Being Real: The Struggle for Authenticity in the Historian-Narrator Exchange

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"Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, praying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse."[1] Those are the first words to Janet Malcolm's *The Journalist and the Murderer*, a text that probes into the ethics of journalism and discovers little to take pride in. Malcolm herself was a journalist, one who had clearly struggled to justify the means of her profession.

These words are a touch hyperbolic when applied to oral history, but they should not be easily dismissed. Much like journalists, oral historians also must gain the individuals' trust in order to record their stories, and they use a number of strategies—some borrowed from the journalistic profession—to do so. Malcolm's idea of journalistic betrayal gestures, however dramatically, towards points of tension that often arise between oral historians and narrators (oral historians, for example, have recounted charged disagreements with their narrators due to differing interpretations of an interview).

I quote Malcolm because I, too, have misgivings of my occupation's ethics. Over the past several months, I have been a recruiter, confidante, and interpreter, the requisite roles of an oral historian. Performing each instilled in me a deepening sense of unease. I employed the most conscientious practices that oral history has to offer and yet could not escape the truth underlying this project: I was using these people for my own ends. This is not to say that this was a wholly lopsided transaction; after all, one could argue that they were using me as well—

[1] Malcolm, Janet. *The Journalist and the Murderer*. New York: Knopf, 1990, 1.

as their platform, as their means of expressing themselves without fear of judgment or reprobation. That said, the reciprocity was anything but equal.

For an interviewer and a narrator, oral history has long been an uneasy endeavor. Designing and executing a project specifically for this thesis has magnified some anxieties. Centered around recently graduated Columbia University students of color (with one exception) who engaged in activism work while attending the institution, I presented my project as an opportunity to provide a deeper look into their lives as undergraduate activists. I had asked to interview my narrators under the guise of collecting stories about college activism, particularly those centered around students of color, as a means of teasing out common themes or problems in young people's work towards social justice. I had told them that I intended to have this topic be a long-term research interest of mine, one that could help the next generation of student activists become more aware of this history, in the hopes of helping them become more efficient organizers. I had said these things knowing that these claims were, at best, half-true.

Such inquietude has led to me to a number of questions that I attempt to answer in this thesis. Most are relegated to the interpersonal dynamics of the historian-narrator exchange: Were my actions "morally indefensible?" Did my strategies diverge from conventional oral history practice (and if so, to what extent)? Can oral historians claim superior moral standards when compared to practitioners of other interview methods, be they journalists, sociologists, anthropologists, and so forth? What are the limits of interpersonal authenticity—if such a term can even be strictly defined—in an interview context?

By necessity, a personal lens will guide the answers to these questions. Documenting this experience will anchor this investigation—with its hazy questions about authenticity and

other nebulous terms, such as authority and indeed, activism—from the allure of abstraction. Portions of my biography, which factored heavily into these questions, will also be prominent throughout the text. The occasional historicization of my narrators, who belong—perhaps unwittingly—to a tradition of Columbia-branded activism, will also be weaved in to this thesis.

These questions came into focus as I came near the end of my project's interview phase. I had conducted five interviews. A few months later, a good friend, having praised her commitment to social justice, recommended that I reach out to Sofia, who would become my sixth and last narrator. Sofia and I scheduled a pre-interview—a phone call—the following week.

Pre-interviews have long been a practice in oral history work, and are an essential component to a good interview. They are designed to inform narrators about the project, what is expected of them, and of their rights with respect to the recording and any transcripts. Beyond these intentions, however, is the hope that the pre-interview phase engenders familiarity between the oral historian and the narrator. Unlike the interviews themselves, these are unrecorded conversations, which should encourage the future narrator (and historian) to express themselves more freely.

Though the term "pre-interview" is not universally employed in the field, oral historians have long extolled this stage as essential for fostering not just rapport, but equality. The first chapters of Alessandro Portelli's *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* provides a particularly eloquent example. Portelli suggests strategies on how to foster equality in an interview setting while arguing that befriending one's narrators earnestly was key to fostering an equitable oral history environment. Portelli imagined the oral history interview as a "mutual sighting," a process that succeeded only if the two subjects, interviewer and narrator,

engaged in an equal, mutual exchange, or an "encounter of two subjects who recognize each other as subjects." (Portelli even stylized the word "interview" as "inter/view" to accentuate this idea of reciprocity).[2] He warns that "equality, however, cannot be wished into being," recognizing that historical and socioeconomic conditions can remove its possibility altogether.

With one exception, these roadblocks were not present for this project. My narrators and I all held similar cultural capital, having attended the same undergraduate institution at around the same time. Most of us were also people of color. Class difference was one inconsistent variably that admittedly affected some interviews, however subtly Altogether, though, our commonality meant that we avoided the barriers that so often stifle fieldwork projects. My narrators seemed to assume good will on my behalf. I suspect that these shared experiences drove these assumptions.

I believe that my pre-interview routine was effective in communicating the aforementioned logistics and this virtue of equality. As a guiding rule, I attempted to be both transparent about my motivations and grateful for their participation. I introduced the concept of "informed consent." I extolled the virtues of their legal release, explaining in detail their right to rescind part or all of their interview from public access. I spoke of my goals in this project, namely to document the lives of student activists of color in order to assess the unique challenges they face. I told each of my narrators that I was far from politically active when I attended Columbia. I disclosed, rather vaguely, that I considered myself "temperamentally unsuited" for activism as an undergraduate, that I was then too reticent a person to take such

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[2] Portelli, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History. State University of New York Press, 1991,* 31-43.

public stands. This project would be making up for lost time. With Sofia, I recited the same basic speech, ensuring that she felt comfortable and enthused about being interviewed.

This routine, however, was not entirely transparent. This is not to say that my outward claims for embarking on this project were outright fabrications. My gratitude for their involvement was, and is, sincere. It is true that I was interested in their Columbia experience and intended to document their lives. I was, in fact, quite the shy young man as an undergraduate. But the case I presented deliberately omitted truths that could risk the narrators' desire to participate. The truth is that I was—and in some respects, still am—much more ambivalent about pursuing this oral history project than I indicated to my narrators. I knew, perhaps unconsciously at the time, that the commonalities between myself and my narrators—particularly our shared identity as persons of color—lent me the credibility to present this project as I did.

