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## Doing the Feminist Intergenerational Mic: Methodological Reflections on Digital Storytelling as Process and Praxis

May Chazan & Maddy Macnab

**Key words:** digital storytelling; feminist methodology; participatory methodology; inter-generationality; multimedia creation; critical arts-based methods; aging; technology; activism; researcher vulnerability

**Abstract:** In this article, we reflect on the methodology of a digital storytelling workshop held in May 2016, gathering activists and academics across four generations to share and record their activist histories. Drawing on observational notes and participant feedback, we investigate whether and how the workshop challenged knowledge-production conventions, ageist assumptions, and intergenerational scripts. We offer the concept of a *feminist intergenerational mic*, arguing that the norm-challenging possibilities of this methodology lay not in providing access to a *mic*, but rather in particular, routinized, feminist and intergenerational practices. Through this article, we contribute to conversations about feminist methodologies, power and vulnerability in research, participatory media creation, and aging studies.

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### 1. Introduction and Launch Point

On a crisp spring morning in 2016, some 25 activist women<sup>1</sup> of different ages, backgrounds, and abilities gathered in Montreal, Canada to begin the *Aging Activisms Media Capsules Workshop*, organized collaboratively by research groups Aging Activisms and Ageing Communication Technologies (ACT).<sup>2</sup> Around the circle, community activists (most in their 60s through 90s), professors

1 We use "activists" and "activisms" in this work to refer to diverse ways of working for social change, including "quieter" actions that extend beyond formal protest. Additionally, we initially conceptualized this workshop as a gathering of "women," recognizing that the pivotal roles of women are often erased in historical narratives of social movements and social change. However, it will become evident in our analysis that drawing repeatedly on the category "woman" may have inadvertently functioned to reinforce discourses of heteronormativity and cis-normativity in this work; we have since shifted our language to "women and non-binary or gender fluid activists" (CHAZAN, forthcoming).

(most in their 40s and 50s), and students (most in their 20s and 30s) came together for three days to co-create a series of multimedia digital stories (or "media capsules"), sharing their activist histories: powerful stories of acting, intervening, and building toward a more just future. In addition to the goal of media creation, we (the co-authors, together with our organizing team from *Aging Activisms* and *ACT*) sought to develop an intentionally feminist and intergenerational digital storytelling methodology.<sup>3</sup> We hoped this process might challenge perceived generational and academic-community divisions and unsettle attendant power dynamics. [1]

Over the course of the workshop, we witnessed poignant moments of connection across generations and instances in which participants challenged conventional research dynamics. By the final morning, many expressed their sense of this methodology as transformative in some way. As one activist in her 70s exclaimed, "I was wondering whether, with all the feelings with this methodology, if you couldn't use this to resolve conflict?" Her words clearly evoked a sense of possibility and potential. What was it about our process that elicited such feelings? We take up this question in this article. Specifically, we investigate whether and how we and other workshop participants, through repeated practices of our digital storytelling methodology, worked to challenge and/or consolidate certain norms in ways that, while never fully transcending such routinized operations of power, might have opened up certain possibilities for change.<sup>4</sup> [2]

We take as our launch point one of the first and most profound "a-ha" moments of the weekend: the opening "tech training" session. This was a moment that gave us pause to consider our methodology's underpinning tensions, its insidious workings of power, and the possibility for spontaneous actions to challenge routinized assumptions. It was during this session that Rose Marie WHALLEY, activist and community radio host in her 70s, called up for us the concept that has come to guide this analysis: the *feminist* (and we added *intergenerational*) *mic*.<sup>5</sup> [3]

2 [Aging Activisms](#) is a research program and collective led by co-author, Dr. May CHAZAN at Trent University in Peterborough, Canada. [Ageing Communication Technologies](#) (ACT) is a research group led by Dr. Kim SAWCHUK at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Many workshop participants had been previously involved in one or both of ACT's and Aging Activisms' projects, workshops, or events, and these relationships certainly shaped workshop dynamics. For more on this workshop, see <http://www.agingactivisms.org/media-capsules-workshop-with-act> [Accessed: February 6, 2018].

3 Digital storytelling is a participatory media creation methodology that was popularized by the Center for Digital Storytelling, now known as [StoryCenter](#), in Berkeley, California over the last two decades (LAMBERT, 2009). In her critical assessment of StoryCenter's approach, POLETTI describes digital storytelling as a "practice [that] produces digital stories: audio-visual vignettes of approximately two to five minutes in length which present a first-person voiceover in conjunction with visual material [...], edited together on consumer-grade computers and software" (2011, p.74).

4 Here we draw on a performative conception of norms, following BUTLER (2004), GIBSON-GRAHAM (2006), and others. We consider norms to be always made or unmade, stabilized or destabilized, through repeated and routinized actions, thereby always leaving open the potential for norms to change by being practiced in different ways. However, with respect to the idea that any digital storytelling alone could "transform" systems of power or resolve conflict, we heed the insights of scholars who remind that no social space, even those oriented toward unsettling normative power dynamics, exists outside of structural power relations (e.g., SMITH 2013).

