



Abrams, L. (2019) Heroes of their own life stories: narrating the female self in the feminist age. *Cultural and Social History*, 16(2), pp. 205-224. (doi: [10.1080/14780038.2018.1551273](https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2018.1551273))

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/117892/>

Deposited on: 05 November 2018

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Heroes of their own life stories: narrating the female self in the feminist age¹

Abstract

This article argues for a triple legacy of the expressive culture of the 1960s and 70s. Late twentieth century feminism and discourses of gender equality liberated women's narrative voices but this was further facilitated by the advent of modern confessional culture. Together these produced self-realising and self-validating narratives in terms of lives lived and choices made as well as the frameworks for telling. In the last 20 years there has been a sea-change in the willingness of people to tell their stories and a related shift in women's facility to produce life narratives which are seemingly authentic 'reflexive projects of the self'. This article, drawing on oral history interviews with the cohort of women born in the 1940s and who achieved maturity in the 1960s and 70s in the United Kingdom, Australia and North America, utilises a new concept for a distinct genre of women's oral history narrative— the feminography – in which we hear women owning their voices and the stories those voices tell.

Introduction

It is widely accepted that oral history narratives are gendered, both in respect of the stories women and men tell and the ways in which they narrate those stories.² Feminist oral history

¹ The genesis of this article was my professorial inaugural lecture at the University of Glasgow in 2015. Subsequently the ideas were developed in the Kathleen Fitzpatrick Memorial Lecture at the University of Melbourne in 2017. I would like to acknowledge the Women in Humanities Fellowship at TORCH, University of Oxford, for the space and intellectual stimulation to enable the article's completion and Penny Summerfield, Katrina Srigley, participants at the 2017 Berkshire Conference of Women Historians and the anonymous reviewers of *Cultural and Social History* for their valuable insights and my interviewees who shared their life stories with me so generously.

² See K.M.Langellier and E.E.Peterson, 'Spinstorying: an analysis of women storytelling' in E.C.Fine and J.H.Speer (eds), *Performance, Culture, Identity* (London, 1992), pp.157-8; M.Gergen, 'Life stories: pieces of a dream' in G.C.Rosenwald and R.L.Ochberg (eds), *Storied Lives: The Cultural Politics of Self Understanding* (New Haven, Conn., 1992), pp.127-44.

practice and theory has advanced significantly since the 1970s when collecting personal testimony in the form of oral history was one of the key methodologies of recovery women's history. The early feminist forays into oral history were founded on feminist research principles which rejected social science adherence to objectivity and neutrality and in turn were committed to research 'by, for and about women'.³ Facilitating women's voices and women's subjectivities which had, hitherto, been missing from the historical record, was the prime objective. Feminist oral historians developed methodological and analytical tools which were consistent with feminist research aims and which were designed to unmute the 'muted channel of women's subjectivity'.⁴

By advocating reflexive research methods, insisting on creating an interview environment in which women could 'speak for themselves', sharing authority, 'learning to listen' and acknowledging the interview as an intersubjective encounter, feminist oral history has played a leading role in shaping the wider field of oral history practice. Oral history became a 'feminist encounter' with the potential to liberate women's voices and experiences from patriarchal structures, histories and language.⁵ And indeed the application of feminist methodology resulted in a rich vein of women's oral history research with vast geographical and thematic range.⁶

More recently there has been a retreat, with some questioning the ability of the oral history interview to provide an echo chamber for the authentic female voice.⁷ On the one hand feminist oral historians have pondered their own complicity in the rise of individualism and their potential undermining of the original ideals of the feminist movement based on collectivity and sisterhood, by facilitating narratives that are focused on the self as opposed to being embedded in family, community or the social.⁸ On the other, oral historians more

³ This approach is exemplified by S.B.Gluck and D.Patai (eds), *Women's Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (London, 1991). S.B.Gluck, 'From California to Kufr Nameh and back: reflections on 40 years of feminist history', in A.Sheftel and S.Zembrzycki (eds), *Oral History Off the Record* (New York, 2013), p. .26.

⁴ K.Anderson and D.C.Jack, 'Learning to listen: interview techniques and analysis' in Gluck and Patai (eds), *Women's Words*, p.11.

⁵ S.B.Gluck, 'What's so special about women?' in S.H.Armitage with P.Hart and K.Weathermon (eds), *Women's Oral History* (London, 2002), p.5.

⁶ Some of this range is represented in K.Srigley, S.Zembrzycki and F.Iacovetta (eds), *Beyond Women's Words: Feminisms and the Practices of Oral History in the Twenty-First Century* (London, 2018).

⁷ D.Patai, 'When is enough enough?', in Srigley et al (eds), *Beyond Women's Words*, pp.48-55.

⁸ See M.Jolly , P. Russell & R. Cohen, 'Sisterhood and After: Individualism, Ethics and an Oral History of the Women's Liberation Movement', *Social Movement Studies* (2015), 11:2, pp.211-226.

generally are in the process of questioning some of their deeply held practices and trying to understand where oral history now sits in western societies that have embraced self telling, or confession as part of the memory industry.⁹ This anxiety about the feminist practice of oral history is overdone. This article comes to the defence of the authentic feminist voice of the now aging sixties' feminist and proto-feminist generation. It argues that a unique confluence of research practices and historical conditions has produced a distinct genre of women's oral history narrative – what I term the feminography – in which we hear women owning their voices and the stories those voices tell.¹⁰ For this cohort of women in the global north, the generation born in the 1940s and who grew to maturity during the 'expressive revolution' of the 1960s and 70s, the oral history interview undertaken in their later years, is an appropriate, familiar and in some senses liberating platform for the articulation of the self and beyond that, a self embedded in a bigger story about the progress of women in the postwar era.¹¹ In short, we are reaping the benefits of several decades of feminist oral history practice, discursive acceptance of the broad tenets of gender equality and the modern permissiveness about talking about oneself in public, with a cohort of women who are able and willing to turn themselves into narrative subjects. In what follows, close analysis of interviews with British, North American and Australian women demonstrates a common facility to place themselves at the centre of their narratives as heroes of their own life stories.

Cultures of telling

There are three developments in the postwar era which underpin women's facility in narrating histories in which they feature as heroes of their own lives: the expressive revolution of the 1960s and 70s and its legacy; the normalisation of discourses on gender equality; and the advent of modern confessional culture. The oral history interview is a beneficiary of and contributes to, all three.

The expressive revolution is the most appropriate term used to denote the rise of individualism, secularisation, and a range of counter-cultural values and lifestyles which

⁹ A.Freund, 'Under storytelling's spell? Oral history in a neoliberal age', *Oral History Review*, 42:1 (2015), pp.96-132.

¹⁰ As this article was being written women were loudly making their voices heard in the #MeToo campaign. On similar upsurges of female anger and speaking out in the US which suggests a sea change in attitudes towards women's reporting of sexual assault see Rebecca Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions* (2017), pp.69-95.