Oral historians have differed on whether or not it is moral to present myself so selectively; there is, however, some consensus. To quote Linda Shopes, "oral historians counsel telling a narrator the truth about the subject, purpose, and disposition of an interview, but argue that they are under no obligation to inform the narrator of the interpretation they will bring to bear upon an individual's story." Despite this general agreement among professionals in the field, I continue to grapple with the ensuing question Shopes asks about this consensus, borrowed from oral historian Jeremy Brecher:

> "'What is the nature of our implied contract with our informants, and what limits should that contract place on the way we present them?'"[3]

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[3] Shopes, Linda. "Law, Ethics, and Oral History as an Archival Practice." In *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*. Ed. Thomas L. Charlton, Lois E. Meyers, and Rebecca Sharpless. Lanham: Altamira, 2007. 131.

Brecher's question is an open one. If one were to favor the consensus, oral history becomes more difficult to distinguish from other interview-based methodologies (such as journalism) if an oral historian should feel no obligation to involve or inform their narrators about their interpretation of these interviews. Should this, then, be the consensus? If oral historians continue to prize ongoing consent, should that not extend to their interpretation? In writing this thesis, I have followed the general counsel. I chose to free myself from the constraints of obligation, deeming it necessary to write honestly. In doing so, my claim to "moral defensibility," as Malcolm would phrase it, seems as dubious as it would be coming from a journalist. Deciding to anonymize these interviews is but an oral historian's insufficient capitulation to conscience.

Brecher's question also invokes authenticity, and an oral historian's capacity for it given their inherent duties to others (such as their narrators or funders). As a concept, authenticity has been discussed previously by oral historians, though often this has been with respect to oral history sources' credibility in academia. These debates center on the aspects of oral history that distinguish it from other historical approaches, which stem from a disciplinary embrace of subjectivity. Those ideologically tethered to a scientific-like belief in objectivity, have cause for skepticism: oral history sources are indispensable due to its improvisational nature, and narrators often have false memories or recount a story that does not add up. From this perspective, oral history sources are not authentic because they are not necessarily faithful to the "facts" of a historical moment. However, these concerns have not discouraged academics

from using oral sources in their work. Indeed, the inconsistencies themselves are ripe for analysis.[4]

Elsewhere, oral historians have invoked authenticity when discussing approaches to creating end-products that cater specifically to participants. Howard Levin introduced the most notable example of this when describing a case study that involved high schoolers conducing oral history interview with the elderly. He coined the term “authentic doing” to refer to “student authentic work that has meaning, virtue, and purpose to a wider audience outside of the school.”[5] Here, “authentic” is implied to have several definitions: “student authentic work” suggests that that the work is “authentic” because students conducted their interviews independently; when attached to the word “doing,” however, “authentic” is imbued with a sense of citizenship. The former hints at originality and self-authorship while the latter implies an outward disposition. Levin does not define “authentic” on its own terms, allowing the word to encompass meanings that are in tension with each other.

Levin’s liberal use of the word is a microcosm of a centuries-long debate on authenticity; it has indeed proven a most malleable concept. This thesis could spend hundreds of pages summarizing and analyzing what philosophers have written about authenticity. Instead, I will defer to literary theorist Geoffrey Hartman, who wrote that “authenticity,” much like its equally nebulous cousin “spirituality,” “cannot be saved from [its] pathos. The impression [it leaves] is clear enough.” Echoing Nietzsche, Hartman argues that words

[4] For more on the subject, read chapter titled “What Makes Oral History Different” in Alessandro Portelli’s book, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli.*

[5] Levin, Howard. “Authentic Doing: Student-Produced Web-Based Digital Video Oral Histories. *The Oral History Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2011, pp. 6–33.

themselves are imperfect when representing ideas or ideals. In Hartman's view, would render "authenticity," as perhaps the most "inauthentic word around."[6]

The word's built-in irony leaves it prone to nebulousness. This thesis will venture to constrain the word, and its extensive philological flaws, to a smaller arena. As defined in this thesis, to be authentic is to act according to one's own desires and instincts; it is to be unfettered from outside influences; it is to have an outwardly sincere disposition, without fear of judgment or reprisal from others. This definition is admittedly trite and not without its own issues. Conceptions of authenticity cannot escape the culture from which they were conceived. One's own desires cannot helped but be molded by experience (and such tensions become only more strained in a cosmopolitan—or to use a more damning descriptor, fractious—culture). For brevity and the author's sake, however, "authenticity" will refer to this definition throughout this thesis.

This conception of authenticity appeals. As Charles Taylor said, "the affinity is obvious. Authenticity is itself an idea of freedom; it involves my finding the design of my life myself, against the demands of external conformity."[7] Nietzsche's ideal of man, the *Übermensch*, is empowered because he feels no ties to societal values. To be authentic is to have power of an entirely self-possessed nature, one that cannot be subjugated under any terms. In theory, such a conception of authenticity is a virtue than anyone should hope to embody.

In practice, however, the freedom that stems from authentic living can clash with adopting a code of ethics. Oral history ethics are no exception. It is at this nexus—of

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[6] Hartman, Geoffrey H. *Scars of the Spirit: The Struggle against Inauthenticity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. 3-15.
[7] Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991, 67-68.

authenticity and ethical doing—that the prospect of becoming an authentic oral historian seems a distant possibility. How can one be an authentic oral historian if the very profession demands a sort of fealty to narrators, who have a distinct set of self-interests? Is the interview itself, in its semi-orchestrated nature, not an inherently inauthentic encounter? Could one not counter that oral history has built a "culture," one that valorizes a code of ethics, thus allowing an ethically bound oral historian a claim to authenticity? Is authenticity even a priority for the oral historian in light of these other values? If so, why even ask these questions?

Conducting this oral history project has provided some insights into these queries. That I was inauthentic throughout the process is not in doubt. In many respects, I believe this led to many successes. I was able to establish a rapport with my narrators, some of whom I had first met for this project. In feigning solidarity, I was able to build trust and provoke responses from my narrators that they might not risk saying otherwise. Elsewhere, I do wonder if being inauthentic—in the sense that I refused to betray my (current and past) reservations about college activism—limited the efficacy of this oral history project. Ironically, my internal distaste discouraged me from asking the more critical questions about activism, for fear of exposing myself as an outsider with this group. In adopting one mold of authenticity—that of the oral historian, professional empathizer—I relinquished another: that of myself as a doubter of—to put it uncharitably—rah-rah types. It is tough to gauge for certain just how much was gained or lost during these interviews.