5 We primarily refer to "the feminist mic" as a way of thinking through feminist methodological praxis in this media creation context; we also acknowledge its resonance in feminist sound

Our ACT collaborators facilitated this training session; they staged a mock interview to demonstrate how to use the equipment and guide interviews most effectively. As part of this, they instructed interviewers to hold their microphones close to interviewees' mouths. While the group focused quietly on the demonstration at first, Rose Marie soon intervened with what seemed like a simple, technical question: "Why don't we use a tripod?" The facilitators responded that the interviews were meant to be very short and so tripods were unnecessary. However, a second intervention soon followed, this time from another participant, an activist in her 80s, who shifted the conversation from the technical toward the emotional. "What if you are petrified of microphones?" she asked, alluding to an experience from her childhood. She revealed her discomfort with having a microphone held directly to her mouth. [4]

The pause this time was longer and a sense of unease intensified around the circle. Then Rose Marie asserted herself once again, this time explicitly challenging us to realign our practices with our feminist and intergenerational principles, pointing especially to the importance of relationship-building in research, and to the power held by the researcher:

"Yeah, can I just say... having done quite a few interviews, I find that it's a question of attitude ... The best interviews I do are super time-consuming, but [the time] really helps. I meet with [participants] ahead of time. We have a coffee, we get to know each other a little bit, no equipment ... I negotiate the interview; I ask what is it they want to bring out about their story? ... This is a *feminist mic*. And then, by the time they come into the studio or you're doing the interview, they're *comfortable*. And they're not nervous." [5]

She elaborated, bringing further attention to issues of vulnerability, trust, and control in research encounters:

"We've got to treat the women that we're interviewing as absolute equals; we are working *with* them. And we have to do whatever it takes to build that relationship. So that they feel agency and we feel agency. *The mic is just an instrument, it's not a tool of authority*. Especially our generation, we're used to a mic as a tool of some kind of authority [...] It's really important that we keep the feminist dignity there, and that we keep that awareness that we are feminists and we're doing feminist mics." [6]

As Rose Marie shared with us her understanding of "doing the feminist mic," we marveled at how, with just a few words, she reminded us of a guiding concept that captured our methodological objectives. We have returned frequently to Rose Marie's words, and the idea of the feminist mic, in thinking about what aspects of our methodology—our workshop's planning, facilitation, and process—functioned to settle and unsettle the normative power dynamics often

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studies, where scholars have theorized feminist audio praxis as a particular relation to sound creation and to technologies including the "mic." Tara RODGERS, for example, coins the term "*pink noises*: sonic interventions from multiple sources, which destabilize dominant gendered discourses and work toward equal power distributions in cultural arenas where sounds reverberate" (2010, p.19). See also, for example, MADDEN (2011), McCARTNEY (2003), and SAWCHUK (1994).

experienced between researcher and researched (or between interviewer and interviewee). [7]

In this article we explore how we "did" (or did not do) a *feminist intergenerational mic*, examining three constitutive aspects of our digital storytelling praxis. First, the "mic": contesting existing assumptions that access to technology is necessarily a way of bridging across generations or empowering older people (SAWCHUK 2013; SAWCHUK & CROW, 2012), we demonstrate that the radical potential of our "mic" lay not in whether but in *how* technology was taken up by participants. Second, the "feminist": attending to process, power, vulnerability, and emotion, we investigate how our practice of flipping who was in front of, and behind, the "mic" worked to blur and/or uphold the power dynamics between academic and community participants (KINDON, 2003; LaMARRE & RICE, 2016). We explore the significance of both moments where we allowed ourselves to be vulnerable as researchers, and moments where we resisted vulnerability as researchers, and the implications of researcher vulnerability for power dynamics in our feminist research praxis. Finally, the "intergenerational": challenging conceptions of intergenerationality that posit elders as donors of wisdom (LOE, 2013; WEXLER, 2011), we explore how, through various elements of our workshop methodology, we both fostered reciprocal, multi-directional connections across age and circumscribed possibilities for such connections. We draw, then, on the concept of the *feminist intergenerational mic* to argue that the norm-challenging possibilities of our methodology did not result simply from participants' access to a platform and technology to tell their stories; it was not, in other words, solely a matter of offering up "the mic." Rather, through a detailed analysis of our process, we reveal that what invigorated this potential was how we conceptualized, negotiated, *and practiced* feminist and intergenerational principles, not only while recording but over the course of the entire weekend. [8]

We now begin with an overview of our conceptual framework (Section 2), before providing a more detailed description of our workshop design and methodology (Section 3). We then offer an analysis of our workshop process, with attention to the three themes outlined above: the "mic," the "feminist," and the "intergenerational" (Sections 4-6). Lastly, we conclude with a summary as well as suggestions of the broader implications of our findings (Section 7). [9]

## 2. Conceptual Framework

Our analysis draws from and extends three interrelated lines of inquiry. First, in scholarship on intergenerational digital storytelling and on aging and technology more broadly, researchers often posit technology as a way of connecting across—or a source of division between—generations (AARSAND, 2007; GAMLIEL & GABAY, 2014; KOLODINSKY, CRANWELL & ROWE, 2002).<sup>6</sup> Many researchers who study aging and technology also assume a straightforward correlation between access to technology and empowerment for seniors (CHARNESS & BOOT, 2009; CZAJA & LEE, 2009; KWON, 2016). However, we build on the

6 GAMLIEL and GABAY (2014), for example, assert "the importance of digital technology as an intergenerational bridging tool" (p.610).