¹¹ I use the term 'cohort' here to denote a demographic group, in this case women born in the 1940s.

began to be incorporated into the mainstream.¹² It was accompanied by what Chloë Taylor calls the ‘confessional habitus’, constituted by the rise and democratisation of the psychological sciences since the 1960s. These incorporated not only psychology and psychotherapy but a range of counselling and therapeutic practices designed to locate, heal and liberate the self from oppressive structures and bonds of authority, including patriarchy, through talking, self-examination and self-understanding. This quest for the authentic self as Charles Taylor has otherwise described it, and the emergence of an ‘ethic of authenticity’ in the postwar decades, had profound consequences for the Christian churches as the pursuit of personal happiness and self-fulfilment clashed with the strictures of religious discipline and the emphasis on self-control, particularly with regard to sex and relationships.¹³ As has been explored elsewhere, this was especially pertinent for women in their early adult years during the long 1960s, for whom autonomy in relationship and moral matters became a totem of their search for self-realisation and a symbol of the distance they had travelled from their parents’ generation.¹⁴ For some women involved in the Women’s Liberation Movement, the practice of consciousness raising – a sharing of personal experiences within a group in order to better understand and then challenge their oppression - was a critical element of this new emphasis on self-expression and self-understanding. But these practices in the quest for the authentic self – a self that aspired to not being constrained by traditional authority, but rather sought autonomy and self-determination especially in matters of personal morality and decisions regarding relationships, the body and belief and in more banal and everyday matters such as dress - permeated everyday life and were not limited to those who explicitly sought out opportunities for self-understanding. Self narration is one element of the expressive revolution and the quest for authenticity which is still an active work in progress in many more domains focused around expressive individualism from new age spirituality to mindfulness and other practices focused on self-care and self-expression.

The second element to consider here is the normalisation of discourses on gender equality in countries of the industrialised west. Whilst clearly the gender equality project is nowhere

¹² The term ‘expressive revolution’ was coined by Talcott Parsons in 1975 and elaborated by B.Martin in *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change* (Oxford, 1981), in the context of the 1960s.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (2007), pp.492-3.

¹⁴ L.Abrams, 'Mothers and daughters: negotiating the discourse on the "good woman" in 1950s and 1960s Britain' in N.Christie and M.Gauvreau (eds), *The Sixties and Beyond: Dechristianisation in North America and Western Europe, 1945-2000* (University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2013), pp.60-83.

complete, the circulation of language and beliefs acculturating gender equality since the 1960s has been such that women now have a ready-made framework for life story telling which privileges the self as subject and legitimises life stories with the I as a self-determining actor with choices.¹⁵ It is against this background that a distinct genre of feminist oral history narrative has emerged amongst the postwar generation. Following Langellier and Peterson's concept of 'pathographies' or illness narratives which serve to translate the experience of illness into a journey towards recovery, the feminography similarly serves to translate the lived experience of being a woman into narrative, one that reclaims the female experience from patriarchal histories, that strives towards honesty and authenticity (in terms of being true to one's present self-understanding) and which is embedded within the ideological framework of feminism and gender equality and the material framework of both private and public social relationships.¹⁶ Elsewhere this phenomenon is discussed in the context of consciously feminist narratives which serve as 'testimonials to a belief in a set of fundamental principles which have the purpose of reaffirming the narrator's self-identification as a feminist and sustaining the discursive narrative for posterity.'¹⁷ Here I extend that concept to embrace a wider cohort of female oral history narrators beyond those who explicitly spoke about feminism or who would identify as feminist. They have related life histories which privilege self-understanding and self-determination. These women's life stories have been enabled by the confluence of the postwar cultural context described above, whereby the ethic of authenticity bred feminism with its practices of self-care, alongside other critical political and social movements and the critique of patriarchal structures and mindsets. In turn, this gave a boost to the nascent professional and lay embrace of therapeutic practices which have come to incorporate, at the popular level, the telling of stories about the self.¹⁸ These women who grew up with the expressive culture, whilst being all too aware of the tensions engendered by their desire for autonomy and the clash with their

¹⁵ L.Abrams, 'Liberating the female self: epiphanies, conflict and coherence in the life stories of post-war British women', *Social History* 39:1 (2014), pp. 14-35.

¹⁶ K.M.Langellier and E.E.Peterson, *Storytelling in Daily Life: Performing Narrative* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2004) p.189.

¹⁷ L. Abrams, "'Don't mention the f-word": Reconciling Fragmented Narratives with the Feminist Research Frame' in Katrina Srigley, Stacey Zembrzycki, and Franca Iacovetta (eds), *Beyond Women's Words: The Personal, Political, and Ethical Challenges of Doing Feminist Oral History* (Routledge, 2018), pp.XXX.

¹⁸ See for instance, Nikolas Rose, "Assembling the Modern Self," in Roy Porter (ed.) *Rewriting the Self: Histories from the Renaissance to the Present*, (London, 1997); Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self* (London,1989); M.Shapira, *The War Inside: Psychoanalysis, Total War, and the Making of the Democratic Self in Postwar Britain* (Cambridge, 2013).

parents' values, tell honest and sometimes brave life stories in oral history interview, charting a new kind of life-story narrative for their generation characterised by self-ownership (that is, these are not other people's stories to tell). One of the notable features of these life stories is the relative absence of traditional markers of female identity that might have been deployed by earlier generations: motherhood, marriage, sexual identity and so on. Encouraged in interview to tell a story about the self these women unshackle their memory stories from conventional expectations of what a woman's life story should look like.

The third development, the advent of a modern confessional culture, has facilitated new and multiple forms of self telling in western societies. A key element of this is the ubiquity of storytelling in which the personal (and often confessional) narrative has a privileged place.¹⁹ And the oral history interview, one of the places where self-narration is encouraged, has become familiar as a research encounter, in part as a result of the proliferation of interview genres in the public domain. The one-to-one conversation designed to elicit self-revelation is a commonplace feature of popular culture and public discourse. At the same time, the so-called 'mass culture of confession', underpinned by the confessional habitus of earlier decades but now encompassing a myriad of print, broadcast and online platforms and modes, has democratised, anonymised and pluralised self-telling. Autobiographical narratives are no longer the preserve of the celebrity or the conventionally successful or confined to the psychiatrist's chair, but neither do they conform to traditional autobiographical forms, with online platforms in particular facilitating partial, selective or considered 'confessions'.²⁰ In contrast with more traditional forms of self-narration – the published autobiography for instance – in which men dominated, women in particular have found a space within this new confessional culture; they appear to dominate the genre in the print and broadcast media as well as online via blogs and social media formats.²¹ As a result, a cultural circuit exists

¹⁹ Freund, 'Under storytelling's spell'.

²⁰ There is of course a tradition of working-class autobiography dating back to the 18th century. See, for example, J. Burnett, *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (1977). Modern autobiographical writing however exists across a range of genres and platforms including online.