I should state here that my unease runs deeper than a surface-level inner conflict with authenticity. At the core of this was my personal understanding and relationship with activism, particularly as a Columbia undergraduate. For me to claim that I was "temperamentally unsuited" for it, as I had to my narrators, was to equivocate the greater truth. I had been much

more candid when confiding to my close friends in college, eager to deride student activists as deluded and eager for attention. Despite having made friends with few self-identifying activists, I was then convinced that these students were not as committed to their causes as they purported to be. For varying reasons—ranging from a tenuous grasp on Columbia's activist history to what were, frankly, projections of deeply felt insecurities—I dismissed these folks as not worth taking seriously. The years since have been illuminating. Learning more about Columbia's middling tradition of activism, combined with a few years of honest reflection, has tempered this disdain to a simmering skepticism.

Two moments from my time as an undergraduate once hardened this contempt. Once, I walked by a campus protest decrying rape culture and its undeniable presence on the many readings that were required per the Core Curriculum. In spite of my skepticism, I was impressed: these students were enthusiastic, well organized, and communicated their message well. These good feelings, though, would soon be deflated. That evening, I attended a university-sponsored party. Music with obvious misogynistic themes blared through the room's speakers. Some of the protesters, having put away their picket signs some hours ago, danced cheerfully to the music; some even sang along to the kind of content they had so vigorously condemned. I found myself surprised at my outrage. How could their gestures earlier that day be so brazenly empty? Their whole act of protest appeared to be just that—an act.

My one dalliance with activism earlier that semester should have primed me for this inconsistency. This encounter was a begrudging one from the outset. A close friend, well aware of my resistance to such things, asked that I attend an off-campus demonstration he had spent weeks organizing as favor. I obliged. A few nights later, I joined dozens of Columbia students

congregating on 116th street before entering the South Ferry bound 1-train. Once we boarded, conversations that would affirm my doubts were within earshot. Peers asked questions that, to me, were outright disqualifying. *So what is this for, again? Wait, what are we asking for?* These very students joined the group's chants once we arrived at our stop and began marching to the protest site, loudly proclaiming the simply worded demands to anyone who would listen. Again, I was upset to observe what I understood as apathy that roamed freely beneath a radical surface. The irony of the moment—that I also participated despite my own indifference—was lost on me then.

These two episodes and the charged responses they evoked were inevitable in retrospect. Though I did not know this at the time, attending Columbia proved to be a reckoning with the self. Harlem was my first home in America. It is where I attended elementary school, where I learned to speak English, where I developed ambitions that seemed entirely within reach to me and family, because we were finally here, in America. Choosing the university that has leveraged its institutional power to usurp and eventually erase this neighborhood has its consequences to the conscience. Like myself and the rest of the student body, undergraduate activists were slowly eradicating the particularity—the *authenticity*—of my neighborhood just by being here. That some of them recognized this was of little comfort, as such self-awareness did not inhibit many of these students from beseeching Columbia administrators to condemn our required Western readings as imperialist, colonialist, or some other –ism implying imposition. I often wished that these students—or, to put it kindly, my idea of these students—would rein in their sanctimony and recognize that they were not exempt from what they so maligned. I wished for this because my own complicity gnawed at me every day. It still does.

Charles Morrissey judged that “the sensitive most questions in America today are not about sex but about money.”[8] Becoming an American has meant learning that class is the proverbial third rail in conversation, even at a liberal institution like Columbia College, the most economically diverse undergraduate school in the Ivy League. Whereas race and gender were topics of open, often personal conversation in courses, class was often relegated to an abstract realm. One of my narrators expressed her frustrations about this dichotomy when reflecting on his experience attending an organization’s meeting centered the Occupy Wall Street protests:

> “I had to take my hand up and be like, “all right, y’all, at a certain point, though, we are at an elite institution…to even sit and have this conversation is a luxury. At a certain point, we need to be a more self-aware that we are poised to be the 1% more likely than we are to remain the 99%. Take some agency over your privilege.” That was not met with much positive regard.”

Much of what my narrator says here resonates with my experience, but I do quibble with one point: most of the students she was addressing, as well as herself, were *already* part of the “1%,” and already endowed with a set a privileges that would be completely foreign to my childhood neighbors. I also enjoy a large subset of these privileges—attending private academic institutions endows one with a permanent sort of cultural capital—despite not sharing the same economic class as many of my classmates. Minor objections aside, this narrator reveals the challenge of introducing class in even a politicized discussion. Though I rarely participated in circles as politically active as hers, this anecdote, my experience was similarly frustrating.

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[8] Charles Morrissey, “Oral History Interviews: From Inception to Closure.” *History of Oral History*, 170.

As I saw it, my peers did not do justice to Columbia's storied tradition of student activism. Not that doing so was an easy task—the events of April 1968 have taken on a myth-like status as the years have passed. From what I had known about the protesters, it was difficult to be impressed by the current iteration of activists. I could not imagine my peers staging demonstrations of such magnitude. Once I learned more details about the 1968 protests, however, two assumptions were swiftly corrected. First, the proceedings of those demonstrations is a much more complicated story than one of committed protestors winning a battle against a heartless administration. Second, the aspersions I cast on the current generation of Columbia activists were unwarranted, as their forbears could hardly claim to be more authentic.

The conventional tale of the 1968 protests is an inspiring story of grassroots political organizing. In the wake of an ever-unpopular war in Vietnam and the assassination of Martin Luther King, students took Columbia administrators to task for their implicit support for the Vietnam War and their plans to construct a gymnasium in Morningside Park. Advertised as a facility that would be open to both citizens and local Harlem residents, the gymnasium was in reality designed to be segregated; the locals, who were predominantly black, would have to enter through a rear entrance. Students and non-students alike held occupied university buildings until the university met the following demands: that Columbia rescind its once-secret affiliation with the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA),[9] a think tank that bolstered scientific research funded by the Department of Defense; that Columbia halt the construction of the Morningside gym; and that Columbia ban on-campus recruitment from military organizations.