earlier work of our *ACT* collaborators (SAWCHUK, 2013) to argue for the need to problematize such simplistic claims about technology, either as a tool to bridge generations or as a tool to empower the elderly (see also SAWCHUK & CROW, 2012). Instead, we focus on *how* technology is taken up and used, considering our "mic" not as inert, but as a politically and socially charged site of power negotiations. [10]

Second, in shifting our gaze to an analysis of how power operated throughout our methodology, we bring scholarship on digital storytelling explicitly into dialogue with research on feminist methodological praxis. We situate our discussion of digital storytelling in relation to scholarly conversations around power, process and vulnerability in participatory and arts-based research methodologies more broadly (McCARTAN, SCHUBOTZ & MURPHY, 2012; PFEIFFER, 2013). Many digital storytelling scholars to-date focus on the *products*, or the digital stories themselves (DAVIS, 2011; KANNENGIEßER, 2012; LAMBERT, 2009; WHITE, 2003). Following GUBRIUM and TURNER (2011) and others, however, we shift our gaze to an analysis of how power operated throughout our digital workshop *process*. As LaMARRE and RICE (2016, §9) argue, digital storytelling as methodology "presents us with new grounds for interrogating the role of the researcher and participant in research." We take this methodological possibility as a starting point, drawing, for example, on Sara KINDON's (2003) adjacent work on feminist, participatory video creation to explore the practices and implications of intentionally sharing authority between academic and community participants (see also ALEXANDRA, 2008; HILL, 2010; PARR, 2007). [11]

Third, we extend the concept of intergenerationality as researchers have so far deployed it in relation to digital storytelling. While scholars in this area have contributed to challenging ageist stereotypes (e.g., the assumption that older people are technologically illiterate), they often rely on conventional generational scripts: positioning older participants as "donors" of their past stories and younger participants as receptacles and technical experts (DAVIS, 2011; FLOTTEMESCH, 2013; HEWSON, DANBROOK & SIEPERT, 2015). Through such a linear framing, such scholars tend to elide the rich presents and futures of older people, in favor of focusing on their pasts, while also limiting intergenerationality within the bounds of conventional familial relations (FARRIER, 2015; CHAZAN, BALDWIN & EVANS, forthcoming). Drawing on the works of LOE (2013) and WEXLER (2011), both scholars whose digital storytelling projects challenge normative intergenerational dynamics, we seek to extend these conceptions by focusing on the active co-creation of knowledge and a shared, intergenerational present and future through digital storytelling. [12]

We turn now to a more detailed examination of our methodology and workshop design. Following this, we return to these three conceptual underpinnings as we examine how we did (and/or un-did) the *feminist intergenerational mic* through particular aspects of this design—that is, through the routinized dimensions of our process. In doing so, we engage closely with our practices of "the mic" (negotiations surrounding the use of technology, beyond assumptions of straightforward generation-bridging or empowerment), "the feminist" (the doing

and undoing of authority and power sharing), and "the intergenerational" (the challenging and contesting of multi-directional connections across generations). [13]

### 3. Methodology and Workshop Design

Co-author May CHAZAN, an academic in her 40s, led this workshop, as part of her [research program on aging and activism](#). Through this research, she explores how activists tell their own histories and why and how they engage in social change efforts throughout their lives. Co-author Maddy MACNAB, a graduate student in her 20s, also played a lead facilitation role in this workshop as one of a team of research assistants with *Aging Activisms*. We were collaborating for the first time with a prominent feminist research group ACT, led by Kim SAWCHUK, academic in her 50s, with postdoctoral fellow David MADDEN, scholar in his 30s, leading ACT's role in this project. This particular version of collaborative meaning-making—the *co-creation of media capsules* as a research methodology—was new to *Aging Activisms* and to both of us, and borrowed heavily from processes developed in previous ACT research.<sup>7</sup> The *Aging Activisms* group designed the program, invited participants, created the recording groups, and facilitated the weekend's activities and discussions. The ACT researchers drew on their critical expertise around technology and feminist media creation to direct the media-creation dimensions of the workshop, including training us and participants in the use of the recorders, cameras, and editing software, and also providing immense labor in preparing files for editing and organizing logistics.<sup>8</sup> [14]

This digital storytelling methodology pivoted around a series of recording sessions in which participants collaboratively recorded and photographed interviews for the media capsules. In planning for these recording sessions, we considered explicitly how authority, expertise, and power might operate in these encounters, how we might facilitate meaningful conversations across academic-community positions and across generations, and how participants and facilitators might challenge and/or consolidate certain norms and assumptions. We carefully designed the multi-generational, academic-community groups in which participants would conduct the interviews: each group consisted of two trios (or six participants), with a fairly even spread of younger students, academics in their 40s and 50s, and older community members in their 60s through 80s. The plan was that while one trio (interviewer, interviewee, and photographer) recorded their interviews, the other trio would watch supportively, building relationships through the experience of story-sharing. These groups of six would remain together over the course of the entire weekend, also allowing the time Rose Marie suggested was key to doing a trusting "feminist mic." [15]

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7 ACT had been developing a media capsules creation technique over a five-year period, in collaboration with key community partners including [Respecting Elders Communities Against Abuse](#) (RECAA) and [Seniors Action Quebec](#), and also as part of the "[Mobilities](#)" conference and research lab.

