



## “I Thought We Had No Rights” – Challenges in Listening, Storytelling, and Representation of LGBT Refugees

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**ABSTRACT** *Storytelling serves as a vital resource for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans\* (LGBT) refugees' access to asylum. It is through telling their personal stories to the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board that LGBT refugees' claims for asylum are accessed and granted. Storytelling also serves as a mechanism for LGBT refugees to speak about social injustice within and outside of Canada. In this article, I explore the challenges of storytelling and social justice as an activist and scholar. I focus on three contexts where justice and injustice interplay in LGBT refugee storytelling: the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board, public advocacy around anti-queer violence and refugee rights, and oral history research. I describe how in each arena storytelling can be a powerful tool of justice for LGBT refugees to validate their truths and bring their voices to the forefront in confronting state and public violence. I investigate how these areas can also inflict their own injustices on LGBT refugees by silencing their voices and reproducing power hierarchies.*

**KEYWORDS** LGBT refugees; forced migration; queer studies; community activism; activist-scholar; oral history; storytelling

I remember writing down my story for my hearing. I remember at the end, the file that I was presented was like bigger than a bible in thickness, it was a big, big file. There was a lot of stuff in there, I basically empty my heart in that, you know. And again my whole story was that I really thought that nobody cared about homosexuals. I thought that we had no rights. (Interview with Hector, June 2013)<sup>1</sup>

Stories matter for refugees. Refugees make sense of their past and present experiences, interact with each other, and participate in cultural, political, and

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<sup>1</sup> Hector is a gay cisgender refugee from South America. He claimed asylum in the early 2000s and is now a Canadian citizen. As with all interview participants quoted in this article, Hector's real name and country of origin are kept confidential.

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ISSN: 1911-4788



social conversations through sharing their stories. It is through telling and retelling their stories to the Canadian Border Service Agency (CBSA) and the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB) that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Trans\* (LGBT) refugees work to gain asylum in Canada.<sup>2</sup> The significance of LGBT refugee stories continues long after claimants receive a positive decision on their refugee claim, as their stories are powerful tools to bring attention to larger issues around anti-queer violence and provide a counter-narrative to anti-refugee sentiments in mainstream Canada (Murray, 2014).<sup>3</sup> For LGBT refugees, being able to share their stories and thus contribute to critical policy issues around inequality and immigration is an important step toward social justice about refugee protection and settlement in Canada.

In recent years, refugees have emerged as powerful political actors in Canada, using their stories to challenge stricter immigration controls by Canadian federal and provincial governments (De Genova, 2010; Nyers, 2010; Naples, 2009). LGBT refugees across the country contribute to this discussion by sharing their stories with the IRB, the media, via public events, and by participating in community-based research projects. Their stories serve as a crucial source of knowledge around the intersection of gender and sexuality in immigration. Growing awareness in the media around persons seeking protection in Canada from anti-queer persecution abroad has brought attention to underlying heteronormativity in the Canadian asylum process and the need to offer protection to LGBT refugees (Jenicek & Wong, 2009; Jordan, 2009; Murray, 2014).

Valerie Janesick (2010), Sharene Razack (1996), and Alan Wong (2009) remind us that storytelling is not, however, a neutral process. Activists and researchers must be critical of how stories are used and who is allowed to tell another's story. LGBT refugees' stories are a critical component to their claim for asylum and are important to their sense of self. These individuals are active storytellers in the sense that they work hard to construct their narratives, choose what to reveal and what to elaborate. For many who have lived in silence most of their lives because of homophobia and transphobia, being able to share their story with outsiders can induce a sense of pride and accomplishment. At the same time, LGBT refugees can also experience

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<sup>2</sup> I use the phrasing 'LGBT refugees' to refer to individuals who file a refugee claim based on fear of persecution because of their sexual orientation or gender identity (Jordan, 2010; Mule & Gates-Gasse, 2012). 'Trans\*' refers to individuals who do not associate or identify themselves with the gender assigned to them at birth; it is an umbrella term for gender nonconforming and gender variant individuals (Roen, 2001; Stryker, Currah, & Moore, 2008; Spade, 2008). According to Westbrook & Schilt (2009, p. 461), "cisgender refers to individuals who have a match between the gender they were assigned at birth, their bodies, and their personal identity. This term is a complement to trans\* or gender nonconforming individuals who may not associate their assigned gender at birth with their personal identity or body".

