>8</sup> It was often conflated with same-sex desire and could result in

discharge under the charge of indecency, the catch all term for same-sex activity.

Constructive dismissal, known as premature voluntary release (PVR) was also pursued as a means of forcing the resignation of personnel whose trans identity was declared or discovered. Services no longer required (SNLR) was frequently used as was medical discharge, the latter usually with the rationale that an individual's mental health was unstable and therefore that they posed a danger to themselves and their colleagues.

In 2003, the Army terminated the service of a trans woman, Joanne Rushton. This was in spite of the Army's new guidelines, specifically instruction AGAI 76, on the issue of 'transition within the Army'. Rushton took the Army to an employment tribunal on the grounds of discrimination but lost her case because she was classified by British law as male. Despite the fact that trans personnel were becoming increasingly visible, a formal Defence Instruction Notice (DIN) for trans personnel across all three services was not formally introduced until 2009.<sup>9</sup> Following its publication the Tory MP Douglas Carswell commented that the DIN was 'nonsense at a time when soldiers in Afghanistan do not have enough helicopters' and that it was 'dancing to the human rights lawyers' tune, not the common sense needs of our forces.'<sup>10</sup> Before 2009, the responses of senior personnel were hugely inconsistent, meaning that there was a great deal of variation in how each woman experienced service life. Caroline Paige, for example, announced her decision to live as her authentic self in 1998 and was retained by the RAF. Others, like Joanne Rushton, were not as fortunate. Indeed, one of the only consistent narratives that emerged from the interviews was the notion that the hypermasculinity of service life would dispel feelings of gender dysphoria. According to one interviewee Cat, who joined the Army, service 'was a

way of trying to fix myself.’<sup>11</sup> While this was largely an internally generated narrative, it was reinforced by the culture of the Armed Forces, specifically that men displaying undesirable behaviours could be ‘straightened out’ by a regime of discipline and exercise.<sup>12</sup> In this sense, the service careers of my interviewees differed dramatically. Some were able to disclose their identities while still in service and felt supported and respected. 2009, when the Defence Instruction Notice was finally introduced, marked something of a turning point in the policies and guidance on the Ministry of Defence. For the first time, all three services could refer to guidance on how trans personnel should be treated and understood. The introduction of this guidance goes some way to explaining why many of the women who had retired more recently spoke positively about their experiences of coming out to their colleagues and working as themselves. Others veterans, many of whom had served in the 1980s and 1990s, only felt able to live openly once they had left their particular service, and much of their interview narratives were focused on coping strategies that allowed them to either suppress or access their authentic selves; everything from the concealment and periodic destruction of feminine clothing to the discovery and use of the internet as a means of locating the wider community. There were some interviewees, including Chrissie Beckett, who were dismissed from service on account of her gender identity. Chrissie’s case is particularly interesting because it confirms that understandings of gender identity and same-sex attraction were conflated by officials until at least 2009.

Chrissie joined the Army Air Corps in 1979 and excelled in her job. Her first posting was to a helicopter flight of the ACE Mobile Force, NATO’s multinational rapid reaction force, which involved several tours in Norway, Europe and the Middle East. She also did a United

Nation's tour in the Middle East. While she was serving in the UN, she applied for special duties and subsequently, returned back to her depot to await the selection tests. During this period Chrissie was buying feminine clothes and visiting clubs in Cardiff and London. Following a night out at one of these clubs, a colleague of Chrissie's overslept and was unable to carry out her orders. She was put on a charge and admitted under questioning that she had been out with Chrissie. Chrissie was then also put on a charge. She recalled that 'It was quite traumatic because as far as the Army were concerned, if you dressed in women's clothes and you went clubbing to these clubs, you were gay and that was it. Bang, they threw the book at you...they proceeded to throw it at me.'<sup>13</sup> Chrissie was brought before her Commanding Officer and refused to accept his punishment. Instead, she requested a courts-martial. The Regimental Sergeant Major repeatedly marched her to another room on base and screamed at her in an attempt to get her to accept the punishment. 'I'd had enough hints dropped at me over the preceding couple of days to know that the CO [commanding officer] was going to give a stint in "Colly" [Colchester Military Correction Centre] followed by a dishonourable discharge. I really had nothing to lose by demanding my right to a courts-martial.' Chrissie stood her ground and the charge against her was dropped. She was instead asked to pay her way out with a PVR, or premature voluntary release. Chrissie found the entire process exceptionally traumatic but acknowledged that she was fast approaching the point where she could no longer cope with the duality of her life on and off base. The image that she produced with King, which depicts her trapped in a red, white and blue cage, is one of the most impactful photographs in the exhibition, and encapsulates her feelings about the Army. 'It was a cage I willingly entered, albeit for the wrong reasons. But as the years went by, the cage got smaller and smaller, and