8 Though we will not reflect on the editing process in this article, on the final day all participants were invited to attend an editing workshop; this was optional and about one-third of the group attended. Those present were given the opportunity to work directly on editing their own digital stories. Those who chose not to attend were sent drafts of their media capsules at various stages and invited to provide feedback. Editing the digital stories was a back-and-forth dialogue.

One of the key features of the recording sessions was our decision to, as we noted earlier, "flip the mics," so that each participant could act in each role: thus, not only were community participants called upon to share their stories with younger researchers, but students and professors were also interviewed and community participants were also interviewers. Care was given to matching up each recording trio, so that community participants in longstanding research relationships with specific academics were positioned as interviewers of these academics, thereby further blurring the dynamics between "researcher" and "researched" (KINDON, 2003).<sup>9</sup> Students from the *Aging Activisms* team provided general support to each group, took observational notes, and kept time; many also participated in the recording trios. [16]

In addition to these recording sessions, the workshop involved a number of activities which were intended to further build relationships, develop trust, and thus support the storytelling process. These activities included: a cocktail party and multimedia cabaret on the first night; icebreakers, sharing circles, and roundtables, often led by community members or students; a training workshop led by *ACT* where we learned together how to make a media capsule; discussing the research component in detail together; inviting feedback after each session; and social opportunities, including an intergenerational activist song-writing workshop and an excursion to a local gallery and restaurant. [17]

With consideration to how power, emotion, intergenerationality, and technology were operating and deployed throughout, the *Aging Activisms* researchers documented each part of the workshop, starting with discussing this research component with participants. During all of the training, recording, and feedback sessions, as well as at all of the roundtable discussions, the *Aging Activisms* team took observational notes; researchers also recorded and transcribed many of the sessions.<sup>10</sup> At the end of the workshop, all of the note-takers (including the co-authors) typed up their notes and added reflections from the weekend. In addition, after each recording session, all participants were invited to provide written feedback on how they felt about that particular session, what surprised them, and how they saw power to be operating. We draw on these materials—observational notes, feedback forms, personal reflections, transcripts of sessions, and so on—as we turn now to our analysis. [18]

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9 *ACT's* previous media-creation projects have engaged extensively with questions of power and authority in ways that might be described as "flipping the mic" (e.g., SAWCHUK, 2013). In this instance, however, we refer to "flipping the mic" to mean specifically the swapping of typical research roles, wherein academics are placed in the role of interviewee, and community participants are placed in the role of interviewer.

10 All participants signed written informed consent forms, stating that they agreed to participate not only in the creation of digital stories but also in this research component; this was reviewed and approved by Trent University's Research Ethics Board, in accordance with Canada's Tri-Council standards for research with human subjects. All participants agreed to be identified by their full names and to have their digital stories made public, upon their final approval, see <http://www.agingactivisms.org/montreal-media-capsules> [Accessed: February 6, 2018].



#### 4. "The Mic": Understanding Technology as Practice

In considering "the mic," and specifically in thinking about how we used technologies in ways that enabled and/or challenged our goal of producing a critical feminist and intergenerational digital storytelling methodology, we return first to our launch point. Above, we described Rose Marie's intervention into the opening training workshop. Her invocation of the "feminist mic" specifically challenged us re-align our practices of *technology* with our feminist, intergenerational approach. In this section, we examine what came *before* the moment of the "feminist mic," in terms of workshop design, and what came *after*, in terms of how participants related to technology during the recording sessions. In examining this context, we suggest that it was not simply access to technology, as is often assumed, that bridged intergenerational divides or empowered older participants (CHARNESS & BOOT, 2009; KOLODINSKY et al., 2002). Rather, we explore how participants of all ages took up "the mic" and navigated power dynamics around technological expertise. [19]

The training workshop was preceded directly by a roundtable discussion, which we designed to set the tone for the weekend and make explicit our feminist and intergenerational approach. At the roundtable, May led a "diversity welcome" (described further later in this article), which aimed to create a meaningfully inclusive space; community participants (in their 70s) facilitated icebreaker activities; and Maddy led the weekend's first sharing circle. At the end, May outlined our methodology and research questions, asking everyone to consider how the presence of technologies might influence the stories shared and how power and emotion might operate throughout the weekend. [20]

Our ACT colleagues then led the aforementioned "tech training." They provided interview guidelines and tips for achieving high-quality audio and visual materials. They did so thoughtfully, staging a mock interview that not only demonstrated the process and use of the recorder, but also deliberately placed themselves (as the younger "tech experts") in relative positions of vulnerability—in front of the whole group as interviewers and interviewees. As we turned to this demonstration of the technical, however, we (the ACT facilitators and us) found ourselves alternating between asserting technical instructions about how to obtain "good footage" and re-affirming our principles of feminist praxis.<sup>11</sup> It was in the context of this alternating—between a more regulatory "how-to," and a more critical approach to authority and expertise—that a tension arose and Rose Marie offered the "feminist mic." In suggesting that a recording device itself could be "feminist," she reminded us to think beyond technology, to ask why we were learning to use