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[9] Jerry L. Avorn et al., *Up Against the Ivy Wall: A History of the Columbia Crisis*, ed. Robert Friedman (New York, NY: Atheneum Press, 1968), 15-18.

The joint forces of two on-campus activist organizations, the Students' Afro-American Society (SAS) and the Columbia chapter of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), compelled university officials to comply with their demands, thus proving the potential of cross-racial political organizing.

A closer look, however, exposes several blemishes. First, it took a series of unpredictable events—occurring both on campus and in America at large—to spur enough momentum for radical activism in an otherwise apathetic student body. Second, the threat of violence loomed large; students, faculty, and administrators were all tense, fearing that the protests would escalate into bloody riots. Third, the eventual triumphs of the movement were preceded by heightening racial tensions that broke the illusion of unity—and in many respects, it was indeed an illusion—between black and white student activists. These historical wrinkles suggest that this generation of student activists also had its own set of flaws and contradictions. Some of these defects, particularly those related to racism, are especially damning, more so than anything afflicting contemporary Columbia activists.

Although the demonstrations of this time were perhaps the peak of political activity at Columbia University, student activists—with the help of some key outside events—were only moderately successful in combating widespread student apathy. The plans for the Morningside gym were known to the public for years and yet the first day of construction went uninterrupted; students would not organize a sit-in until the following day. As late as March of 1968, SAS leadership had urged for more participation from Columbia's black student body, which had then ignored Harlem community leaders' calls to protest gym construction.[10] More

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[10] Avorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall*, 38.

than anything else, the political climate of this period—one marked by a deeply unpopular war (with a corresponding draft) and escalating civil unrest in pockets throughout the country—was conducive to having a politically active student body. Otherwise moderate students were compelled into action after the extent of Columbia's relationship with the IDA, an institution actively developing counter-insurgency tactics for the War in Vietnam, was discovered.

These politicizing factors were still not enough to engender a deep—and dare I say, authentic—commitment to the issues among most protestors. The Low Library occupation is a telling example. Two hundred students took over Columbia's main administrative facility on the second day of strikes. The slogan these students had chanted—*Hell No, We Won't Go*—just two days before was a distant memory, as only a dozen would remain the following day, when rumors of impending police arrests spread among demonstrators. Elsewhere on campus, enthusiasm for these activities was predictably lower than the Low Library deserters. The majority of Columbia students did not participate in these strikes; most continued to attend classes, even in otherwise occupied buildings, until the unrest demanded their cancellation.[11]

Physical violence was a constant threat in this period, one that occasionally became a reality. The administration and students grew concerned about the prospect of unprecedented mayhem breaking out on campus. These concerns were not unwarranted. Violent scuffles between protestors and counter-protestors had already occurred in recent years.[12] In addition, activists held a few administrators hostage when they began occupying university buildings, hoping to leverage them in negotiations. Over the course of these demonstrations, a hundred

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[11] Avorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall, 50, 66-68.*
[12] Avorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall, 40.*

people would suffer injuries. Recent history was not the sole source of worry, though, many of these concerns were borne out of transparently racist assumptions.

Though nearly all of the violence on campus would involve white activists, fears of a black revolt dictated much of the administration's response to SAS's occupation of Hamilton Hall. With the nationwide wave of riots that ensued Martin Luther King's assassination occurring just a few weeks prior to the student demonstrations fresh in their memory, university officials were loath to agitate these black activists. Harlem—the setting of remarkably tame riots when compared to other cities—was within earshot. Its proximity was enough to chasten any administrator's impulse to apprehend these students. [13][14]

Despite having formed an alliance with SAS, the mostly-white SDS was not exempt from these racial anxieties either. Their uneasiness was evident from the first day of the occupations. Cicero Wilson, the newly elected president of SAS, spoke at the anti-IDA, anti-gym rally that set off these protests. He had been invited to speak by SDS, which had been hoping to forge a joint alliance with SAS to advance what they saw as shared causes. Most of Wilson's speech was well received, though one portion polarized to the majority-white audience. Wilson would not spare white students from his darting criticisms about Columbia's institutional racism. He castigated white Columbia students as racists due to their "ignorance and inactivity," unleashing withering critiques like this: "You will be the educators and the administrators, but yet and still you cannot handle yourself in an inter-racial confrontation."[15] Such accusations were met with tense silence.

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[13] McCaughey, Robert A. *Stand, Columbia: A History of Columbia University in the City of New York, 1754-2004*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003. 440-46.
[14] Avorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall,* 82.
[15] Avorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall*, 38.

It would prove to be a prescient criticism, however. SDS members, once keen on enlisting black members in their efforts, found themselves intimidated by SAS's moves during the demonstrations. The emergence of unfamiliar black protestors (brought in from Harlem) unnerved the white activists, who then felt a palpable loss of control. When SAS members evicted SDS from Hamilton Hall, SDS members, though shocked at the black students' temerity to demand that they leave, left without protestation. These students were both outraged at the black students' sudden sense of authority and terrified of their perceived capacity for violence.

Black activists were keenly aware of their image on campus and shrewdly leveraged white fears—from administrators and fellow activists alike—to advance their agenda. They used militant language in speeches in statements, stoking suspicions that a black revolt could soon overtake the campus. They made no effort to quell rumors that the militants who joined them in Hamilton possessed firearms. There were days where they would make no statement at all, leaving their intentions to fester in the administration's imagination.[16]

Members of SAS balanced this militant presentation with a commitment to careful not to feed into negative stereotypes about black people. They had several motivations for evicting SDS from Hamilton Hall, but perhaps the main factor was a suspicion that the organization would destroy university property (suspicions that proved to be warranted, as SDS ransacked Low Library, their adopted site of occupation). In the wake of the recent riots, SAS prioritized cleanliness and organization. In moments when violence appeared imminent, SAS leaders were quick to contain their body of protestors. Ultimately, SAS' occupation in Hamilton Hall was a

[16] Avorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall*, 50.

relatively non-violent affair, particularly in contrast to the discord in SDS-occupied Low Library. They remained committed to non-violence through their protest's conclusion: SAS had arranged an agreement with the police to submit to entirely non-violent arrests. Some protestors, in fact, would be taken away without being handcuffed.[17]

The black activists' success in this approach is remarkable in its shift from strategies they employed as recently as a semester prior. For years, black activist organizations on campus eschewed confrontational tactics or even public assembly. The had preferred instead to go through institutional channels to advance black student causes, which had been limited to university-centered issues, such as improving admissions for black students or requesting that the administration hire more black faculty members). Before these protests, black student organizations had rarely expressed an interest in issues affecting Harlem or the black community outside of the university. The construction plans for the Morningside gym were public knowledge for years before these demonstrations.