<sup>3</sup> 'Queer' refers to non-heterosexual and/or gender-variant individuals (Phelan, 2001; Valocchi, 2005; Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005), as well as an anti-essential theoretical and political approach to sexuality and gender (Epprecht, 2008). A queer perspective to migration in particular emphasizes sexuality and gender as a critical component to processes of migration (Luibhéid & Cantú, 2005).

silencing, and the appropriation and misuse of their stories if their narratives are coopted to serve nationalist agendas and support systems of power that marginalize racialized and Indigenous queer individuals inside and outside Canada. It is therefore important to be critical of the ways in which storytelling is used for social justice (North, 2006, 1995).

I work with LGBT refugee stories on a daily basis as an oral history researcher and as a volunteer for Rainbow Refugee, a Vancouver-based organization assisting persons claiming asylum in Canada on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and HIV status (see <http://www.rainbowrefugee.ca>). As a volunteer for Rainbow Refugee, I help LGBT refugee claimants tell their stories at their IRB hearings. I also facilitate public speaking opportunities for LGBT refugees to share their stories with policy makers and media. In my oral history research, I interview and analyze LGBT refugees' life stories in order to understand their experiences of home and belonging in Canada. The potential efficacy of storytelling as a social justice resource informs my commitment to record LGBT refugee stories and to ensure that refugees voices and concerns are at the forefront of social change. As Valerie Janesick (2007), bell hooks (2009), and Lee Anne Bell (2010) argue, storytelling is an important social justice tool for marginalized communities. When members of oppressed communities are able to tell their stories, they can challenge norms and speak directly to the social, economic, and political forces that marginalize them (Janesick, 2010). Their knowledge is based on everyday experience, granting them authority as storytellers and critical knowledge-producers.

In this article, I explore the challenges of storytelling and social justice as an activist and scholar. I focus on three contexts where justice and injustice interplay in LGBT refugee storytelling: the Canadian IRB, public advocacy around anti-queer violence and refugee rights, and oral history research. In each arena, I explore how storytelling can be a powerful tool of justice for LGBT refugees that validates their truths and brings their voices to the forefront in confronting state and public violence. I investigate how these arenas can also inflict their own injustices on LGBT refugees by silencing their voices and reproducing power hierarchies. At the forefront of my exploration are questions around voice, representation, and ownership of LGBT refugees' stories.

### **Justice and Injustice: Working with LGBT Refugee Stories as a Volunteer and Activist**

I remember the judge [IRB member] at my hearing. I felt connected to her. I felt that I was speaking to a human being, to an authority figure that has a very sound understanding of a single soul individualized in many complex forms. Our bodies were connected. I felt that I was speaking to her heart. I spoke my truth, my heart's truth, to her. (Interview with Jordan, July 2013)

The excerpt above comes from an interview I conducted with a gay refugee from South Asia who is an active volunteer for Rainbow Refugee and has shared his story publically several times. His description of the hearing expresses the powerful and intense feelings many LGBT refugees experience in sharing their stories with the IRB.<sup>4</sup> For many of these individuals who have been oppressed and silenced in their home country, telling their story to a representative of the Canadian state and having their story taken as credible and valid is a source of personal justice.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the refugee board hearing can also serve as a place of silencing and injustice. Claimants are under intense scrutiny by IRB members for credibility and proof of legitimate fear. In this atmosphere, refugees face significant pressure to tell their story that is intelligible and compelling. Consequently, as David Murray contends, LGBT refugees' stories are often forced into particular scripts that reproduce ethnocentric ideas around gender and sexuality, as well as support ongoing colonial structures of power (Murray, 2014; Morrissey & Jordan, 2013; Fobear, 2014).