²¹ On the implications of the digital age for feminist oral history see M. Shea, 'Feminist oral history practice in an era of digital self-representation', in Strigley et al (eds), *Beyond Women's Words*, pp.283-97. Studies of blogging in the UK and the US indicate that whilst men are more prominent in the blogosphere this is because they dominate political blogs. Women meanwhile are more likely to blog about personal issues and consider the social aspects of blogging important. See S. Pederson and C. McAfee 'Gender Differences in British Blogging', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 12 (4) (2007), pp.1472–1492. An analysis of the UK online community Mumsnet indicates that rather than reinforcing gendered modes of communication, this female-dominated site facilitates new

whereby feminist narratives become naturalised. By this means discourse is initially personalised, then generalised and established in culture. The oral history interview feeds off and contributes to this circuit by offering a space for self-narration that is unconstrained by limitations of form or language which might be present in other contexts and which is facilitated by a researcher committed to co-curating a productive encounter.

I also suggest that far from embracing individualism, women's self-narratives should be situated in a much longer history and culture of women's telling which has always been anchored in social networks. Women of this generation may well have embraced what Giddens describes as 'the reflexive project of the self'. But it is evident that speaking honestly and reflectively about a life brings forth both self-realisation and an understanding of where the personal life story belongs in the broader public and collective interpretations of the past.²² This is achieved via the anchoring of experiences in communal narratives, a strategy that has been observed by feminist researchers in other contexts.²³

The narratives analysed below have been produced in oral history interviews conducted between 2011 and 2016 with women from four advanced western, predominantly English-speaking countries – the UK, Australia, Canada and the US. All the interviewees were born in the 1940s and were interviewed by different researchers, female and male, for three separate projects. The Australian Generations project collected the life histories of four generations constituting the postwar era. These interviewees gave the most wide ranging and least focused interviews. The American and some of the Canadian women volunteered their life histories for research on the loss of religion in the west since 1945; the UK and Canadian respondents were participants in a project examining the lives of the post-war generation of women conducted by the author.²⁴ All of the interviews were conducted using a semi or

models of femininities; S.Pedersen and J.Smithson, 'Mothers with attitude – how the Mumsnet parenting forum offers space for new forms of femininity to emerge online', *Women's Studies International Forum* 38 (2013), pp.97-106.

²² A.Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, 1991), p.76.

²³ On the tradition of women anchoring their stories in communal networks see S.N.G.Geiger, 'Women's life histories: method and content', *Signs* 11: 2 (1996), pp.334-51; L.Abrams, 'Story-telling, Women's Authority and the 'Old Wife's Tale': 'The Story of the Bottle of Medicine', *History Workshop Journal* 73:1 (2012), pp. 95-117.

²⁴ The Australian Generations Oral History Project: <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/australian-generations/>. The project interviewed 300 men and women and used a number of different interviewers. Transcripts or summaries and audio files are available on the website. The American

unstructured format which encouraged a conversational mode of discourse and were broadly informed by feminist oral history practices.²⁵ This gave respondents the space to construct life stories without expectations that certain events or life stages would be included, the result being stories that were not necessarily framed by experiences centred on women as mothers, partners or wives.²⁶ All the women sampled and featuring in this analysis belong to the so-called transition generation who grew to maturity in the era between the end of World War Two and the advent of the women's liberation movement. They are all white. The majority had never been active within organised feminism and, despite narrating life stories characterised by self-determination and autonomous decision-making, many were either equivocal about describing themselves as feminist or were uneasy when this theme was raised in interview.²⁷ This means that they were not untypical of their predominantly white middle and upper working class cohort who experienced the opening up of opportunities and expectations for women in the postwar decades and the tensions and struggles that went along with this change. Whilst the narratives represented here traverse the social class spectrum from working to middle class in respect of the women's origins and respondents are able to articulate their life story through the lens of class, their racial identity as white was, for the most part, a formative and yet unremarked upon element of their life experiences.

Not all told coherent, composed life story narratives. Still, there are several features of their interviews which distinguish them as feminographies which align with three preconditions for the emergence of feminism: firstly, women recall experiences of inequality or subordination and, crucially, acknowledge the validity of their interpretation of the experience (that is, they do not interpret their experience through a patriarchal lens); secondly

interviews were conducted by Callum G. Brown between 2009 and 2016, were made available to the author, and are analysed in *Becoming Atheist: Humanism and the Secular West* (London, 2017). The author has interviewed 23 women between 2010 and 2015 for a project on postwar British womanhood, the majority in the UK.

²⁵ The Australian Generations project states: 'interviewers will avoid normative expectations and support accounts that chart alternative life courses.' <http://artsonline.monash.edu.au/australian-generations/methodology>

²⁶ Narratives which are framed by traditional female markers of identity are no less authentic or in thrall to patriarchal expectations. Rather, the point is that an alternative way of framing the self is possible for this generation. For a discussion of women's self-determining narratives with motherhood at the centre see Carla Pascoe, 'From the little wife to the supermum? Maternographies of feminism and mothering in Australia since 1945', *Feminist Studies* (forthcoming).

²⁷ See Abrams, "Don't mention the f-word".

they begin to understand this as a collective experience and identify the causes of injustice (that is, they do not generally ascribe their experiences to their own failures but understand the structural and ideological causes); and thirdly they develop an interpretive framework and act upon it to bring about change.²⁸ Not all the women analysed here exhibit all three stages and in respect of the third, the actions undertaken are more often than not through a number of organisations which offered women opportunities for self-fulfilment and growth rather than via the conduit of the feminist movement. Yet, whilst lacking the anchor that involvement in the women's movement provided active feminists, still they demonstrate how the pervasive discursive culture of feminism in the present opens up an opportunity for women to position themselves in relation to it in complex ways.

Feminographies

For women who grew to maturity during a period of economic and cultural change and who were beginning to realise the potential of the expressive revolution it was inevitable that they would experience personal struggles with their parents' generation and broader social attitudes towards gender. Despite the expanded educational opportunities for women in the postwar decades incorporating academic secondary education and increasing tertiary access, there were still attitudinal and financial barriers impeding some from reaching their potential, perhaps especially impacting on women in working-class families or those in which there was no history of women continuing their studies beyond school. Susan, who grew up in a working-class family in England with no tradition of tertiary education and who won a place at an academic secondary school, was denied the opportunity to go to university largely on account of her family's expectations and in interview she articulated her understanding of the factors in play.

I loved school, I loved studying, I was a swot, a real goody goody, and I came out with eight very good 'O' levels and the school had suggested that I carry on to 'A' levels, but my father felt that with five girls and he was of the previous generation, he didn't have that educational background to see the value of university education. He felt that I should go to work and help contribute, so he wasn't very keen. I was too

²⁸ For this definition of feminism as an historical concept see Karen Offen, 'Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach', *Signs* 14 (1988) 119-57.

innocent and uneducated and unaware to, be able to, I wanted to study more but I accepted and went to work.²⁹

Susan's love of learning sustained her through a life which threw up barriers to her fulfilling her educational ambitions. After working as a bi-lingual secretary for the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Susan's life took an unconventional turn when she married an Iraqi and went to live in Iraq for a number of years in the 1960s. This decision catapulted her into a very different culture, more limiting for women in some ways but simultaneously supportive and loving – a 'wonderfully warm, comforting network'. However, on the family's return to the UK Susan acknowledged that she had lost confidence – 'I had become totally incompetent, totally not confident, totally unable to do much for myself. I was totally dependent on my husband, and I had been an independent person before I met him, actually.' In interview with the author, in which the intersubjectivities present almost certainly affected Susan's interpretations of her life course – signalled by her references to my academic position and her focus on education - she was able to articulate a life story that encapsulates the experience of inequality, an understanding of what underpinned that and, crucially, an acceptance in later life of the value and validity of life experiences and decisions. Whilst being thwarted in her ambitions for university study, experiencing the cultural and personal shocks contingent on moving to a Middle Eastern country and then returning to the UK which initially dented her self-assurance, Susan discovered a route to self-development and self-confidence. The Open University (OU: a university operated on the principles of distance-learning) and then the National Women's Register (NWR: formerly the National Housewives Register), an organisation set up in the 1960s to address the boredom, isolation and intellectual stagnation of housewives, both filled this role.