The racially-tinged tension of this time allowed blacks students to coopt a militant stance without issue, even though they had never shown an inclination to do this before. Is this authentic? Sure, these students were by and large not the militant radicals they portrayed to whites and yes, they had never shown an outsized interest in Harlem. But they performed to pursue justice for black Americans. Could one not argue, then, that what these students did was authentic, authentically black at that?

This is a fraught (and arguably unfair) question with inadequate answers. Yet it remains on the minds of many Columbia students of color. In my case, my background—a Latino

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[17] Avorn, *Up Against the Ivy Wall,* 187.

immigrant who is also black, who was born in the Dominican Republic but came of age in Harlem, who feels both Dominican and American but not Dominican-American, who grew up in a lower economic class but received a first-rate, private school education—often froze me in discussions, be they in class or of a personal nature. Just *who* or *what* did I represent? And to *whom* did I represent *what*? Why did I feel pressure to represent anyone or anything? I struggled to keep my balance on the thin borders between several cultural realms, each with its own set of arbitrary rules. Christopher Lasch eloquently describes this feeling when writing on the drawbacks of cosmopolitanism in *Revolt of the Elites*:

> "It is a common mistake to think that exposure to the world's culture necessarily leads to the loss or renunciation of one's particular subculture. Except for those whose only aim is complete assimilation—the ostentatious display of all the cultural trappings of one's power and status—moving beyond one's parochial identity leads to a more complex, even to a painfully divided identity."[18]

Students of color at Columbia often wrestle with these divisions in identity. For those who had grown up outside of a city (a cosmopolitan center), or without the economic advantages of the typical Columbia student, or both, attending such an elite institution invites such schisms in identity. How one responds to that can vary, as my project's narrators' experiences (many cited a search for community a reason for entering a student activist organizations) and my own can testify. Not one of us chose "complete assimilation," and in choosing the alternative route, it is eminently possible we sentenced ourselves not merely to a "complex," "painfully divided identity," but to one that will never be completely understood, by others or the self.

Around white students, I suspected that I was perceived in ways that echoed the experiences of those black activists nearly fifty years ago. Whenever race came up in a

[18] Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites*, 132.

classroom with mostly white students, the air in the room changed. Otherwise voluble students became oddly quiet. Others would offer a sideways glance in my direction. To blame the students who deferred in those situations would be unfair; over the years, they have been conditioned to yield, daring not to contradict, let alone offend. The pulpit was mine, and where it was once empowering, it was now oddly dehumanizing. I came to resent the pressure.

My claim to authority in such moments was borne out of an assumed authenticity. What had *I* actually done to command such performative respect? These students often did not even know my name. And "performative" is the operative word here: it was impossible to know for certain what these students really thought or believed about race or racism. Not here. Unlike the black militants of years past, I would typically say nothing at all. They would know as much of me as I of them.

I would also refrain when there were more students of color in the room, though for different reasons. The odds that one of these students would jump at the chance to play their own Cicero Wilson was not insignificant. I often disagreed with many things such students said, which were borrowed from what I considered the typical college activist platform (for instance, I rather like the Western canon and took no offense to the racism and misogyny found therein, given their historical context, and had long considered the attempts to eradicate their presence from Columbia's required courses as infantilizing). But I hesitated to dissent publicly with students of color who espoused such beliefs, fearing that I would be failing according to some implied racial/ethnic standard, and that I would be labeled as a modern "Uncle Tom" of sorts, (though not in so many words). There was safety in silence, though that too had its consequences: those in the room, no matter their racial identity, were free to project whatever they chose onto me.

Black students navigating their racial identity at Columbia is just one of many resonances in the story of 1968 when contrasted to the modern-day era Columbia activism. In recent years, Columbia has embarked on yet another encroachment of Harlem via "Manhattanville Campus." Though there have been several protests—notably by Harlem residents, not Columbia students thus far; this is yet another commonality with 1968—these have been nearly as successful as those combatting the Morningside gym.[19] Apathy remains a constant battle for leaders of student organizations. Fierce intransigence continues to be a defining characteristic for Columbia's administrative wing.

Despite Columbia's many demographic and institutional transformations, apathy has been a consistent element of campus culture. A quick search of the word in the *Columbia Daily Spectator*'s archives reveals that this has been an identified concern in every decade since the newspaper's founding in 1877. Most articles highlight conventional dimensions of Columbia apathy, such as low attendance at sporting events or minimal participation in student elections. These are often condemnatory pieces; a 1926 editorial, for example, expressed dismay at the low voter turnout in recent student elections.[20] Some articles proffer forceful defenses of apathy, regularly citing heavy coursework or psychological self-preservation as rationales.[21] Others yet reveal the farcical depths to which apathy seeps into campus life. A 2006 article reported that more than seventy undergraduates did not evacuate their rooms after a fire set off

[19] "CB9 calls for audit of Columbia's Manhattanville commitments." *Columbia Daily Spectator*, March 22, 2013.
[20] "Apathy Again." *Columbia Daily Spectator*, February 25, 1926, 2.
[21] For an example see "Hooray." *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 16, 1975, 4.

a residential building's alarms. Instead, officers clearing the premises found students "hiding beneath their beds, drinking in crowded rooms, and even smoking."[22]

Stories of Columbia's reaction to activist efforts have not seemed to change much since the 1960s. When Columbia administrators invited one of my narrators, a black woman who had been in several organizations on campus, to a closed-door discussion on strategies to improve black students' experience on campus, she and the other students had been warned to not bring a "manifesto." As the Manhattanville Campus' construction has gone underway, Columbia has made conciliatory gestures to angered Harlem residents, such as promises to donate to local non-profits and to found a scholarship fund for neighborhood college applicants. Much like their efforts to assuage Harlem residents during the Morningside gym construction, these overtures have not succeeded in winning over the neighborhood.[23]

These continuing threads in Columbia's history place current-day activists—and my uninformed assumptions about them—into context. As an institution, the university remains a resistant force to any efforts seeking to change the status quo. Notable episodes of forceful political activity at the university are the exception to the rule of general indifference. In an ironic sense, the activists of this era, in all of their inconsistencies, could be described as authentic, as they are keeping in line with a tradition that precedes even 1968.