In order to make a refugee claim in Canada, claimants must write a detailed story about their lives and the reasons they fear returning to their countries of origin. These stories are submitted as their basis of claim and used as primary evidence for their refugee hearing. In preparing for their hearing, claimants must gather evidence that proves their identity and supports their story. Evidence may include birth records, hospital records, and police reports, as well as letters and photographs from family or friends corroborating a person's story. These documents are reviewed by the deciding IRB member prior to the refugee hearing. At the hearing, which can last up to eight hours, the claimants are asked a series of questions regarding the evidence presented and why they are seeking refugee protection. During this stressful ordeal, claimants are under intense scrutiny for any inconsistencies in their stories. A mixed-up date or inconsistent telling of an event may be sufficient for a case to be rejected as not credible. The fate of claimants is in the hands of the IRB, which does not have to ask critical questions of itself regarding its regulation of refugees' bodies; nor are members held directly accountable for their decision-making or their actions during the hearing (Colaiacono, 2013). Refugees do have the opportunity to appeal a negative decision to the Immigration Appeals Court, but the success rate is very low (Heller, 2009; Morgan, 2006; Jordan, 2009; LaViolette, 2009, p. 438; Miller, 2005; Murray, 2014; Fobear, 2014; Shari & Ou Jin Lee, 2011). Refugees may not lodge an

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<sup>4</sup> The Immigration Refugee Board (IRB) is an independent administrative tribunal that is responsible for making decisions on immigration and refugee matters in Canada. IRB members, who are public servants nominated into the position by the IRB, are given the authority to determine a claimant's eligibility for Convention Refugee status (Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada).

<sup>5</sup> In 1991, Canada became the first Western nation to grant refugee status on the basis of sexual orientation. Since 1991, Canada has had the world's highest acceptance rate for asylum based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and HIV/AIDS status (Fobear, 2014, p. 52).

official complaint directly against IRB members' actions.

Sharing intimate stories with strangers and state officials can be difficult and traumatizing for refugees (Hopkins, 2009; Cabot, 2014; Lacroix, 2006). For LGBT refugees, there is the added fear and shame of talking openly about their sexuality and/or gender identity (Jordan, 2010). Moreover, they must tell their story under a hostile political and social environment in mainstream Canada that frames a large majority of incoming refugee claimants as 'queue jumpers', 'bogus,' and a threat to Canadian society (Hari, 2014; Diop, 2014; Jantzi, 2014). There is ever-present fear of being misheard, or perceived as not being consistent or credible. This is a serious risk, often due to cultural differences in storytelling and because of the IRB members' own biases or stereotypes regarding gender and sexuality (Murray, 2014; Jordan, 2010; LaViolette, 2014). Claimants also run the risk of being rejected if they do not appear to be gay or trans\* enough (Lewis, 2010; Murray, 2014; Shuman, 2014; Bieksa, 2011).

As queer scholars have argued, there is a wide variation with regard to sexuality and gender that is often culturally, socially, and location-specific (Walks, 2014; Boellstorff, 2007; Gorman-Murray, 2009; Luibheid, 2008; Manalansan, 2003; Knopp & Brown, 2003; Altman, 1997; Binnie, 2004; Chao, 2000; Oswin, 2006; Valdes, 1998). These differences are often not taken into account at refugee hearings. LGBT refugees frequently have to act as cultural translators around sexuality and gender to the IRB, especially because Western sexual or gender identity categories and lifestyles do not easily or exactly translate across cultural differences (Oswin, 2006). The hearing can be validating experiences (as in the case of Jordan), where IRB members take into account claimants' particular circumstances and work with them to make sure they are comfortable telling their story. However, I have also witnessed several instances where claimants were not accepted as being homosexual by the deciding IRB member because they did not look 'gay', did not have a relationship with a person of the same sex, or did not feel comfortable talking about their sexuality. The deciding IRB member disregarded the cultural and socio-political context in which these claimants lived, failing to take into account the internalized homophobia that comes from living every day in fear of being discovered as a sexual minority by strangers, loved ones, and state officials. For many, this fear of discovery not only causes shame and trauma that makes it very difficult to talk about sex and sexual preference, but also limits opportunities to find same-sex partners.