I would have probably have never done anything more with my life if I hadn't gone out to Iraq, but the grammar school gave me the, if you like, the love of learning and the idea of what was out there and so after we came back from Iraq, I couldn't just sit there and do nothing, I'm not that sort of person, I've always been a person who enjoys studying, so, the OU, I saw it advertised somewhere, and that actually changed my life much more than the NWR did, much more. NWR was interesting, good for social networking um, but as for mental stimulus, it is no more than talking to an interesting friend or ... even being on the national committee, it was interesting and

²⁹ Author's Interview (2011) with Susan (pseudonym), born 1944.

stimulating and various things, but it didn't give me what the Open University did because I am that way, I am an academic at heart, I would be doing what you're doing if I had had a different life. And I did get offered an MA at Cambridge after the OU because I got a first with the OU, but I couldn't - my husband and children at that time didn't want me to leave them. My husband is still in the Iraqi culture, although he's very much a westerner now, he does have that different cultural background where he feels that the mother is important in the family and needs to nurture the family, and it's not until the family are sent off on their way that you can then --- I mean he's totally happy for me to do whatever I want to do, go away, stay, do courses, but it had to be when the children were gone. So the opportunity sort of passed by and now I'm having fun just doing my own stuff.

The form of a feminography is assembled here through Susan's narration of her life story as a quest for the authentic and fulfilled self. At various times this was constrained by others' expectations for her and her role (her working-class father, her Iraqi husband) but by the time of interview she had reached a sense of composure whereby she understood and rationalised the reasons her life had taken the direction it had. Susan put it like this:

as a woman I've had many different womanhoods if you like. A childhood, as a woman in a family who thought of women as different from men and with few expectations, and then going out to Geneva and seeing the woman just... still as a secondary person, most of us were secretaries, and then coming to Iraq where women were very definitely mothers but also had careers, but all the different levels of womanhood, of being a woman have sort of impacted so it's been quite interesting.

Susan had never been actively engaged in organised feminism but she situated her life experiences within an interpretive framework made possible by the discursive culture of feminism. This endorsed Susan's life story characterised by the accumulation of experiences which are judged to be valid and meaningful on her terms. Returning to the value of her experience in Iraq, Susan concluded the interview in this way with an oblique reference to the sentiments inherent in the expressive revolution:

Everything helps you grow, and that made me value all sorts of other things and it gave me an education in life, not just academic, so --- no, but it didn't sort of further my aspirations in any way, it just widened my perspective. I think that is perhaps a

better way to put it, made me a --- made me a very different person, a very different person from what I was when I went out.

Although narrating a very different life history to Susan, Australian Geraldine Box who was interviewed by a male researcher for the Australian generations project, similarly used the process of life review to both express belief in gender equality in the present but also to allude to a more longstanding adherence to equality of opportunity. Geraldine was born in New South Wales in 1949 and grew up on a farm in a relatively conservative environment in which she was expected to attend church and stay on for the school leaving certificate as a prequel to a respectable job. Geraldine described herself as a ‘nice student’ but she also knew her own mind from an early age. At just 10 years old she had refused to attend church with her father even though she enjoyed spending the time with him: ‘by the time I got to be ten I thought no, I said ... asked dad a couple of questions. I’d say, “Can you explain there, why does he say that? What’s this about?” And dad said, “No, you just, you just, it’s just there, you believe it, it’s what is, that’s what you do.” And I thought no.’³⁰ Not only did the Latin liturgy make no sense, as she got older Geraldine came to understand that the Catholic church stood against the emancipation of women, albeit the way she articulated this view was light-hearted and signalled by a reference to outward appearance (at that time an important signal of women’s desire to distinguish themselves from their parent’s generation) rather than ideology.

Um and the priest—when the priest—did speak in English it was just haranguing of, you know, always what women were doing, you know. Women were starting to not wear hats in church because Jackie Kennedy didn’t wear a hat. You know, this is, you can, yeah we’re talking this nons-, this rubbish, you know, Jackie Kennedy, I can remember that, Jackie Kennedy, I must’ve been a bit older than Jackie Kennedy.

As Geraldine reached school-leaving age she asked her father if she could stay and work on the farm and this prompted the first recollection of the constraints on her opportunities on account of her sex:

³⁰ National Library of Australia: Australian Generations Oral History Project: interview with Geraldine Box. <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-219847431>

I loved the farm, I loved the ... I said to my father, 'Can I stay on the farm.' He said, 'No, it's not a place for a girl. Girls don't stay on farms.' In those days girls didn't. There was one woman in the district who with her father—who was by that stage she was probably about 40—and they ran a small farm. Um they'd lived nearby and I thought she was the greatest thing since sliced bread because she was working on the farm. Then and I said, 'I'll do that.' And he said, 'No, you won't'. That was one, you know, he was quite clear about, he said, 'It's not something that a girl does. And it's not, it's not a good life, no.' So I thought well, that's out.

Geraldine's experience was not an uncommon one for white rural girls in this period.³¹

Similarly, in rural Canada Tanya Long, who had a dream of being a lawyer, encountered opposition from family and school:

When I was a teenager, and I think it came as a result of watching too many 'Perry Masons', I wanted to be a lawyer. And I guess I had a kinda adolescent idealism which a lot of adolescents do because I didn't see myself as a high powered lawyer making a lot of money. I was gonna defend the wrongly accused... So this woulda been in the 50s, late 50s in a small redneck mining community. And even though I was very bright everybody said 'no way' women can't be lawyers so my parents didn't support me, my teachers didn't support me, guidance counsellor didn't support me. I got no support for that dream at all. And unfortunately I gave it up. But what I was determined to do was to go to school. I mean my father would've been happy if I'd quit school in grade 10 because, what does a girl need schooling for? But I was a reader, I loved reading. I did well at school and I did well enough that I was able to pay my way my whole way through university with scholarships. Which was thank goodness for that because my parents would not have supported me. I mean they were poor so maybe they wouldn't have been able to but they would not have wanted to either because they just didn't believe in it. They didn't think that girls needed that kind of schooling. Excuse me --- So I did I got on. I got my BA and then a masters and then a degree called an MPhil which is sort of like a baby PhD. Started out as an

³¹ Escaping from farm life is not uncommon in Australian women's narratives of this generation. See Jill Ker Conway, *The Road from Coorain* (1992) and Bronwyn Davies, 'Women's subjectivity and feminist stories' in C.Ellis and M.G.Flaherty (eds), *Investigating Subjectivity* (London, 1992), pp.53-76.

academic because by this time I was married so in order to make money I became a teaching assistant which then led to being an assistant professor.³²

Lorraine Lavoie in Vermont in the US was involved in a similar struggle. Brought up in a Catholic family Lorraine's moment of realisation that her autonomy was being checked came when she clashed with her parents over her choice of career.