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11 In conversations with our ACT collaborators in May 2017, they clarified a distinction between the idea of "good" footage and our workshop's goal of creating *useable* footage. From their perspective, this goal was not necessarily at odds with a feminist praxis; it involved sharing knowledge about sound quality with participants, rather than making aesthetic judgments. Further, these technical guidelines were designed with an eye to keeping post-production labor manageable in scope and volume for editors (also graduate student researchers). These considerations highlight the complexities of maintaining a feminist media creation praxis, as our ACT colleagues put it, "in all aspects of production, from pre to post."

these instruments in the first place. She cautioned us of the dangers of presenting technology as neutral. [21]

This tension then re-emerged at various moments and in different ways throughout the weekend. Participants' reflections sheets and researchers' observational notes both indicated moments of disjuncture between the perceived inert technical authority of "good"—or useable—footage, and a feminist technological praxis. It became increasingly clear that technology did not "bridge" generations (GAMLIEL & GABAY, 2014), but instead was a point of negotiation through which participants and facilitators struggled with dynamics of "expertise" and authority. During the first recording session (i.e., participants' first opportunity to handle the recorders and cameras themselves), note-takers in two of the three recording groups noted how participants of different ages quickly, and without much concern for the technical details, hit "record" and started snapping photos; eager to take ownership of these devices to facilitate the story-sharing, they did not ask for any further instruction. Participants also took ownership over the spaces in which interviews were conducted, dragging potted plants and armchairs into place—not only for the composition of photos, but also to facilitate a sense of comfort and trust for interviewees and interviewers. [22]

This participant ownership of technology, with more regard for emotion and connection than for the quality of the footage produced, however, was not without tension. Our *ACT* colleagues were left with the responsibility of overseeing the technical requirements of the recording sessions. As they sought to do their jobs to support the process, they intervened gently but consistently in participants' interactions with the technology. Some participants suggested on their feedback sheets that such interventions, unknowingly, sometimes functioned to reassert the authority of inert technology; participants actively resisted this. For example, multiple interview groups noted how the suggested time-limit for interviews was enforced over the course of the weekend, creating friction between a seemingly technical requirement, and what was for many an emotional-political issue of voice and intersubjectivity. Marietta HAAS-LUBELSKY, a human rights advocate in her 80s, was the first to be interviewed in one group; over the course of 14 minutes, she shared a number of moving, personal stories. After the interview concluded, as everyone in the room began thanking Marietta and asking her more questions, the *ACT* facilitator in the room suggested that 14 minutes was somewhat long, and that next time they should aim for a more concise interview. From the facilitator's perspective, this attention to time limits was consistent with an equitable feminist storytelling praxis that included, among other things, considerations of post-production labor (see Note 11). For some participants, however, this became a source of tension. In several of the interviews that followed this interaction, for instance, the group chose to directly contravene this suggestion: they left the recorder running to capture the lengthy conversations that ensued post-interview between interviewee, interviewer, and the rest of the group. Other groups similarly decided to discount instructional guidelines offered in the spirit of obtaining usable footage and to leave their recorders running to capture post-interview dialogue as well. These ongoing contestations demonstrate how, through our methodology, participants and researchers in

some ways consolidated normative power relations around technological expertise, while at the same time, all involved worked in various ways to resist these norms. [23]

During the closing roundtable at the end of the weekend, May asked participants to reflect on the role they felt that technology had played in the workshop. Marietta expressed her thoughts as follows: "Storytelling is storytelling. I didn't particularly like the microphone, but other than that ... It was very supportive. I still don't know, 'digital' is just another form, it's just a new adventure." A number of other participants echoed Marietta's sense that the technology itself was not what made this experience meaningful to them. Joanne SHERWIN, activist in her 80s, agreed, "I didn't feel like the technology interfered at all, we were so engrossed in each other's stories. It was really wonderful to hear everyone's story. And for me the technology really didn't impact it." [24]

Near the end of a lengthy conversation in which many participants agreed that the recording equipment had neither been empowering nor frightening, Emma LANGLEY, one of the *Aging Activisms* researchers in her 20s, considered what *had* been meaningful about the space for her and her group, if not the digital recording itself:

"Something else, my group was reflecting afterwards about how unique of an opportunity this is and the possibilities. You were saying the technology was changing it a lot, but we found that the conversations we had afterward were really valuable too and we thought just the space of sharing stories in that way, whether they were recorded or not, was really very unique and powerful and that it would be great to do in some other form for a different purpose, maybe without even the technology aspect of it." [25]

In Emma's experience, it was the building of relationships through reciprocal story sharing, and a growing atmosphere of trust and mutual appreciation, that created a sense of possibility. Emma also alludes to post-interview conversations, where the feminist praxis of letting the recorder capture casual exchange was at odds with the guidelines for useable footage. In this way, her comment speaks not to the irrelevance of technology in the space. Rather, it suggests that *how* participants chose to engage with the technology fostered a kind of feminist, intergenerational praxis: contesting the perceived rules of "good footage," asserting their agency in the process, and challenging the authority often vested in researchers. [26]

Our analysis of "the mic" thus reveals an underlying tension between designing a methodology that might allow researchers and participants to destabilize normative researcher-researched and older-younger dynamics on the one hand, and the realities of guiding a process that requires at least some technical instruction on the other. What emerged is a clear example of how power and resistance operated around the technology; through these dynamics, all involved fluidly challenged and consolidated Rose Marie's invocation of "the mic as a tool of authority" and existing assumptions about younger researchers as technical

advisors. With these important contestations over "the mic" as a backdrop, we now turn to examine more closely the practices through which we sought to "do a mic" that was both feminist and intergenerational, as well as the possibilities and limitations of our methodological design. [27]