My primary concern as a volunteer is to make sure that LGBT refugees are prepared as much as possible for their hearing, which means helping them tell their stories to potentially biased IRB members. Together, we talk about their experiences in their home country and the fears they have if forced to return. I answer questions about the hearing process and specific concerns they have about their case. When we identify parts of their story where an IRB member may request more clarification, I work with the claimants in explaining their story in a clear and straightforward manner. We talk about their everyday social reality as persons who are gender nonconforming or attracted to

members of the same sex. In this process, the claimants can feel a sense of relief in being able to tell their story to an outsider, gaining confidence in their case by taking charge of how they want to share their experiences to the IRB. It is through this work that I assist LGBT refugee claimants maintain the integrity and truth of their stories. I make an effort to instill confidence in them that their stories matter and deserve to be listened to by the IRB.

During the period that refugees are undergoing the asylum process, getting through the hearing and receiving a positive decision is the most important goal in maintaining their safety and freedom from persecution. Claimants learn quickly, however, that the refugee process is just one in a series of obstacles that must be overcome to have a safe and comfortable life in Canada. Economic, political, and social inequalities remain long after refugee claimants have been accepted as Convention Refugees<sup>6</sup> into the country. As much as Canada offers a place of protection, freedom, and relative acceptance for LGBT refugees, it can also be a place of discrimination and isolation. After moving to the country, refugees often continue to experience racial and ethnic discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, and income inequality. These forms of marginalization hinder access to adequate housing, medical care, education, and employment, which refugees must work through as they build a home for themselves in Canada (Brotman & Lee, 2011). Being able to publically address these inequalities through the telling of their stories to a wider Canadian audience can be one source of social justice for LGBT refugees. Yet, as I describe in the next section, public advocacy comes with its own forms of justice and injustice.

### **Telling Your Story as an Act of Social Justice: Working with LGBT Refugees' Storytellers in Public Advocacy**

Being able to talk about my experience as a transwoman and as a refugee was such a great experience. I was so nervous standing up there on the stage. There were many people from Immigration organizations and even people from my home country. But, I just kept reminding myself that these people are there to listen to you. I told them the difficulties I experienced as a transwoman in my country. I am still with difficulties here as a transgender refugee in Canada. It felt like a big achievement for me to go out there as a woman and talk. A year ago, before I got my refugee, I never would have been able to do this. I gained more confidence in myself as a woman and a refugee. (Interview with Tiffany, January 2015)

Over the past ten years, immigration and asylum in Canada have gone through a dramatic overhaul. What once was a system that actively

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<sup>6</sup> 'Convention Refugee' is the official term for individuals who have been accepted as refugees and are given asylum in Canada and in other countries. The definition comes from 1967 United Nations Protocol to the 1951 Refugee Convention (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 2010, p. 15-16).