I think, in the very early years, I didn't mind going to church, but then there was a time when I wanted to go to public school, I wanted to take home economics. My Mother says 'no way, you're going to lose your religion' and I began resenting having something imposed on me that I didn't choose at that point. At one point I had done some research and I was deciding what career I wanted to go into, and I wanted to become a librarian ... So, my father had decided that he would help me financially if I became a nurse, a school teacher or a secretary, and I said 'but I wouldn't be any good at any of those' and I explained why... So, in the last year of High School I told my mother, I said 'you know, at the end of High School I'm leaving home, I don't care where I go, but I'm going to find a way to earn money and go back to school on my terms.'³³

Whilst Lorraine eventually found work as a medical laboratory technician, Geraldine Box entered nursing, not as a vocation but because it gave her the opportunity to travel, to escape the constraints of rural Australia. Her account of how she came to this decision is worth citing at length here because it demonstrates a self-awareness and self-determination both at the time and in retrospect.

And I got to fifth year and I thought I'm drying up here. I don't know what, there's something not right and I ... all I wanted to do at that point was get around and travel... I wanted to go to other places, other ... you know, places that I'd read ... the only thing I'd you know, would've been reading them in the encyclopaedia or ... the *National Geographic* that mum subscribed to ... She had the most wonderful library of books which we were, we could read anything. And I had read much of what she had and I thought I need, I want to get out, I have to go somewhere. I have to get out of here. It's, it's like it was drying me up. And um I think I just out grew school and I

³² Interview by C.G.Brown with Tanya Long.

³³ Interview by C.G.Brown with Lorraine Lavoie.

wasn't, I wasn't going out, I didn't want to go out with boys, I didn't know why I didn't want to go out with boys, I didn't want to go out with boys. I didn't want to do any of the other sleeping under the bridge and stuff that the other kids were doing in high school. Um or I, I didn't want to do that but I wanted to go and see places and see different things. And I knew that and I thought, 'I've got to get out of here.' And that's, that was it. So I just came home and said, 'I'm leaving school.' And my parents—my mum really—nearly had a nervy turn. So she said, 'You can't leave until you', you know, 'You can leave but only if you go and do some training and then you can do whatever you like after that. But you've got to do something'. So and I thought well what can I do that allows me to travel. Had a few talks with a few of my—not real cousins—my other, and couple of them had done nursing and they'd, they'd been in England and they'd travelled in Africa and I thought, 'Oh, that sounds alright, I'll do that.' And that's what I did.

The key observation here is the focus on Geraldine's autonomous decision-making (whilst acknowledging the influence of her peer group) indicated in her narrative by repetition of the words 'I have to get out of here'. Geraldine is the hero of her own life-story. But shortly afterwards in the interview, after rejecting another career option (librarianship) suggested to her by a school careers' officer, she reflected on the constraints on her opportunities compared with those of her brother who attended university:

So nobody said university, not to me, nobody said university...and somehow or other my brother, two-and-half, two-and-half years older, so by the time I'm having this discussion he's already in his first year at uni because he, he did the, fi-, he finished the last of the fifth year ... And, and he's, he told me his English teacher told him um that that Mr Mr Robert had said to him, 'oh, you know, boy you'll be going to university and you'll be ta, da, da.' I said, 'well, you know, nobody said that to me, nobody and I would never even know what it was anyway I didn't know', I said, 'how did you know.' I said to him, 'Jim how did you know what you know?' And he said, 'ah well I just, I just knew'.

Geraldine had a very clear sense of having had to make deliberate decisions as a young woman in order to reach her goals of travel and developing herself as an individual: 'it certainly got me to travel and allowed me to do the things that I wanted to do.' Her repetition of the phrase 'I was drying up' is telling as are her repeated references to the importance of

reading in fuelling an imagined future. Following the completion of her nursing training Geraldine, like many of her contemporaries, travelled to the UK where she became a nanny for the family of the headmaster of Radley, a public school. It was a time she described as a 're-education' through meeting 'lots of interesting people' and being exposed to literature via her employers' extensive library. On her return to Australia after an overland trek, she 'landed in Darwin', which she described as 'a great representation of a dynamic, emerging culture' with a cosmopolitan population and subsequently she found a nursing position on Thursday Island in the Torres Strait, 'a really exciting place to be' as well as opening her eyes as a relatively privileged white woman to the plight of indigenous Australians. Geraldine, like many young people of her generation, was politicised by Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. As a young trainee nurse she had made her own protest, explaining:

I came home from the nursing job that I was in and decided to do a late night, midnight um run to the local war memorial and plaster it with anti-Vietnam war. Ah I think it was actually just after the Cambodian, after the bombing of Cambodia and that really ... I thought that was it and I'd, I went up um and wrote things on newspaper and spread it all, pasted it all over the War memorial.

The version of her life story Geraldine chose to present in this interview context revealed an autonomous self, revealed through independent decision-making: to not believe in God, to pursue her desire to travel, to protest against injustice and to accept her sexual orientation as a lesbian, the latter being something that she only explicitly discussed in response to the interviewer's question late on in the interview. When asked if she wanted to discuss 'that side of your person' (indicating some knowledge on the part of the interviewer) Geraldine responded: 'I should and do want to, because it's very much part of me yeah... yes I grew into it.' Yet, Geraldine narrated a feminography, not in the sense of a life story explicitly framed by feminism or her sexual or gender identity, but rather by situating herself within a broader narrative of Australian history and in the process contributing to a rewriting of that history. This is significant given the reported inability of some female narrators of an earlier generation to place themselves within national historical and political interpretive frameworks on account of the lack of congruence between dominant accounts of the past and women's priorities in their own lives dominated by family and community.³⁴ When she was

³⁴ S.H. Armitage, 'The next step' in Armitage (ed.), *Women's Oral History*, p.62. Though Penny Summerfield's interviews with women about their role in World War Two revealed that for those who told 'heroic' narratives they had no difficulty situating themselves within the dominant framework of

asked: 'And how you were sort of, you know picturing yourself?' in the context of the 1970s and 80s, Geraldine responded by positioning herself as part of the wider movement towards rights, not just for women but for all disadvantaged groups:

M'mm. I think for me definitely the women's, women's um and moving, moving on into the 80's post Whitlam but still those, those reforms or those changes had been put in place. So um early equal opportunity, equal opportunity particularly and initially focussing on women and then eventually on indigenous rights and, and then, you know, of going, going into [disability] rights had its formative stages here in Australia I think in the 70s, possibly in the US in the 60's but we, we fell on the back of that and it took us, you know, another 10 years to get going and by the 70s we're talking equal opportunity um I ... we've got all of those acts that came in around '84 the Equal Opportunity Act and which primarily ... initially looked at women but looked at other groups.