more dangerous for me. [...] escape from it took more courage than I was ever required to exhibit when inside it.<sup>14</sup>

### *Assessing impact*

The Museum of Liverpool and the Red Barn Gallery in Belfast were chosen to exhibit the portraits because of their connections to the queer arts festivals Outburst and Homotopia. Liverpool's trans community is large and well-supported. The city council flies the trans flag every year to mark Trans Day of Remembrance and unanimously passed a cross-party motion in 2018 called 'Standing With Our Trans Community.'<sup>15</sup> In Belfast, the trans community is still developing and support is less widespread.<sup>16</sup> Rob Kitchin and Karen Lysaght noted in 2003 that 'much of the heterosexism in Northern Ireland, although drawing on common heteronormative discourse, is supplemented by religious, postcolonial, and political discourses...that are often cross-cut by sectarianism.'<sup>17</sup> In spite of huge advances for the trans community in Belfast, King and I would discover that, in the press at least, transphobia was both accepted and widespread.

King's portraits and extracts of my interviewee's testimony were displayed for the first time on 12 November 2015 at the Red Barn Gallery in Belfast as part of the queer arts festival Outburst. Outburst began in 2006 and is described by its artistic director, Ruth McCarthy, as a 'greenhouse for artists to take creative risks and for events that challenge assumptions and ideas around sexuality, gender and related human rights and justice issues.'<sup>18</sup> During the eight-day run of the exhibition, the images were mounted around the central gallery

space and visitors could choose whether to view the portraits in isolation, or access a short information sheet that summarised the experiences of each participant and gave the viewer the central piece of testimony that related to their image. King and I were anxious to avoid the imposition of a pre-existing script on the audience. Each image had a title, which appeared on a label adjacent to it, but no other explanatory text was immediately visible. The absence of my overt mediation as a historian and King's as an artist allowed, we hoped, for the creation of a private dialogue between the subject and the audience. Caroline Paige believed that the relationship between the image and the information sheet meant that audiences could reach their own conclusions. She noted that she 'enjoyed viewing each portrait in turn to look for the story...before reading the short narrative for clues.'<sup>19</sup> Although we would have preferred to use listening posts to allow visitors to engage with the original audio, this was not possible for a temporary exhibition. Moreover, it would not have been entirely necessary for all of the portraits. For example, one of the interviewees, Gemma, joined the Navy when she was 23 and spoke movingly about her attempts to avoid her feelings about her gender identity. Following the breakdown of a relationship, which she described as 'my last chance at conformity', she tried to commit suicide while serving in the Gulf. King's portrait of Gemma depicts what she calls her 'epiphany':

I decided that things would be better...if I wasn't going to conform then I wasn't going to conform. I had my epiphany on the 28th of December, 2008. I was sat on my sofa at home in Weymouth, and I realised that if I didn't do something about this, the situation, that I would not be sat there in a year's time, because I would die before then. Having made that decision, it was great. I slept like I hadn't slept before.<sup>20</sup>

The original oral vignette is an incredibly powerful piece of recollection that was narrated with composure, resolution and without overt emotion. In many ways, while the audio recording would have given Gemma's portrait an additional dimension, the combination of

text and image was a powerful coupling that would not have explicitly benefited from the inclusion of the original interview.