encouraged immigration has transformed into a system that limits immigration to individuals of wealth and privilege (Root, Gates-Gasse, Shields, & Bauder, 2014; Abu-Laban, 1998). Of particular concern, visa restrictions for countries outside of the United States and Western Europe prevent many individuals from legally entering Canada. Without a visa, refugees may be arbitrarily detained for several months in county jails and prisons throughout the country (Silverman, 2014). Moreover, the Canadian Border Services are under increasing pressure by the federal government to deport failed refugee claimants and undocumented migrants (Silverman, 2014). In order to prevent ‘bogus’ and fraudulent refugee claims, Canadian Citizenship and Immigration shortened the refugee process from one year to three months (Diop, 2014; Hari, 2014; Vinokur, 2015). The short processing time creates significant stress for refugee claimants and their service providers, limiting the time available to meet with lawyers and other support personnel to help prepare for hearings. The shortened time period also creates obstacles to collecting important evidence, such as medical documents or police reports. In addition to these immigration constraints, funding for in-state refugee health care and services was cut across Canada in 2012 (Marwah, 2014; Warmington & Lin, 2014). As a result, refugees are no longer able to access provincial medical service plans and must pay out-of-pocket for most of their medical services (Hari, 2014; Ratkovic, 2013; Dawson, 2014).<sup>7</sup>

In the current conservative immigration climate, refugees and undocumented persons have emerged as powerful public advocates in Canada (Nyers, 2010). Peter Nyers writes that one of the key ways that undocumented persons and refugees have asserted their autonomy as political actors is by reclaiming the discourse that defines their existence (2006). Refugees have worked to challenge negative labels of their asylum claims being bogus through sharing their stories publically (Nyers, 2010). They have made a significant contribution to challenging public perceptions around gender, sexuality, and asylum by speaking in a variety of forums, ranging from Vancouver City Councils to the office of Citizenship and Immigration, from public rallies to talking with the media (The Early Edition, 2015; Logan, 2014). It is through telling their stories that audiences see the complexity of LGBT refugees’ lives. Social justice cannot happen with just one voice; it takes a cacophony of different voices engaging with each other in respectful dialogue to make a difference.

As a volunteer and activist for Rainbow Refugee, I work with our LGBT refugee members to share their stories with a wider public audience in order to raise awareness about the issue and to situate their voices in the center of

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<sup>7</sup> Under the new refugee health care plan, in-state refugees receive restricted federal health coverage across Canada that includes basic emergency care and treatment for illnesses that are a risk to public health (for example, HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria). Thus, illnesses that are not considered a public threat are not covered under the in-state refugee health plan, nor are hormone replacement, anti-anxiety, and anti-depression medications (Marwah, 2014).

social and policy discussions around immigration and inequality. My work involves advocating and creating opportunities for LGBT refugees to be speakers and contributors at workshops, panels, and events on asylum, immigration, homophobia, and transphobia. As a volunteer for Rainbow Refugee, I am not permitted to share the stories we hear from the LGBT refugees we work with unless they give explicit permission. When our members want to share their stories and participate in public actions, I connect them with organizers, policy makers, and journalists, with whom I then work to help develop a respectful mode of engagement.

Although several of our members have experienced a sense of justice in being able to use their stories to advocate for others, thereby providing a critical voice against hierarchy and oppression, this is not always the case. Similar to the ways in which LGBT refugees' stories can be confined to certain Western and colonial scripts in the refugee hearing process, they can also be used to dismiss ongoing violence against queer individuals within Canada. With the recent rise in anti-homosexual legislation in places like India, Russia, Uganda, and Nigeria, as well as the increasing attention being paid to the persecution of sexual and gender minorities in parts of the Middle East and elsewhere in Africa, LGBT refugees are often invited to be interviewed by newspapers and attend public speaking events around homophobia and transphobia in a global context. However, focusing only on LGBT refugees' experience and knowledge of anti-queer violence outside of Canada ignores the violence that many marginalized communities face *inside* the country. As I have argued elsewhere (Fobear, 2014, p. 53; see also Razack, 1996; Jenicek & Wong, 2009):

This is not to suggest that persecution against sexual and gender minorities in other countries is not a serious issue. The difficulty arises though when LGBT refugees' search for freedom from homophobic and transphobic persecution in their countries of origin becomes the only element of their story addressed in the Canadian public sphere.