In this respect Geraldine is typical of those women of her generation who rode on the back of the expressive revolution and turned to identity politics in the 1970s. Similarly Ruth, who grew up in a working-class family in England, who had embraced evangelical Christianity as a teenager, and received a university education, flourished and grew when she moved overseas to Canada to study and discovered radical politics and feminism.

Anyways, by then I was really --- I knew that I didn't believe anymore and that I had got to somehow separate myself from the church because...all my friends were in it, like it's very hard because....and my family, you know, so anyway, so I came to McMaster and with I think the conscious idea that I was re-thinking everything, you know, about my life and I wasn't going to --- admitting to myself that I didn't really believe any more and looking for how else can I direct it kind of thing. There was an amazing group of people there at that time. It was a fairly new university, it was incredible; and um, they had a lot of, um, working class Italian people like there was a big Stelco factory in Hamilton and a very big Italian, second generation going to university now but they were very politicised and very labour oriented and that; and then we had, um, several French corps who were Lefties and then we had all these

that war. P.Summerfield, *Reconstructing Women's Wartime Lives: Discourse and Subjectivity in Oral histories of the Second World War* (Manchester, 1998).

draft dodgers. So, actually it was amazing and several of them had brought... women had come with them and I was exposed to my first lesbians, openly anyway, I mean I'm sure there had been plenty at Cambridge, but if you were in the CU [Christian Union] you didn't talk about it and there were some really very amazing people there and it was a really stimulating year.³⁵

Geraldine narrated her reflexive project of the self as a lifelong process of self-determination whereby experiences of unequal treatment and constraints on her opportunities were turned into moments when she made conscious decisions to follow her own path. Ruth however, experienced fewer constraints on account of her sex but similarly embraced opportunities to grow – prior to moving to Canada and following her University of Cambridge degree, she had trained for social work in London's East End and taught English in Thailand. Both women took control of their own destinies and in interview likewise they were able to assume authority of the narrative, in that they positioned themselves as self-determining actors resolutely seizing the opportunities for self-development and discovery rather than portraying themselves as passive receptacles of others' expectations.

Susan, discussed earlier, re-discovered her self through pursuing higher education with the Open University and her involvement with the National Women's Register in the 1980s, initially joining her local organisation when she moved with her husband and young family from the south of England to Scotland, and then becoming publicity officer on the national committee. The place of voluntary organisations, whose origins pre-dated the women's liberation movement, has been underplayed in interpretations of postwar womanhood and yet the NWR (which had branches overseas including Canada, South Africa and Australia), the Pre-School Playgroup movement, and the National Childbirth Trust in the UK, the Parents' Centres Australia, Nursing Mothers' Association and Childbirth Education Associations in Australia and in Canada, had as part of their *raison d'être* the acknowledgement and use of women's unrecognised skills and the development of capacity building amongst women to develop their self-confidence and ultimately to build careers.³⁶ Whilst none of these

³⁵ Author's interview with Ruth (pseudonym), born 1941.

³⁶ See K.Reiger, "'Sort of part of the women's movement. But different.'" Mothers' organisations and Australian feminism', *Women's Studies International Forum* 22: 6 (1999), pp.585-95; L.Marks, "'A job that should be respected": contested visions of motherhood and English Canada's second wave women's movements, 1970 – 1990', *Women's History Review* 25:5 (2016), pp.771-90; C.Beaumont, *Housewives and Citizens: Domesticity and the Women's Movement in England 1928-64* (Manchester, 2015);

organisations would have described themselves as feminist and indeed in many cases explicitly demarcated themselves from feminist campaigns, as Reiger has noted for Australia, ‘the gaining of skills, self-confidence and sense of belonging to a collectivity of women pushed at least some of them towards positioning themselves more consciously as feminists.’³⁷ Here I suggest that we should regard such organisations, whose members and activists were often women with young children, as conduits and catalysts for self-determination in the 1970s and 1980s alongside WLM debates about maternity and child care and campaigns for 24 hour nurseries. The founder of the UKs NWR, Maureen Nicol, put it like this in a speech in 1962:

Before finishing I would like to make a personal plea... It is to ask you to try and maintain your own individual identity in spite of demands of children and home. There is always so much to do, I know only too well it is easy never to quite finish reading that article on the Common Market, and never to really make up your mind on the rights and wrongs of the campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, or even what to tell your children about religion and your belief or disbelief in God. I do think vitally important that women, and particularly mothers read, discuss and decide about the important things happening around us now.³⁸

‘The style and ethos of the organisation has given me the self-confidence to express my own views in any company and the tolerance to listen to the views of others. I have, through NWR, acquired the skills and the belief in my ability to face and overcome any challenge life throws at me, from speaking in public to fighting for my rights and those of others. I had not known I was capable of so much’ reported NWR member Hilary Bushell in 1994 in a testimonial for the founder of the organisation.³⁹ And in interview these organisations are often remembered as the context within which women achieved self-realisation and understanding about their life course. As Kathleen, who belonged to both the NWR and the National Childbirth Trust in the 1970s explained to me, referring here to her involvement in the latter: ‘Well, I suppose yes we were making our decisions, we weren’t being told what to do and I think because we weren’t being influenced by our parents then, we were away from home, but we didn’t have our own careers but maybe that was one way of having our own

³⁷ Reiger, ‘Sort of part of the women’s movement’, p.586

³⁸ London School of Economics (LSE), Women’s Library 5/NWR/1/5: Cheshire group c.1960: Maureen Nicol 1962

³⁹ LSE, Women’s Library, 5/NWR/5/3: Maureen Nicol (testimonials), 1994.

control.’⁴⁰ But another important element of women’s involvement in these organisations was the ‘webs of connectivity’ which operated at a number of levels: practical, offering mutual support for women with young children who were often isolated from family networks and from the lively, intellectual environment they had experienced in higher education or in a career; in terms of self-confidence and self-realisation whereby women discovered a context where their skills and experience were valued; and for some these organisations acted as a springboard for carving out ‘the reflexive project of the self’.⁴¹

Jennifer’s feminography is perhaps the most complete in terms of the elements contained within it revealing a life that has run in parallel with the preconditions for feminism. Jennifer acknowledged the validity of her interpretation of her experience of inequality. She understood that her experience is not singular but part of a pattern caused by ideological and structural inequalities and she ultimately actively engaged to firstly, bring about change in her own life and then for others. Jennifer was born and brought up in a middle-class family in Birmingham in the English Midlands. Although she passed the entrance exam to grammar school she recalled the limited expectations for her - ‘I was a disappointment all along in some respects, I wasn’t a nice young lady that they wanted, or my mother wanted. My father was It was often said, “well you know, you don’t need too much of an education, you’re going to get married.”’⁴² As with Geraldine Box, Lorraine Lavoie and Tanya Long, Jennifer recalled her self-determination at a young age:

While I was at school I was in the Girl Guides, I was doing very well there, you know, I was getting a lot of affirmation, Queen’s Guide, you know, pushed right up.... I left on the grounds that I couldn’t keep the promise any longer. I didn’t believe in God, you know, and you have to promise to do your duty and obey orders, that was the bit, I said ‘you can’t make me obey an order, if I don’t think it’s right I’m not going to do it’ and I left and of course all the Guiders, they couldn’t understand.