This question of authenticity with respect to activism is far from settled, however, since "activism"—as a word and concept—rivals "authenticity" in its nebulousness. Etymologically speaking, the very word is profound in its blandness; broken down, it means "one who acts."

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[22] Hirschland, John. "Apathy a Growing Fire Hazard." *Columbia Daily Spectator*, October 6, 2006, A1.
[23] See 17.

A conversation on the label's generic quality with OHMA professor and writer Gerry Albarelli highlighted a notable generational shift with respect to college activism. When was an undergraduate at Sarah Lawrence College, he never identified as an "activist" but instead would say he was "politically active," as did most of his classmates. This is an important distinction. When transitioning from "politically active" to "activist," one morphs what was once a descriptor to a form of identity, or an integral part of one's self-understanding.

I sought to whittle down the word into something more defined. I asked my narrators to help; each interview ended with a variation of two questions: a) how would you define the word "activist"? and b) per your definition, do you consider yourself one? Each response was unique, but most labored to find the right words. Below is one example:

> **Alvarez:** When you hear the word activist, what do you—how would you define that word?
>
> ***Sage:*** *Hmm. [pauses, then sighs] I think it is a person that is committed to justice. Yeah. But that looks a lot of different ways.*
>
> **Alvarez:** So I guess the following question would be, do you consider yourself as such?
>
> ***Sage:*** *Oh, yeah. Oh, absolutely…I always have empathized with people in a way that, even if it's not my experience, if it's wrong, I should say something.*

This response is telling for several reasons. First, Sage pauses for several seconds and then sighs as she searches for the right words. Her initial answer is vague: she associates activism with commitment (to justice), empathy, and an inclination to "say something" when witnessing injustice. "Saying something" is the only segment of this definition that suggests action, and even then, the latter word of this phrase is *something*, which could mean anything. Sage

acknowledges that this is a rather broad definition ("that looks a lot of different ways"). Before taking a moment to collect her thoughts, Sage then argues that the meaning of "activist" or "activism" is far from settled:

> "I think we should interrogate just what that term should mean. Because if it becomes a trope, or a way to build an identity, I don't like that. I don't like that social justice archetype. People that I know that are doing the work in the trenches could give a shit about how people perceive them…those are the people that I admire…Having left Columbia, I think there's a big gap between the people who are actually doing the work and who we think we are when we leave that institution."

Sage resists usage of the word activist to reflect those who are *not* "doing the work," tacitly admitting that identifying as an activist while in college was misguided. She expresses distaste for the use of the label "activist" as a vehicle for identity formation, implying that acceptance for that is a disservice to those "doing the work." Admiring these workers, who are not concerned with how "people perceive them," is again, an admission that claiming to be an activist while in college was rooted, at least partially, in a desire to have that facet of her identity known to others.

What is remarkable about this exchange is how Sage adopts *and* rejects an activist identity. She initially claims it without hesitation ("I have always empathized…"). Moments later, however, she considers the term more deeply before suggesting that *now* she can be considered an activist (Sage currently works for an activist non-profit organization and thus is "doing the work). Even then, she never outright claims to be an activist in this part of her answer, instead professing admiration for "those doing the work."

Sage was not alone in hesitating when responding to this question. Julia, another former student, was similarly apprehensive about explicitly identifying as an activist.

> "I typically don't use that term to describe myself, because I feel that is a loaded term for a lot of people…the word I use now is 'organizer.' I think it's much more—a lot of people don't know what it is, so you have the added benefit of being able to define it. But activist—when I was at Columbia, that was the word I would use to describe myself. And that was the word that my mother would use to describe me to a friend. I think it is a good word. To me, an activist is someone who is willing to act on what they believe and engage on a really deep level with an issue."

Much like Sage, she leaves it to the listener to identify her as an activist. Similarly, she states that she described herself as an activist in college, though she is much more hesitant to do so now. Julia also introduces the term "organizer" as an alternative to "activist," implying that the former is less prone to conjure up assumptions typically ascribed to the "social justice archetype," as Sage phrased it. She concludes by defining an activist using verbs that lack clarity in "act" and "engage," demonstrating the difficulty in explaining the word in concrete terms.

Anna had similar struggles in arriving at a definition of activism that sufficed for her. Like Sage, she often paused and sighed before gaining momentum:

> But, [*sighs*] how do I define activism and being an activist? [*sighs, then pauses*] It sounds like a verb word; it's doing something. Like, you can't be an ally as a noun, like you have to be an ally as a verb. So you can't self-identify as an ally in the same sense that I don't think you can really self-identify as an activist. [*pause*] It's a process. It's an act. It's listening, and learning, and engaging critically with your surroundings.

In these few sentences, she wrestles with the label's lack of precision, using the phrases "doing something," "process," and "act" to flesh out her definition. The vagueness is similar to Sage's and Julia's responses. But she also considers activism as it relates to identity, claiming that one can do the acts that fall under the purview of activism but cannot self-identify as one. She said this despite having identified as activist throughout the interview, much like Sage did. Seemingly aware of the contraction, Anna continues to work through a definition:

> Sometimes, living authentically is a form of activism. A lot of times it is. Especially against critical odds. I think Columbia creates an environment of such incredible odds that it's hard to live authentically…so, existing and surviving at Columbia can be a form of activism, depending on your identity and your context…I don't want to make it so broad that anyone thinks that they can be an activist, because…activism is working to decolonize, and working to create spaces where people who have always existed throughout time can live authentically, and freely, and safely, and can thrive.

Here, Anna connects activism to authenticity, though she does not define the latter in defining the former. Though Anna might disagree with this interpretation, she implies that "living authentically" means to live in accordance with one's culture—perhaps what Lasch would call one's "parochial identity"—despite being in a setting that limits that possibility. Then, aware that she is perhaps diluting her definition too much ("I don't want to make it so broad that anyone thinks they can be an activist…"), she then limits her definition to works of decolonization and creating "space." The latter is inherently unclear if we are reading her words by the letter—it is literally impossible to *create* space—though one can assume she means creating or designing venues in which one can act according to their parochial identity without outside influences. What remains uncertain Anna's response is what she wishes to

include in her final definition: is it the entirety of her response, and of all its contradictions, or is it the very end, when she makes reference to decolonization?