## **5. "The Feminist": Reflections on Power, Vulnerability, and Flipping the Mic**

"Flipping the mic," as discussed previously, was one key methodological strategy we employed to align our technological practices with our feminist principles, as it allowed us to contest certain normative power dynamics in research. As noted, we designed recording sessions deliberately to shake up the conventions of who was in front of, and behind, the "mic," ensuring academics, students, and community participants were equally researchers and researched. For both of us, this process of being (or potentially being) behind the mic revealed a series of vulnerabilities we had not anticipated. We both encountered moments of fragility in this process, followed by reflections on the importance of this kind of experience for doing "a feminist mic" (or meaningfully challenging normative research dynamics). What follows in this section is a short reflection from each of us on our respective experiences of these dynamics. [28]

### **5.1 On being interviewed (May's reflection)**

As the person leading the design of the workshop, I made the decision to position myself among the first to be interviewed, recognizing that doing so would place me in a position of relative vulnerability. I hoped that by being among the first to share my story and be interviewed/ photographed, my interview would act as an ice-breaker within our recording group. I deliberately chose Sharon SWANSON, activist in her 70s and longtime participant in my research, to interview me. Sharon was someone whom I have interviewed as part of my program of research on a number of occasions; not only had she, in the past, shared her life story with me in great detail, but she had also become a friend, and someone who had followed my work for a decade. Flipping the mic in this case seemed to me a clear way to begin to challenge some of the ways power operates in our relationship. [29]

What I did not anticipate, however, was the level of vulnerability I would feel as interviewee. As someone who is quite comfortable in the researcher role, I had never had the experience of being interviewed, and I did not realize how destabilizing I would find it. As Sharon asked me questions (questions that I had designed, and to which I had pre-prepared answers), I froze: I could not think of how to respond. I was being asked about my own history with activism, which is fairly extensive, and yet I could only think about who would hear the story and how it would be perceived. I left out an entire decade of my recent life's work and, interestingly, it was Sharon who began reminding me of my own contributions, prompting me to speak about the pieces I was leaving out. [30]

I came away from this experience with a sense that all feminist researchers should undergo a similar type of process of having their mic flipped, as this provided visceral insight into the operations of power in research. It also made clear to me how the stories we tell are shaped by the relationships, emotions, and vulnerabilities we experience within the digital storytelling process. [31]

## **5.2 On refusing to be interviewed (Maddy's reflection)**

In addition to being involved in designing and facilitating the workshop, in my recording group, my role was, variously, note-taker, timekeeper, photographer, and listener. Over the course of the weekend, we developed a level of closeness as a group that I had not anticipated, and that I found moving. Each person in the room—not just the designated "interviewer"—listened intentionally as stories were shared; in between, we had rich conversations, affirmed each other's experiences and imagined new uses for this exciting story-sharing we were engaging in. By Sunday afternoon I was the only one in the group who had not been interviewed; even so I still felt a part of this closeness. Though I was still self-conscious about the dynamics around my implied position of authority as timekeeper and note-taker, by the end of the weekend I thought I had mostly let go of these official duties—helped along by some friendly teasing from the older women in the group. [32]

My sense of my closeness to the group, however, was unsettled when I was faced with a question from Elizabeth VEZINA that was both an invitation and a challenge. Everyone on the schedule had been interviewed; as we chatted amongst ourselves, Elizabeth, activist participant in her 70s, leaned toward me, and suggested excitedly that there was time for me to be interviewed now. Quickly and unthinkingly, I fell back on the very researcher authority I had been trying to shrug off all weekend: I declined, appealing to the schedule and to my duties. Elizabeth was kind, and didn't push it. The moment passed. [33]

As the day wrapped up, my refusal hung heavily over me. I was struck by how little it took for me to re-assert the boundary between researcher and researched, even in a space that we had begun to think might be transforming those dynamics. Because I had not dared to speak and be heard in the vulnerable position of interviewee, it was remarkably easy for me to retract whatever closeness I had provisionally offered. It became clear to me that listening empathetically was not enough to challenge dominant power dynamics; rather, the possibility of this space lay in the mutual sharing that the other participants engaged in. As we all came together for a final roundtable later that day, I shared my sense of regret with the group. I was grateful for their responses. "We'll get you next time," some of them said. I was reminded both of possibility and responsibility: the possibility that these relationships are ongoing and that there will be other chances to connect and share; and my responsibility as a researcher and simply as a person in relationship, to work to shift that imbalance. [34]

### 5.3 Bringing our reflections together

In these contrasting moments, we were reminded that, even in environments designed to unsettle conventional power dynamics, the vulnerabilities associated with being researched remain present. May's reflections demonstrate how allowing herself to be vulnerable as a researcher had a palpable effect on power dynamics between her, as an academic researcher, and her longtime community research collaborator. Maddy's reflections demonstrate how resisting vulnerability as an academic researcher can actively reinscribe normative power dynamics in research. By reflecting critically on these moments afterward, however, both in the context of the workshop and now, in the context of this article, we have both reaffirmed our commitment to continually examining and challenging such power dynamics. In the context of developing an explicitly feminist digital storytelling methodology, moving away from mic-as-tool-of-author to feminist mic, we see this flipping of who is typically researched and who is the researcher as an uncomfortable but potentially norm-challenging practice. [35]