Whilst still at school she had been a local youth organiser for CND and at the age of 16, having left school before ‘A’ levels to take a secretarial course, Jennifer travelled to Edinburgh and found work as a secretary. Marriage took her to rural Scotland and life as a

⁴⁰ Author’s interview with Kathleen (pseudonym), born 1946.

⁴¹ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p.5.

⁴² Author’s interview with Jennifer (pseudonym), born 1943.

farmer's wife for 12 years before the marriage broke down. The local branch of the National Women's Register which Jennifer founded in her small market town was the key to her understanding that her personal experience was a collective one amongst women of her generation. In the early 1970s, with two young children, responsibility for the household and living in an isolated community, Jennifer was already reading the feminist press:

and I was reading *Spare Rib* and just absolutely --- and of course I had no one to talk to about it ... You know, it wasn't like a lot of my friends who were in consciousness raising groups by then or soon after ...

And your, and your National Housewives Register group wasn't like that then?

We were..... I think it was perhaps early days of that and we were beginning to talk about it and, and recognise, you know, we've got more of a life than our mothers had, and we're going to make more of it and we all did in our own different ways, or most of us did. So I probably picked up other women's magazines but it was *Spare Rib* that I remembered then and of course, my husband was nowhere near me in that respect (laughing).

Something there in my head that picked it [feminism] up, within the Women's Register there was feminism at the level of sheer equality with men, we ought to be equal, we oughtn't to be put down, you know, and a lot of them were experiencing difficulties within the marriage because they wanted to be freer than their husbands had been brought up for their wives to be, and there were often battles going on, you know? Go to these conferences and 'oh how great, not to have to cook a meal' and to leave the children, it was so difficult to find someone to look after them, or 'get my husband to do it' or 'I'll have to get back early because he can't do it in a Sunday night, he has to go to...' that sort of thing.

The National Women's Register was also the stepping-stone to a range of other activities that helped to develop Jennifer's and other women's capacity as well as raising their consciousness about women's issues. Although NWR was non-aligned in political terms, as Jennifer explained: 'there wasn't much direct discussion about women's lib or that end, it was about more freedom, for us, and pushing the boundaries. We were probably just pushing the boundaries all the time, and to push those boundaries we had to start up play groups.' The Pre-School Playgroups association in the UK was also to become a significant vector for

many women's development and reintegration back into the workforce.⁴³ Central to the future course of Jennifer's life was her involvement in a local Action Centre which provided advice for those experiencing poverty, homelessness and domestic abuse and it was this that was to provide a catalyst for her own understanding of her own situation in a broken marriage:

And no money. Yes, yes. I was by then in the Dumfries Action Centre and I understood about benefits and other women that were, you know, being battered.

What is the right word now? That was the word we used then

Domestic abuse they call it now,

Domestic abuse, yes, yes. And so I looked up, I worked out all the benefit system, if I leave him, I couldn't leave him, I had to put him out, well I chose, I don't know, but I put him out in the end because by then he was becoming alcoholic, he was also suicidal and the children were all suffering. I was suffering mental abuse really, but I had everything at my fingertips so I could work out what benefits I could do and where to go and what to do. Other women didn't necessarily have that unless they came to an advice centre like I was in.

The combination of involvement in the NWR including being part of the national organising committee and addressing the NWR conference, working in the Action Centre and simultaneously beginning a course in Social Sciences with the Open University, were confidence building for Jennifer as they had been for Susan, and contributed to her situating her personal experience within a wider collective perspective. These organisations and then subsequently employment in London running the Quaker International Centre for students, followed by a return to Scotland to help set up the Glasgow Centre for Women's Health which was part of the Labour Council's policy commitment to equality issues, enabled Jennifer to act upon her understandings of gender inequality in order to bring about change for other women. In interview Jennifer narrated a life story that incorporated disappointments and incidences of mistreatment and discrimination into a reflective and reflexive narrative with her experience at the centre. Jennifer accepted her own responsibility for decisions and understood why she had made those decisions. For example, getting married and then remaining in an unhappy relationship was explained by her commitment to the marriage

⁴³ Institute of Education Archives, PLA/PPA/4/6: 'Parents in Playgroups' (London, c. 1971).

vows and subsequently her own naivety regarding the extent of her husband's drinking. And as with Geraldine Box, Jennifer told the bulk of her life story with no reference, until almost the end, to her sexual identity, signifying perhaps that Jennifer today is comfortable with her identity as a feminist, a lesbian and a mother and that it is possible in some contexts for women to tell a life story in which her sexual identity is just one element of a more complex whole. Indeed, we might conjecture that for Jennifer and for Geraldine too, narrating lives in which their sexuality was not the central feature signified an understanding that there are many factors that shape a life with class, location and family expectations just as salient. Given the opportunity to narrate their life histories they chose what to privilege in that story and when.

The argument so far has been that the combination of new confessional cultures providing the opportunity to craft an authentic life story and the normalisation of discourses on gender equality have 'liberated' women's voices so that women are now able to claim a space in interpretations of the recent past which are not dependent upon dominant or patriarchal positions. In the case of Linda, however, we have the opportunity to witness the presentation of a confident feminist narrative of the self that is unhinged from the webs of connectivity that give the other narrators discussed so far their anchor and their distinctiveness from the life story model predicated on normative male examples. Linda was born and educated in the UK but has made her life in Canada. At the time of interview she had recently retired from practicing psychiatry so Linda embodies someone who not only lived through the expressive revolution but who came to embrace and practice the philosophy of therapeutic practice and self care. Linda's experience as a medical student in the 1960s provides the core struggle from which the rest of her life story develops. As a young, first generation student Linda experienced repeated abuse from medical professionals, her tutors and fellow students which she not only experienced as humiliating but also as profoundly sexist.

Yes, and the sexism was utterly appalling, just utterly appalling. Um, and I hadn't got the skills at that point to, or any other women to back me up. I got it, I think I got it worse than all the other women ... But anyway, day one this is just what happened to me – I get locked in the cadaver room by these fellow male students – terrifying because I had never seen all these dead bodies and anyway, that was awful, but it just went on and on and on. I remember in the --- oh what topic was it --- it was forensic -- - and this guy would put up pictures of all these, you know, chopped up, murdered,

you know --- but then he'd splash up *Playboy* centrefolds, just like every fourth picture. Yea! I know, I mean, now these people would be out on their, they'd be fired. We did get to the clinical part, that's when you see the patients, you're divided into ten groups, they're called 'firms' and then I was one girl and nine boys and the first day of going to see patients, the very first day you are all nervous and everything, I was called upon first to examine a patient in front of the others, and guess what I had to examine? The male genitals. I mean this kind of thing went on all the time. You'd think the girls would get together, but I don't know why we were --- the lectures we were all together but we were all dispersed you see to different hospitals and different wards. I remember in gynaecology, questions like this ... Like 'Oh, in your experience, in your experience Miss -' like personalising it. I remember this one, 'can dyspareunia-- that's painful intercourse -- be entirely psychological?' Like 'in your experience' -- that's meaning? you know, you know, and it would go on ... and I mean, I remember speaking up one time, the way they were examining these poor women in gynaecology as if they are a dead lump.⁴⁴

Then, on failing a critical examination that forced a six-month repetition of a course, she recalled:

that man he didn't interview me on - he came in, he got my hair and he said 'you should be a dancing girl on the stage', pulling it. He said 'I don't know how they allowed anybody like you into medical school'. He just ranted and raved at me and it still upsets me now and failed me, he didn't even ask me anything.