Epiphany on the 28<sup>th</sup> ©Stephen King

When the images were exhibited at the Museum of Liverpool (which launched on the 14 December 2015) as part of the Homotopia queer arts festival, the same format was repeated. In a fitting nod to its previous exhibition, the museum allowed King to use some of the space that had belonged to their exhibition of the trans pioneer, April Ashley. Both the Museum of Liverpool and the Red Barn Gallery broke new ground in terms of their willingness to exhibit the portraits. LGBTQ narratives are beginning to emerge in the museum sector but it is hard to underestimate the foresight of the Museum of Liverpool in particular in embracing such an innovative and unapologetic temporary exhibition. The mainstream museum sector has yet to substantively address sexual and gender diversity and tends to refrain from challenging existing 'taxonomies of normalcy'.<sup>21</sup> The Museum of

Liverpool is a notable exception; its curatorial team actively programme exhibitions that question these classifications. Its most recent exhibition, *Tales from the City*, documents the LGBTQ community of Merseyside in the 50 years since the Sexual Offences Act of 1967.<sup>22</sup>



The front panel of images at the Museum of Liverpool. Courtesy of the author.

The visitor figures for both exhibition venues were encouraging; the Red Barn Gallery recorded 1018 visitors over the course of the exhibition's eight-day run and in Liverpool, the exhibition ran for forty-five days and was viewed by an estimated 58,197 people.<sup>23</sup>

Considering that both exhibitions ran for short periods of time, these figures were considered by Outburst and the Museum of Liverpool to be substantial. Homotopia's website and media channel had 284,000 visits between January and December 2015. In

addition, the project generated £246,520.00 worth of marketing, advertising and positive news exposure throughout 2015 including articles in *DIVA*, *Attitude*, *The Independent*, *Out There Magazine*, BBC Radio 4 Woman's Hour, *The Guardian*, UK in Latvia, USA Today, *The Stage*, *Double Negative*, *Aesthetica*, *VICE*, and *i-d Magazine*.<sup>24</sup>

The feedback that we gathered suggested that the portraits were generating discussion and facilitating awareness. In Belfast, the work was called 'Stunning', 'powerful', 'gorgeous' and 'challenging.' Some of the feedback commented on the uniqueness of the portraits; one visitor remarked that the work was 'Historically fascinating, not something you'd normally see here'.<sup>25</sup> Ruth McCarthy, the artistic director of Outburst, remarked on the significance of the exhibition to the wider community. Her feedback is worth quoting in full:

The trans community in Northern Ireland is still emerging and finding the confidence to share stories and experiences in the wider community. The exhibition was a wonderful platform and catalyst for this, with many local trans activists and leaders attending the opening and writing about the exhibition on social media. Although some of the mainstream media attention around the show was incredibly backward in its tone, ultimately it reflected and exposed an accepted transphobia here that needs to be addressed. Both Outburst and the trans community used this as a positive opportunity to address media stereotyping and shaming of trans people here. It was also incredibly powerful in terms of looking at the history of the Northern Ireland conflict through a different and less simplistic lens. Many of those in Stephen's photographs served in Belfast, which still bears the political and emotional scars of the war and is in a huge period of community healing. There was a moment on opening night when Abi, one of the trans women in the photos and an ex-British Army paratrooper once based in Belfast, ended up deep in conversation with our former Lord Mayor, Máirtín Ó Muilleoir, a Sinn Fein Assembly Member(MP) and a local lesbian City Councillor who is an ex IRA prisoner. For me, that was an experience that would not have happened ten years ago, maybe even five years ago, but it happened because of the exhibition and the nature of the talking space it created around human stories and the realities of the intersectionality of experience.<sup>26</sup>

In Liverpool, the visitor's book was defaced by children scribbling on its pages which rendered any comments largely illegible. Although the Museum of Liverpool employs assistants to observe the visiting public, it is likely that they did not expect the book to be defaced and so did not systematically monitor the area in which it was situated. Thankfully, feedback was gathered from other sources. One reviewer on the website Trip Advisor, ClaraNanny, left feedback which attests to the impact of the exhibition. 'An absolutely beautiful temporary photography exhibition with a portraits of trans ex-military personnel and their widely varied stories was brilliant to see. It's great to have an exhibition about trans issues that isn't one note and I really, really appreciated it, it was completely unexpected but incredibly well put together. Thank you!'<sup>27</sup> Another member of the public emailed me to say that she found the exhibition 'very beautiful, and really moving. I wanted to write a long comment in the visitors' book, but I kept welling up as I tried to write – so I have left a very brief comment! I believe that projects like this make a real difference and help to change the world for the better – so it is great to see it happening.'<sup>28</sup> Trans veterans also wrote in support of the project and attested to its power in establishing a collective identity. One veteran wrote to say that she was 'pleased and encouraged [by the exhibition]. Having served in the Royal Engineers to the rank of lieutenant colonel, and since transitioned, I can empathise with your interviewees.'<sup>29</sup>