In other words, instead of focusing only on where LGBT refugees come from, it is important to create spaces that allow them to talk about their experiences living in Canada and to connect these lived realities to larger discussions around social justice for migrant, racialized, and Indigenous LGBT persons (Haig-Brown, 2011). As Ann Cunliffe and Geetha Karunanayake argue, social justice organizing needs to link local and global movements together in dialogue (2013). Racialized, immigrant, and Indigenous LGBT and two-spirit persons face significantly more violence in Canada than their white citizen counterparts (Lamble, 2008; Harper, Jernewall & Zea, 2004; Giwa & Greensmith, 2012).<sup>8</sup> This violence is historically situated in the context of Canada as a white settler colonial state

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<sup>8</sup> 'Two-spirit' is a spiritual and cultural term used by First Nations and Native Americans to describe individuals who have both male and female spirits within them (Driskill, 2010).

that has worked to remove Indigenous communities' sovereignty and restrict immigration on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, and class (Haig-Brown, 2011; Fobear, 2014). Connecting the dwindling social support for refugees and stricter asylum processes to the historic and ongoing marginalization of Indigenous and racialized persons in Canada is an important step toward dismantling larger structures of power and toward challenging political, economic, and social injustice. Yet, state funding and institutional support to create spaces for dialogue and community engagement is scarce. As a person who has one foot in academia and one foot in community activism, I try to use my hyphenated position of activist and scholar to circumvent institutional barriers to funding and support for community-based initiatives.

### **Social Justice in Research: Working with LGBT Refugee Stories as an Oral Historian**

Devran: Coming here, leaving everything behind, coming here making a refugee claim and then facing all the isolation, stress, and fear...Well difficult is not enough to explain it.

Katherine: I can only imagine.

Devran: No, you can't. You can't imagine what it is like. That's okay. But, you can't understand what it is like. (Interview with Devran, June 2013)

Oral history has become popular as a way for refugees' histories and experiences to be preserved and critically explored. It is a methodology that is accessible to both academic and non-academic persons, as it requires relatively little equipment and expertise. Oral history has the potential to connect communities together in order to preserve their stories and provide counter-narratives to mainstream historical knowledge. It is because of its radical potential to bring forward alternative or nuanced versions of history and social life that many feminist, anti-oppression, Indigenous, and civil rights scholars and activists have taken up oral history as both a methodology to record voices of the oppressed and marginalized, and also as a political means to insert these voices into popular historical consciousness, to challenge oppressive systems, and to promote radical change (Abrams, 2010; Brown, 2006; Frisch, 1990; Jessee, 2011; Yow, 1995; Aql, 1995).

Over the past 20 years, oral historians have turned a self-reflexive and critical lens on their own research practice, examining how – in addition to challenging power relations and inequalities through participatory knowledge-building (Abrams, 2010) – oral history research can also reproduce inequalities between oral historians and participants. Building from the work of feminist, postcolonial, queer, and critical race theories, oral historians are challenging positive assumptions about the objectivity and neutrality of oral history (Abrams, 2010; Gluck, 2008; Bornat & Diamon, 2007; Yow, 1995; Plummer, 1994; Ramirez & Boyd, 2012; Armitage & Gluck, 1998; Best, 2003; Jessee, 2011; Day, 2009). Oral historians have come

to recognize that they are not neutral listeners, but rather come into interviews with their own biases, sympathies, assumptions, and positionalities (Abrams, 2010; Gluck, 2008; Reay, 1996), which may lead them to treat refugees and their narratives insensitively or use them exploitatively (Horsley, 2007; Jesse, 2011; Mackenzie, McDowell, & Pittaway, 2007; Nygreen, 2006; Rosinska, 2011), particularly in a context where researchers occupy multiple positions of privilege *vis-à-vis* the latter, especially in terms of citizenship status, education, and employment (Nygreen, 2006).