That these three narrators each grappled with the "activism" and what it entails is indicative of a number of possibilities. Upon reflection, I believe that the way I phrased these two questions was conducive to a hesitative response. To ask my narrators—who have all been recruited to this project as activists or for their activism—if they identify as activists is to raise doubts that might not have been there before. I may have betrayed my skepticism, and thus my narrators, during these moments. I cannot know for sure my narrators read the question this way. The word "activist" could be a struggle for anyone to crystallize.

Other narrators, who engaged in activism but did not identify as such, were much quicker to develop a response to these questions. These characterizations of activists were more critical than the previous ones. Here is one example, of a recent Columbia graduate who had been involved in education reform organizations on campus:

> "My sense of who an activist is someone who thinks of themselves, "if only everyone thought the way that I did and just got on board with the program, the world would be perfect." And that's a strawman, I'm sure plenty of people who call themselves activists aren't so arrogant, but my sense is that if you're calling yourself an activist…there's a certain amount of hubris to that…"

Note that this answer already assumes that "activist" is an identity of sorts, one with a specific outlook. There is little talk of actions or activities an activist would embark on. Perhaps this is one facet of the "social justice archetype" that Sage had criticized earlier. The irony of this narrator's response is that, much like Sage, he agreed to participate in this oral history project,

one that was purely presented as one about college activists. He accepts the label in one sense but rejects it another.

Upon reflection, listening and later reading these improvised definitions, with all of their tensions and paradoxical thinking, was deeply humbling. These narrators were nothing like the shameless caricatures conjured in my imagination. Indeed, they were much like me: unclear on who they were or how to identify themselves, they were both resentful and grateful for labels like "activist". They were no more settled on that identity than I was on my own.

I did not arrive at that realization when it was time to interview Sofia, however. We had arranged to meet in a classroom on campus. I was setting up my equipment when she arrived. We had met in person, at an oral history workshop no less, in the weeks since the pre-interview. I was thankful for that: this was not our first face-to-face encounter, and her interest in the field was an encouraging sign for the interview. I put on my headphones, checked the levels, and asked if she was ready. She said yes. It was time to begin.

Few things have the potential to be as awkward as the start of an oral history interview. The air in the room shifts the moment I press the red button on my recorder. Once on, I am no longer speaking to just my narrator, and neither do they speak solely to me. The recorder cannot help but impose its presence; it hears and remembers all. Whatever fluidity there was in the conversation that was had is now tested, because I now must announce to the recorder things that are obvious to each of us: the date, place, and time; hell, even my own name, and that of my narrator. While I utter these banalities, I can know nothing of what my narrator is feeling, what they are thinking.

Then I ask my first question, the one that never changes. *Can you tell me where and when you were born and a little about your early life?* Rarely does a narrator respond to the

question without a hesitation of some sort: they could flash a quick smile, utter a helpless “uh,” maybe repeat the question back to themselves. It is as if they must acknowledge just how *unnatural* this is. Sofia was no different. She emitted this inscrutable chuckle. What was she laughing at? Is it the sudden personal question, my asking it, or this change in mood brought upon by the red light between us?

My anxiety was short lived. She began speaking at length about her childhood and ten minutes in, the recorder’s imposition was a forgotten memory. She was thorough in describing and analyzing the characters of her upbringing and the formative events of her early life. I could tell this was going to be a long interview. I felt good about the job I had done so far, going back to the pre-interview. My performance as an oral historian, however inauthentic it felt as recently as twenty minutes ago, was vindicated.

An hour in, she asked to take a break to get some air. When she came back, something was on her mind. *Has anyone interviewed you yet?* The question took me aback. Apparently, I was not the performer I fashioned myself to be. I was not quite sure of what to say. I admitted that for this project, no, I had not been interviewed. Why do you ask?

To me, it just seems unbalanced. I’ve shared so much already, but you haven’t had to reveal anything. She raised a fair point. This interview, like many others in my career, *was* unbalanced. And though I had taken measures to inform Sofia’s of her unalienable rights as an oral history narrator—the same ones that generations of oral historians before me had taken pains to design—she was keen to perceive the power disparity that was developing here. In expressing her concerns aloud, she claimed power for herself, animating some of the moral uneasiness I had suppressed in this line of work.

I use word power here in sharp distinction to authority. In this context, power can be understood as one's perceived ability to influence, be it the narrator, the interviewer, the interview, or a project. Authority, however, is also a challenge to distill; the word has been invoked frequently among oral history scholars, and often from disparate conceptions of the term. Barring some exceptions—Michael Frisch's concept of "shared authority" is a singular example—authority, as defined here, refers to the delineated rights that stem from power.

When interpreting the word "authority" as a reference to *authorship*—or more specifically, *who* is the "author" this interview—it is reasonable to claim that both parties, interviewer and narrator, are creators in equal measure. This understanding does seem to be more common among oral historians. Legal releases certainly evoke this spirt, often granting the narrator a nonexclusive copyright in addition to the right to remove sections of an interview they would not want on the public record. In general, oral historians have abided by the idea that narrators are co-authors in an oral history interview, and indeed co-author's to an oral historian's interpretive work.[24] Michael Frisch referred to the co-authorship in an interview as "shared authority," the incontrovertible truth than any oral history interview, no matter the perceived power imbalance therein, is co-authored by historian and narrator.[25] That remains true for this project as well, even though the narrators have been anonymized.

[24] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli,* xvi.
[25] Frisch has been careful to distinguish "shared authority" from "sharing authority," and for good reason. The idea of "sharing authority"—that is, the oral historian's concerted effort to share agency with his narrators in an oral history project, became popular in the wake of Frisch's concept, and are often conflated. Frisch, Michael. "Commentary: Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process." *The Oral History Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2003, pp. 111–113.

However, when conceiving of "authority" from a political sensibility, the equilibrium between interviewer and narrator is not quite as secure. To clarify, this would be to understand authority as a kind of license, a permit of sorts that grants one the right to perform certain actions; authority as defined here is a set of explicitly defined privileges. In this framework, I, as an oral historian, have the authority to ask a narrator questions. A narrator has the authority to answer these questions as he or she sees fit, or to refute them altogether. These sets are different, though not necessarily unequal. As I will demonstrate later on, however, it is not uncommon to conflate difference for inequality and authority for power.