The curatorial team at the Museum of Liverpool was clear about the impact of the exhibition in terms of creating a relationship between the trans community and the

museum. The director of the museum, Janet Dugdale, believed that the portraits represented:

[...] another step on the journey to trust and respect developing with and for the Museum of Liverpool and trans community and the wider LGBT+ community...the real impact is the visibility and inclusive practice for often fragile histories to be shared with the public and for our confidence to develop as a museum... by working together in a collaborative way we can all enable change, confidence, inclusion and visibility. And that the first step really matters as long as the journey continues.<sup>30</sup>

As a project team, we braced ourselves for negative feedback. The mainstream media in Belfast produced a number of transphobic articles on the exhibition before it had even formally launched owing to the accidental release of some of the images to a journalist. Moreover, when the *Guardian* ran a feature on the stories of the veterans, one reader left the response 'voyeurism' and another remarked 'I wish these stories wouldn't always end up being about clothes.'<sup>31</sup> Such reductionism is not unexpected. The trans community is frequently reduced to its physical form by a mainstream media that is obsessed by surgical procedures and gender binaries. King's images, and our collective process, gave our interviewees the right to reply on their own terms. If some of the images are uncomfortable, it is because they reflect the painful memories of those who struggled against an institution that did not recognise their identities.

### *Reflections on the process*

Since the 1990s, and the move from 'realism to narrativity' in the practice of oral history, co-creation has dominated the approaches of oral historians.<sup>32</sup> Michael Frisch's concept of a 'shared authority', specifically that the interviewee and interviewer co-create the interview,

has had a profound impact on the ways in which oral historians have practiced their craft. The project that Frisch undertook in 1993 with the photographer Milton Rogovin, *Portraits in Steel*, embodies Frisch's original concept in that it combines his interviews with steel workers with the documentary portraiture taken by Rogovin.<sup>33</sup> What is interesting about the collaboration is that the images narrate a process of profound change for the participants. The first set of images document the work and home life of iron and steel workers while the later images explore the impact of both time and deindustrialisation on those same participants.

The methodology that Frisch and Rogovin adopted positioned the subject of each photograph as a passive observer in the process of production. Indeed, much of the practice that is undertaken by artists involves them engaging in a process that represents someone or something. It is a process that is done to a subject; the object of the artist's lens or brush, for example, is passive. They rarely participate in the outcome. King was clear from the outset that he wanted to co-create each image, thereby allowing the participants to take control of the production. King remarked that 'working as a photographer is usually a very solitary process but this [the project] encouraged me to step back and allow input from other sources.'<sup>34</sup> King's process put the subject first, and turned what is usually a self-contained endeavour into a collective one. In doing so, King also exposed and reversed the inherent power differential that exists between the expert(s), in this case the artist and the historian, and their subject.

King began by listening to my interviews and reading the transcripts. With my input, he then identified 'pinnacle moments' or textual hooks in the testimony. For example, Dawn Pomfret, who served in the Army, discussed concealing her feminine clothing and in particular, how she stuffed a pair of tights in the toes of her trainers. During an inspection the tights were discovered. Thinking quickly she explained that the tights were used to protect her gun from getting dirty. She was commended for her idea, and everyone else in her section soon started to use tights for the same purpose.<sup>35</sup> Having identified this as a 'pinnacle moment', King visited Dawn and worked with her to distil her memories into a single image. In particular, he focused on location, composition and how she would like to be represented. The photograph that King and Pomfret chose for the final exhibition depicts her interacting with the memory of concealing her feminine clothing in a space – Manchester's LGBT centre – that reflects her pride in her own identity and her role in the contemporary LGBTQ community.