## 6. "The Intergenerational": Unsettling the Scripts

We now turn to our methodological practices around intergenerationality: did we practice a mic that was not only feminist in its attention to power and emotion, but also critically intergenerational in its effort to move beyond conventional scripts? If so, how? Here we sought to "flip the mic" yet again, in a different way. By design, each recording trio was multi-generational, participants of all ages were interviewed, and thus knowledge exchange was not simply from elders to the young (LOE, 2013; WEXLER, 2011). In practice, however, we encountered both the possibilities and limitations of our intergenerational design. While participants' future-oriented sharing of social change practices fostered connections across age that unsettled certain norms, participants also circumscribed (and potentially served to settle) other intergenerational connections by reinforcing norms and assumptions at the intersection of age, gender, and sexuality. [36]

Over the course of the weekend, it was clear that participants' relationships challenged assumptions about intergenerationality as a linear transmission of knowledge of the past. In their feedback forms, some older participants expressed their appreciation that they felt heard by younger participants; more commonly, however, older participants highlighted the importance of the exchange in the other direction. For example, Joanne, in her 80s, after interviewing Christina HARALANOVA, a graduate student in her 30s, expressed excitement: "It was great! I learned so much. I loved being the interviewer [...] the delight in learning something new. For me, that was really important as regards the intergenerational differences." Joanne's excitement certainly troubles assumptions about the conventional flow of wisdom from the old to the young. At the same time, Christina's reflection on the process, from the position of younger interviewee, calls into question the common framing of the elderly as "donors" of solely their *past* experiences. A scholar and activist whose work centers on computer hacking, Christina shared, "It was fascinating to talk about hacking while older women in the room screamed, 'That's fascinating!' And ending the

interview with an invitation to hack together." In this intergenerational exchange, Christina and Joanne were not limited to discussions of the past; rather, through mutual recognition and respect as active agents, they oriented their relationship toward a shared future. [37]

Participants also engaged with familial assumptions embedded in intergenerational connection. At the end of the weekend, one professor in her 50s spoke to her sense of family in relation to fostering connections with other participants:

"This weekend has been very sustaining...I shared that I did feel a certain kind of familial connection because I had shared in a way that I do not share with my family. The intergenerational herstories, the similarities, the differences in the aspirations and visions of labor, I found really sustaining. I do see my activism at the university where I work ... while on one hand can feel like we are all in it together, on the other can feel very isolating, so this has been so important to me. To feel like I am not alone. To have focused time on what is so important to us all." [38]

Though this participant identifies the connection she fostered by sharing with others across age and other differences as "familial," she also reimagines what "family" might look like. Describing shared aspirations, visions for the future, and a commitment to social change, she explicitly sets apart this "family" from her own biological family. For her, the biological family is a common point of departure for reflecting on intergenerationality; however, she politicizes the intergenerational relationships fostered in this workshop and articulates why they were meaningful to her, *in opposition to* conventional familial relations. [39]

In tension with these norm-challenging moments of connection, we also noted moments where participants butted up against intergenerational assumptions in more ambiguous ways. Several queer-identified participants, all in their 20s, reflected on an unintended silence around queerness that persisted throughout the workshop, and their respective decisions to omit their own queerness from their interviews. These reflections and ensuing conversations gave us pause to consider how our workshop design might have left certain norms unchallenged. [40]

Melissa BALDWIN, a graduate student in her 20s who was interviewed by Pat WINSTON, a community activist in her 80s, wrote on her feedback form about her omission of her queerness as a way to maintain the connection between her and Pat: "I [...] think (ageism?) I did not talk about queerness (even though it's a key factor of my politicization) because I did not want to alienate Pat and hinder the amazing flow of our conversation." In later conversations about this, Melissa emphasized this special "kindredness" that she and Pat fostered, as they exchanged social change practices and found shared values. Pat's reflections on her feedback form also spoke to this feeling of special connection (with a hint of self-doubt): "We were in sync—at least I felt we were. [...] The years between us (many years!) disappeared." In her attempt to hold onto this connection, then, what might have informed Melissa's sense that her queerness might "alienate"

Pat?<sup>12</sup> While explicitly noting that she "was not afraid of [Pat] rejecting [her] or of her being homophobic in any way," Melissa wondered whether and how their sense of connection might have implicitly relied on a sense of sameness. By voicing her queerness, Melissa admitted, "I think I was afraid she would see herself less in me" (Melissa BALDWIN, personal communication, February 26 2017). She speculated that it was perhaps in part the insidious working of ageist discourses about "the generation gap" that influenced her own sense of age as a chasm across which only tenuous connections can be made. [41]

Whereas Melissa's decision not to share her queerness was linked to the particular dynamics between her and Pat in the workshop space, another participant identified experiences *outside* of the workshop space that strongly influenced and perhaps limited the connections she was able to make across generations. Emma LANGLEY, a graduate student in her 20s, was interviewed by a participant in her 70s; reflecting on her interview, she explained that she decided to remain silent about her queerness largely because of her recent experiences of enduring homophobic behavior directed at her from older people in her life. She reflected that because of these experiences:

"I think I had a sense of ageist caution that, simply because of the age of the person interviewing me and the people in the room, maybe they wouldn't be as open or accepting of the idea of queerness as younger people would, even if they wouldn't outright say it" (Emma LANGLEY, personal communication, February 26 2017). [42]

In this case, Emma reminds us that our critical methodology, and the "safer" space we attempted to create, does not exist in a vacuum (SMITH, 2013). Indeed, the powerful social forces of homophobia and heteronormativity not only intruded into the workshop in the form of participants' past experiences, but these were also reinforced through the resulting erasure of queerness in that space and in the digital stories produced. [43]

While Melissa and Emma each experienced these dynamics around gender and sexuality differently, their respective reflections raise similar questions: was there perhaps an unspoken heteronormativity and cis-femininity that was shaping the boundaries of the workshop space, and the intergenerational connections possible therein? Indeed, in our aforementioned conversations following the workshop, both Melissa and Emma expressed discomfort at repeated invocations of "womanhood" as the assumed point of connection between all participants. The heterosexual and cis-feminine implications of "woman" as a category might have made it difficult for each of them, and perhaps others, to connect on these terms. Further, it might have made the possibility of voicing queerness, as a politics, and as a way of doing both gender and sexuality differently, even more remote. These were not realizations either one had prior to experiencing the workshop, as both were part of the *Aging Activisms* team and had input into the workshop design; instead, it was through engaging with the vulnerability of being

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12 It is noteworthy that Melissa was not originally on the schedule to be interviewed; she was drawn in for an interview spontaneously and, unlike co-author Maddy, she agreed. So Melissa did not have time to plan out what she might share in advance.



both researchers and participants in this research, and through critical reflection on the stories they ultimately shared, that they came to understand these limits of our intergenerational mic. [44]

In retrospect, we realize that we had not adequately considered how the category of "woman" and the ongoing heteronormativity of feminist discourses would intersect with lingering ageist assumptions to limit the possibilities of intergenerational sharing. In conversations after the workshop, both Melissa and Emma expressed that their decisions to speak about their queerness in their interviews might have been different had we make explicit space for, as Emma called it, "positive conversation around queerness."<sup>13</sup> Thus, despite designing a methodology intended to challenge certain assumptions, our practices—or lack of forthright engagement with certain assumptions—in some cases might have functioned to *uphold* normative power dynamics. In participants' reflections on their intergenerational connections beyond linear and unidirectional knowledge transmission, we see both the possibilities and the complexities of our reimagined politics of intergenerationality. [45]

## 7. Conclusion

Just as our analysis of this workshop suggests that the mere presence of technology does not itself bridge generational divides, or empower older people, so too is it inadequate to declare that digital storytelling as a methodology is necessarily democratic, emancipatory, or radical (GUBRIUM & TURNER, 2011; LOE, 2013). Indeed, our close and critical examination of our attempt to "do" a feminist, intergenerational digital storytelling praxis suggests that any radical possibility of such methodology is incumbent upon focusing intentionally and reflexively on the "doing." [46]

In our experience, doing the *feminist, intergenerational mic* meant more than just stating our intention to do so. It meant designing a methodology with thought to flipping the authority of the researcher, to the point that researchers themselves grappled meaningfully with their own power and vulnerability. It meant paying close attention to how we set up spaces and nurtured relationships to challenge norms and assumptions around age, gender, and intergenerationality. It meant considering the emotional and social dimensions of technological use, and their

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13 This has led us to reflect on one practice we engaged in for this very purpose—the "diversity welcome"—and to question whether it created the kind of open space we had hoped. The diversity welcome, which at the time of our workshop was common in activist spaces in the North American context (TRAINING FOR CHANGE, n.d.), is a practice intended to foster inclusion at the opening of a gathering, where participants with widely diverse ways of identifying, experiences and embodiments, are named and welcomed by participants in a repetitive ritual. At our workshop's opening roundtable, we handed out cards to each participant and asked them to welcome those identified on the cards. The ritual sounded, for instance, like this: "I'd like to welcome LGBTQIA2S+ community [lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, queer, intersex, asexual, two-spirit, and all other genders and sexualities], and those who are pansexual, polysexual, asexual, heterosexual"; "I'd like to welcome women, men, trans people, people of all genders and spirits"; "I'd like to welcome visible and invisible minorities"; "I'd like to welcome people with diverse abilities, learning and listening styles, and ways of engaging in the world." And so on.

implications for participatory media creation. Lastly, it meant making space for critical self-reflection afterward, in the form of this analysis. [47]

At the closing roundtable of our workshop, participants were asked to describe in one word what feeling they were leaving with. Of the words participants chose, a few in particular resonate with us now, as we close this piece: *love; courage; expanding; pondering; and hopeful*. We can imagine exciting possibilities in the ways in which, through the methodological praxis of the *feminist, intergenerational mic*, we did succeed in challenging certain norms and routinized assumptions around age, technology, and knowledge production. We also are reminded of our accountability to the ways we re-settled certain normative power dynamics through that same methodological praxis. These tensions, and the need for rigorous, hopeful, and courageous self-reflection as feminist researchers, have not diminished, but rather grounded and invigorated, our sense of the radical potential of this methodology. [48]

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