In interview Linda recounted numerous instances of sexual discrimination, mistreatment and abuse. Her voice is unusual in the context of this cohort of women, not least for its determination to speak what happened and to name the humiliations and the abuse she experienced. It was only when she moved to western Canada to study that she began to process some of what she had experienced through a feminist lens:

I was aware enough to know I was being treated badly by men, I mean it wasn't that I thought it was ok or anything. But when I came here, as I say, it was one of the

⁴⁴ Author's interview with Linda (pseudonym), born 1949.

teachers. We had this group that we went to every week, we talked a lot about feminism then. In fact I've got a lot of the old feminist books that I got then, and yes, she was very much into that, it was very good, very useful --- she was writing a book about the way men, about how, um, the male doctors, particularly psychiatrists, were treating women over the previous decades, you know, giving them all these things like Valium and all of those, and, you know, not really listening to women and taking them seriously and lumping them all into one sort of. So she was very heavily into that, and what we were able to do was discuss our own patients that we had, in that context, so that was really useful. It got the women in our programme more supportive of each other, that was really helpful, being able to discuss what had been going on with our own patients and with our own tutors and things, even though several had gotten involved sexually with their supervisors or heads of department.

Linda's interview, comprising a litany of stories of discrimination and abuse but also exhibiting a remarkable determination was facilitated by the combination of the feminist, expressive and confessional turns. Her experience of growing up in the 1960s, embracing the opportunities for clever young women whilst at the same time experiencing the sexist down side of the expressive culture of that era, her shift from conventional medicine to practicing a talking therapy, and her embrace of feminist interpretations of what had happened to her and what was happening to her female patients, has turned silence to voice.⁴⁵

Conclusions

Feminist oral history practice in the global north with the cohort of post-war women has acted in concert with the confessional, expressive and feminist turns to produce oral narratives containing striking similarities in which women narrate first-person narratives in the voices of self-determining subjects. Despite the diversity of the origins of the narrators and their interviews (4 countries, 3 research projects and various interviewers), the dominance of feminist oral history methods across the profession and comparable cultural developments in all four national contexts means that the feminography is a transnational

⁴⁵ Solnit, *The Mother of All Questions*, p.20.

phenomenon, at least for a subset of women who had the capacity to push the boundaries and challenge societal and family expectations.

In contrast to those who doubt the ability of women to liberate their voices from patriarchal forms and dominant discourses, this article makes the case for a more positive interpretation of the possibilities for the constitution of the self.⁴⁶ Women are able to reflect on and critique their individual life decisions in the context of contemporary cultural norms rather than positioning themselves as passive objects of patriarchal structures and ideologies. As Alistair Thomson observes in his study of women who migrated from the UK to Australia in the 1950s, the shifts in cultural narratives on which respondents draw means that there are now ‘more satisfying ways to narrate a life.’⁴⁷ These are not individualist narratives unhinged from collective experience as the majority of respondents see themselves as part of a bigger picture comprising other women enmeshed in ‘webs of connectivity’. Neither do they deny or suppress other more traditional markers of female identity. But they are narratives which do not necessarily depend on men for their agency. Fathers, partners, husbands appear – sometimes as obstacles - but do not determine the journey or the direction. The language of self-determination, of individual decision making, comes through loud and clear exemplified by Geraldine Box’s characterisation of her life as ‘drying up’ before she discovered travel and experiences that widened her horizons and Tanya Long’s statement: ‘I got on’. Geraldine and her counterparts articulated or brought into being a self both by describing the action of the character in the story (herself) and crucially in the act of speaking which suggests that in some cases at least, the feminography is, in part, a product of the interview rather than a prefigured life narrative. In this regard there is an irony perhaps in the willingness of these women to couch their lives in such feminist terms at a moment when so many western women reject the description ‘feminist’.⁴⁸ But by placing their own desires and decisions at the centre of the narrative these women are drawing on the possibilities unleashed by the expressive revolution of their youth and the feminist critiques of their middle years. In this context the feminographies of this cohort may be generation-specific.

⁴⁶ L.Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: the Theory and Practice of Feminist Autobiography* (Manchester, 1992).

⁴⁷ A.Thomson, *Moving Stories: An Intimate History of Four Women across Two Countries* (Manchester, 2011), p.308.

⁴⁸ In the Australian context see for example, N.Campo, *From Superwomen to Domestic Goddesses: the Rise and Fall of Feminism* (Peter Lang, 2009), and in Britain K.Scharff, *Repudiating feminism: Young women in a neoliberal world* Routledge, London, 2012).

The performance of speaking, of telling a liberation story or feminography, is a legitimisation of the lived experience of a group of women whose selves are not dependent upon masculine or individualist narratives of the past. Feminist discourses have opened up a space for these life stories and furthermore have enabled some women to tell life histories in which they set the agenda, privileging their own interpretations of events and experiences. There are certainly many women in this cohort whose life narratives will not exhibit these characteristics, perhaps because they do not have the cultural or linguistic capacity to constitute themselves as actors or on account of life trajectories which exist in tension with or opposition to the dominant discursive culture of feminism. Some women find the feminist framework itself silencing, particularly when it is seen as critical of life decisions taken (such as prioritising motherhood over paid work) or when it is interpreted literally as an ideological straitjacket or organisation requiring certain beliefs or actions.⁴⁹ And confessional culture, whilst potentially enabling multivalent voices, can at the same time silence alternative narratives with women (and especially women of colour and those who express non-white racial identities and religious affiliations) particularly targeted on online forums.⁵⁰ But the methods of practice and analytical approaches applied by feminist oral history have, for some women, coincided with trends that have normalised confessional telling to produce self-determining narratives. The interview paradigm has altered for these women (and for the interviewers) as we engage in conversations that we both recognise. The result, at least for this cohort of women, is a new genre of life narration with women situated centrally as self-determining actors; heroes of their own life stories.

⁴⁹ Examples of the potentially disabling impact of introducing feminism in the interview are discussed in Abrams, 'Don't mention the f-word'. See also N.Campo, "'Feminism failed me': Childcare, maternity leave and the denigration of motherhood', *Australian Feminist Studies* 24 (61), pp. 325-342.

⁵⁰ There is already extensive research on misogyny and silencing in the realm of social media. See, for example, Karen Lumsden and Heather Morgan, 'Media framing of trolling and online abuse: silencing strategies, symbolic violence, and victim blaming', *Feminist Media Studies* 17:6 (2017), pp.926-40.