I kept them in a pair of trainers ©Stephen King

The inherent democracy of this collaboration had a radical effect on King's practice and the interviewees. For some it demystified the processes of an artist and shifted the balance of control. Some interviewees were able to take that control and lead King in the composition of their images. Caroline Paige noted that King 'had an idea in mind from [the interview] but still took the time to listen to me, making sure his idea fitted in with my story.'<sup>36</sup> Paige enjoyed the process but for others, it was much more contested and King had to work harder to reach an interpretive consensus. Moreover, while many felt validated by the work with King, one interviewee in particular, Chrissie, experienced different emotions. While

she believed that King's interpretation of her experiences was 'imaginative...and insightful', retrospectively, the process made her acutely aware of her own unresolved trauma in relation to her experience of being constructively dismissed.<sup>37</sup> She decided not to attend the opening of either exhibition and subsequently decided to distance herself from her identity as a veteran. Similarly, Abi Austen commented that 'putting yourself into the public eye over a potentially divisive issue is hard.' However, she believed that King's 'sensitive and brilliantly incisive work in distilling my journey into one image has been both re-assuring and seamless. I am proud to have been a small part of such a ground-breaking exhibition.'<sup>38</sup> The experiences of veterans like Abi and Chrissie suggest that we must acknowledge not only the dynamism of queer oral histories and the potential for collaboration with artists and museums for example, but also the methodological implications of working with vulnerable communities, not least if part of that collaborative methodology involves participants re-visiting painful memories.<sup>39</sup>

From a methodological perspective, the work offered up questions about how best to represent trans lives visually and aurally. Both the practice of gathering oral testimony and the collective generation of trans photographic portraits places, to quote Carter, Getsy and Salah, 'the trans body in a double bind: it must declare its visibility, but in doing so, it initiates the diagnostic gaze that demands that the temporal process of transition be legible on the body.'<sup>40</sup> The authors go on to explore how in the context of Western society, portraits were frequently used in the mid-twentieth as a diagnostic tool and as a means of documenting bodies that were classified as somehow different.<sup>41</sup> Although all of King's images include the physical presence of each participant, they draw the gaze of the

audience to a significant object, whether it be a toy sword, a brick or the colour of a piece of clothing.



I'm a Roman Centurion ©Stephen King

To return to King's underlying principle for the collection, specifically the production of portraits '...not based on the physicality of identity but...on the social and cognitive landscapes surrounding the interviewees' experiences', the bodies of the participants are almost bit players.<sup>42</sup> If they appear more centrally in some portraits, it is because of the collective editorial process rather than a process of objectification. Even so, this editorial process may be, as Carter, Getsy and Salah observe, much more unconscious. 'How do culturally dominant fantasies and representations of trans people inform or impinge upon trans self-representation even as they facilitate entry?'<sup>43</sup> This refers not only to trans cultural production in the form of art and media for example but also to the co-production that takes place between an interviewer and their participants. For example, many of my interviewees anchored their narratives in their physical form and specifically, in the process of gender confirmation. While such a framework may provide trans respondents with a cultural model that is familiar, it also demonstrates the dominance of medicine in the classification and legitimisation of the trans community. Oral historians need to be attuned to both the functionality and the limitations of these existing frameworks and wherever possible, facilitate interviewees to explore alternative ways of structuring their testimonies.<sup>44</sup>

Just as the project altered King's practice and impacted on my interviewees, it also positively disrupted my practice. I have been a practitioner of oral history for over a decade, and largely convinced that the techniques that I have honed over that period are effective. This project has forced me to reflect on those methods and assess in particular whether they are queer enough. Queer oral history and its attendant methodologies is a huge area of growth

and interest in the field. However, practitioners of queer oral history have yet to witness an explosion of advisory texts that ruminate on why and how queer oral history is different from its genesis. So for example, at the start of every interview I have ever done I have asked my participants to give their name, date of birth and state where they were born. I then ask them to tell me about their earliest memory and their recollections of childhood. For me this has always been an icebreaker, but for individuals with a trans history, these questions are reminiscent of those that are used by medical experts when an individual first presents as trans. This dissonance, between an ingrained methodology and the commitment to destabilising the medicalization of trans lives, has had a radical effect on my approach to interviewing, specifically the adoption of a more intuitive, less structured process that is alert not only to the possibilities of queer oral history, but also its limitations in terms of nuance that is concealed by the queer umbrella.