Oral historians deserve commendation for their strides towards some authoritative equilibrium in oral history. Such efforts, however, are not enough to equal the power accorded a historian. Portelli summarizes the inevitability of this dynamic in oral history projects, though he uses the term "control" and not power:

> "Nevertheless, the control of historical discourse remains firmly in the hands of the historian. It is the historian who selects the people who will be interviewed; who contributes to the shaping of the testimony by asking the questions and reacting to the answers, and who gives the testimony its final published shape and context (if only in terms of montage and description). Even accepting that the working class speaks through oral history, it is clear that the class does not speak in the abstract, but speaks *to* the historian, *with* the historian and, inasmuch as the material is published, *through* the historian."[26]

It would appear, then, nigh impossible to overcome the communicative imbalance of an interviewer-narrator interaction. After all, an interview is not a conversation but instead a casual examination: one party asks the questions, with little risk of vulnerability; the other

[26] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, 56.

answers, divulging stories, thoughts, and feelings to a relative stranger. One directs and records; the other acts before awaiting further instruction. One prods and instigates; the other reacts and responds. The very exchange is anti-reciprocal.[27] Efforts make an interview "sound like you're having a conversation, not carrying on an inquisition," as Studs Terkel recommends, suggests that an oral interview naturally resembles the latter.

Unlike sessions between good friends or even acquaintances, there a distinct interpersonal information gap that widens further during interviews between strangers, as only the narrator reveals more and more about his or her life. Fiddling with one's recorder can only do so much to stem this oncoming tide imbalance. This widening can have the effect of further emphasizing the power the interviewer appears to hold over the narrator, since the latter is alone in revealing information. The gap can become more pronounced when the interviewer is reserved or undemonstrative.

In some respects, these were easier interviews to conduct than the others, for reasons that largely are a product of the aforementioned power dynamic.[28] Some of these reasons might first appear counter-intuitive. First, I knew so little about these narrators, I could make few assumptions about their lives going into the interview. This improved my performance as an interviewer. Though one's unfamiliarity with a subject is a hindrance in designing curated questions, it can also incentivize the interviewer to listen more deeply and to remain alert for hidden meanings and cues for unexpected stories. Having no prior acquaintance with a narrator

[27] These effects are amplified when an interview is conducted between peers, as was the case in this project; an oral history interview of some esteemed individual, such as a former senator or ambassador, can greatly diminish this unbalanced power dynamic. Even in these cases, I would argue that this imbalance remains.
[28] For the record, I interviewed two strangers, two close friends, one friend (though we bonded because of the interview), and one acquaintance.

necessitates more improvisation and spontaneity in the interview, as one cannot work off a predetermined list of specific questions. Alan Wong neatly crystallizes the built-in benefits he discovered from interviewing strangers in his essay “Listen and Learn:” “because my mind was clear of epistemological clutter, I was able to think more profoundly about [the narrator’s] reflections in process and, consequently, ask more contemplative questions in return.”[29]

Conversely, being the subject of this particular kind of oral history interview can leave one feeling naked. I say this from experience. I was interviewed for the first time in September of 2015; Amy Starecheski, my professor in my Oral History Fieldworks course, had assigned each student a partner to conduct peer interviews. As an intensely private person, I had anticipated that my experience as a narrator would be a little uncomfortable though generally okay. The interview would prove to be much worse than even my tempered expectations. My responses were rarely longer than two minutes, and were so shallow that my interviewer had few leads for follow-up questions. I found myself unwilling to cooperate with my classmate, who became frustrated at me, herself, or us both.

Though my experience as a narrator is an extreme case, it does demonstrate a different response to the power imbalance that presents itself during this type of interviews. I was someone was both relatively unacquainted with the medium *and* intent on doing a good job, wanting to appease my interviewer. These two factors—my lack of footing and my aim to accommodate—rendered me frozen, unable or unwilling to provide sufficient answers to

[29] Wong, Alan. "Listen and Learn: Familiarity and Feeling in the Oral History Interview." In *Oral History off the Record: Toward an Ethnography of Practice*. Ed. Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 99.

straightforward (though personal) questions. Saying little was my response to feeling powerless in the interview; it was my way of maintaining control over the exchange.

No two people are alike, of course, and my narrators responded different to these similar circumstances. Sofia, for example, openly subverted the power dynamic that so often goes unquestioned during interviews between relative strangers. One of my other narrators, Julia, was also a stranger, and her reaction to the interview was not quite as audacious. Through the first half of the interview, she was appeared nervous. Julia often introduced a story only to interrupt herself, mull over her words, and then begin her answer anew. She would ask if her responses to my questions were sufficient, or addressing what I was interested in. Much like my first time as a narrator, she was eager to please but uneasy (though she was much more cooperative and willfully intersubjective). We barely knew each other, but the onus was on her to be vulnerable.

Ultimately, however, this sense of power that pervades oral history interviews between strangers is just that—a *sense*. This power disparity is little more than an illusion. In assuming my control, I had, as Linda Shopes so eloquently stated, "underestimated the narrator's power over the interview—the power to refuse to talk, to withhold information, even to lie; the power to use an interview to say what the narrator wants to say, whatever the interviewer's questions."[30] Both of my unfamiliar narrators came to recognize this as the interview progressed. Julia took heed of my frequent assurances that she can answer (or not answer) any question as she pleased. By the end of our interview, she would interrupt me as I began a new question as she thought of more to say to my previous one.

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[30] Shopes, *History of Oral History,* 142.

Sofia, of course, wishing to ask me the same biographical questions that I had asked of her, requested to interview me. Recalling the time I had been interviewed, I shuddered and deliberated on a response. I shared my prior experience as a narrator with her to lower her expectations. I quietly reflected on that experience, the feelings of hypocrisy that followed and have never left, the ethical reservations that I began to harbor as an oral historian. Then it hit me. Her question, in all its deceptive simplicity—*has anyone interviewed you yet?*—masked a larger, much more fateful concern: on what grounds do I stand to ask what I would not answer?

We scheduled an interview for the following month.