The relationships oral historians have with the communities they work with are multiple and constantly changing (Gluck, 2008). Oral historians must be reflexive regarding how their presence affects their participants, and the lasting impact of their research (Nygreen, 2006; Cunliffe & Karunanayake, 2013; Wagle & Cantaffa, 2008). As an oral historian recording the life histories of LGBT refugees, it is difficult to separate my roles of activist and scholar. Most of the persons I interviewed know me in my role as a volunteer and activist for Rainbow Refugee. In many ways, I “work the hyphen” (Fine, 1994, p. 70) by not separating these positions; instead, I use them as a bridge between the LGBT refugees I work with and myself. As much as my activism, volunteerism, and research affects the people I work with, their stories, actions, and authority affect me and influence my outlook on the world. Indeed, the borders between researchers and participants can be blurred (but not erased) as we work to understand each other (Chatterton, Fuller & Routledge, 2007). It is a dialectical relationship that requires a commitment to discussion and shared authority over both research and praxis. For me, this has meant using my position in academia and Rainbow Refugee to hold public events where LGBT refugees can speak directly with the public and people in positions of power, to work with other service providers on housing and employment for LGBT refugees, and to disseminate articles that are both academic and publicly accessible.

### **Conclusion: LGBT Refugees, Storytelling, Activism... and the Academy**

All of the storytelling initiatives I’m involved with take time and require effort that are not generally supported by academia, in part because, as Charles R. Hale writes, activist research in academic institutions is understood as controversial (2008). The intense and competitive economic atmosphere of higher education has meant that academics must sacrifice valuable time and energy with local communities in order to produce a high quantity of academic work and be eligible for research grants (Downs & Manion, 2004; Maxey, 1999; Autonomous Geographers Collective, 2010; Askins, 2009). Moreover, state and private sector funders discourage activist work that disrupts hierarchical power structures and “police activist scholarship when it approaches issues those in power would prefer to leave unexamined” (Greenwood, 2008, p. 335). Academic institutions also sometimes do not recognize work outside of the limited confines of peer-

reviewed articles, books, dissertations, and conference presentations. Until academia as a whole recognizes and values different forms of knowledge production as a necessary means for social justice, there will always remain the danger of an unproductive separation and relationship of inaccessibility between researchers and the communities with which they work (Hale, 2008; Frey, 1998; Lorenzetti, 2013; Burnett, 2003).

Despite these limitations, I have sought alternative avenues outside of academia to disseminate the knowledge given to me by my participants. Art has been one mechanism for me to ‘work the hyphen’ between activist and scholar. I was granted funding to support collaboration between local queer artists and LGBT refugees in Vancouver, in order to create “The Painted Stories Project”,<sup>9</sup> a series of leadership and painting workshops for, and led by, LGBT refugees. The workshops provided refugees with a vehicle to share their stories through painting and digital media (Barsotti, 2014); they created a mural that was publicly displayed in the 2014 Queer Arts Festival in Vancouver, and produced a documentary that is available on YouTube (Seeking Protection is Not a Crime, 2014). LGBT refugee activists later used the finished mural and documentary as an advocacy tool at several public events. As these examples illustrate, art can provide meaningful ways of engaging with lived experiences that can affect us deeper than through written text alone. This process is ongoing and will continue after my current research is ‘officially’ over. It is through my continuing engagement with refugees’ stories that I challenge myself to go beyond the limitations of power relations and seek new areas of creativity and dialogue for social justice.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the editors and reviewers for helping me to develop this article. Without their guidance and patience this article would not have come to fruition. Thank you to the volunteers and members of Rainbow Refugee for helping me to learn and grow as an activist and academic. I will always be learning from them. I would also like to thank Brandon Cirillo and Edward Chivevere for their much-appreciated copy-editing work.

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<sup>9</sup> Funding for this project was provided by the Vancouver Queer Arts Festival, the Liu Institute for Global Issues at the University of British Columbia, and the Barbara Roberts Fund from the Canadian Committee on Women’s History.

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