Two of the portraits in situ at the Museum of Liverpool. © Homotopia Festival

I also faced ongoing reservations about my ability to establish an effective relationship with my interviewees. Consider the challenge laid down by Ramirez and Alamilla Boyd in *Bodies of Evidence*, that ‘the presence of sexual or gendered bodies affects the oral history collaboration’.<sup>45</sup> In other words, to do authentic oral history with queer participants, researchers themselves ought to be queer. Although I am a queer woman, I am not trans. It is therefore likely that my cisgendered body, a body that matches my gender identity, influenced the outcome of the interview process, perhaps more than any other facet of my identity. What about the identity of King as a white, cisgendered male artist? The willingness of my interviewees to work with King in the production of intensely private images was in part due to the rapport and respect that I had carefully built up with each individual and the careful emphasis that I had placed on the importance and urgency of their experiences. Assessing just how limiting – or indeed, liberating – our identities were in the co-production of the interviews and the images is challenging. I was certainly not the expert, and I was careful to acknowledge that power differential at the start of each interview by outing myself as a queer cis gendered academic who was deeply curious about the lives of my interviewees. This positioning, of the interviewee as the expert, went some way to ensuring that they held the power. I was also careful not to frame my interviewees in terms of a ‘singular identity category’.<sup>46</sup> I interviewed women who defined themselves as lesbians; women with children and grandchildren, women with and without religious beliefs, women with strong ties to their class and women whose identities as both veterans and as trans women were far down the list of the constituent parts that defined them. I found points of sameness with all of my interviewees, some of whom have become close acquaintances. Therefore, while it is helpful to consider insider/outsider status and the impact of the ‘sexual or gendered bodies’ on the process of co-production, reducing participants to a

singular identity and focusing on differences rather than commonalities is both reductionist and prohibitive, not least to the process of creating rapport.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the generation and subsequent use of photographs has shifted my practice in other ways. I have tended to use photographs and photography in conventional – if not limited – ways. So for example, as a young researcher I frequently took a camera to interviews in order to capture the portraits and home environments of my interviewees. I have also used photographs as prompts and as a way of supplementing and authenticating memories.<sup>48</sup> As Freund and Thomson note, however, photographs represent ‘more than social documents and mnemonic devices.’<sup>49</sup> As a consequence of the project, I became aware of both the historical utility and the limitations of images that are produced and interpreted alongside oral testimonies. Given that the original project was envisaged as an oral history of trans veterans, King’s intervention, specifically his distillation of ‘pinnacle moments’, altered me to the possibility that I might be unduly influenced by his interpretive emphasis when it came to my own analysis of the interviews and the portraits. However, reading King’s images in conjunction with the oral interviews gave me a crucial insight into the processes of my participants and the editorial decisions that they made about how they wished to present themselves, and their experiences, to the world.

### *Conclusion*

*Dry Your Eyes, Princess* explored the possibilities of oral testimony and art as a means of ‘opening up new ways of seeing and understanding gender diversity, acting upon prejudice

and misunderstanding, and challenging oppressive and restricting gender norms.’<sup>50</sup> It was a project that highlighted just how beneficial a co-creative methodology can be when it works across different modalities. Just as we consider oral history to be about the narration of memory through the lenses of both the past and the present, we can surely develop more nuanced interpretations by encouraging interviewees to unravel the active, perpetual interplay of memory and identity formation in mediums other than the traditional oral history interview. Such an approach also deepens interviewee engagement and expands the opportunities for them to contribute to the historical record. In the future, projects like *Dry Your Eyes, Princess*, will rely on the willingness of marginalised voices to collaborate with a range of professionals and for public forums to prioritise the presentation of diversity. While there is huge potential in these collaborations, we must endeavour to place methodological considerations at the forefront of our thinking if we are to advance our craft.

### **Acknowledgments**

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## Notes

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- <sup>1</sup> Stephen King [website]. Accessed online at [www.stephenkingphotography.co.uk](http://www.stephenkingphotography.co.uk), 8 January 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> C. Paige, *True Colours* (London: Biteback, 2017).
- <sup>3</sup> Caroline interviewed by author, 23 June 2015.
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