

Empathy and Authority in Oral Testimony: Feminist Debates, Multicultural Mandates, and Reassessing the Interviewer and her “Disagreeable” Subjects

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Archives specializing in oral history tend not to report the life stories of their own researchers, and oral historians rarely address problems of interpreting interviews conducted by others. This paper draws on the detailed memoir of the feminist scholar Vijay Agnew, who recorded the testimonies of South Asian immigrant women in Canada for an ethnic history archive in 1970s Toronto, to explore the relationship between empathy and the struggle for authority in oral testimonies. Situating the archive within the emergent Canadian discourse of official multiculturalism, the paper shows how the competing post colonial discourses at work in this period were incorporated, resisted or strategically deployed by both interviewer and interviewee to reveal how middle class immigrant women reacted to the ascription of ethnicity, and the heightened racism they experienced in the mid-70s.

Les archives spécialisées dans l'histoire orale décrivent peu la vie de leurs propres chercheurs, et les spécialistes de l'histoire orale s'intéressent rarement aux difficultés d'interpréter les entrevues réalisées par autrui. Cet article s'inspire des mémoires détaillées de la professeure féministe Vijay Agnew, qui a enregistré les témoignages d'immigrantes sud-asiatiques au Canada pour constituer une archive de l'histoire ethnique du Toronto des années 1970 afin d'étudier la relation entre l'empathie et la lutte pour le pouvoir dans les témoignages oraux. En situant l'archive dans le discours alors naissant au Canada sur le multiculturalisme officiel, l'article montre comment s'y prenaient tant l'intervieweuse que l'interviewée pour faire leurs, combattre ou propager les discours postcoloniaux qui s'affrontaient durant cette période afin de révéler la façon dont les immigrantes de la classe moyenne réagissaient à l'étiquette d'ethnicité qui leur était accolée et au racisme accru dont elles faisaient l'objet au milieu des années 1970.

ALMOST FROM the beginning of the contemporary oral history movement in the 1960s, researchers have been vexed by the problem of authority. It arises from the recognition that the interview is, as the feminist historian Luisa Passerini put

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it, first and foremost a social relationship.¹ Given that the encounter between oral history researcher and interviewee is, for oral historians, the essential relationship upon which their scholarly hopes and ambitions depend,² the workings of authority or power within that encounter constitute a foundational problematic. Oral history was seen as a tool for restoring to the national historiography those marginalized social groups absent or excluded from the official archive, and thus from the master narratives of nationhood. In response to the principles of ethical and egalitarian research practise associated with the feminist history and social history movements that arose in the 1960s and 1970s, and which made oral history a vital tool for “filling the gaps” in the archival record, academic historians have sought methods to share their institutionally sanctioned authority with their interview subjects.³ For activist social historians pursuing “emancipatory scholarship,” oral history offered a way of democratizing the practice of history itself, by enabling members of marginalized groups to produce their own narratives and to interpret them in their own terms through some form of power-sharing arrangement with the historian. Oral history could thereby uncover, if not actually undo, the dynamics through which forms of oppression operate,⁴ especially in contexts where interviewees from “vulnerable” groups might be subject to exploitation.⁵ As the debates over whether and how authority could be shared have shown, the process is deeply fraught, and oral historians have, over time, moderated their claims about the transformational possibilities of their work within the broader social context.⁶ Yet, even if authority cannot be (fully) shared, the *operation* of authority within oral history interviews remains a productive site for inquiry.

These observations are the starting point for my exploration of the problem of power and authority in oral history interviews through a close analysis of

1 Luisa Passerini, “Memory,” *History Workshop Journal*, vol. 15, no. 1 (Spring 1983), pp. 195-196.

2 On researchers’ debts to interviewees, see Linda Shopes, “Legal and Ethical Issues in Oral History” in Thomas L. Charlton *et al.*, *The History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007), pp. 125-159; Joy Parr, “‘Don’t Speak For Me’: Practicing Oral History amidst the Legacies of Conflict,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2010), pp. 1-11.

3 Valuable overviews include Ronald J. Grele, “Oral History as Evidence” in Charlton *et al.*, *The History of Oral History*, pp. 33-91; Ronald J. Grele, “Movement Without Aim” in Ronald J. Grele and Studs Terkel *et al.*, *Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History*, 2nd. ed. (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1985 [1975]), pp. 126-154; Alexander Freund, “Oral History in Canada: A Paradox” in Klaus-Dieter Ertler and Hartmut Lutz, eds., *Canada in Grainau/ Le Canada à Grainau: A Multidisciplinary Survey of Canadian Studies after 30 Years* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), pp. 305-333; Steven High, “Sharing Authority: An Introduction,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, Special Issue on Sharing Authority, vol. 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 12-34.

4 See especially Franca Iacovetta, “Post-Modern Ethnography, Historical Materialism, and Decentering the (Male) Authorial Voice: A Feminist Conversation,” *Histoire sociale / Social History*, vol. 32, no. 64 (November 1999), pp. 275-293.

5 Parr, “‘Don’t speak for me,’” p. 10.

6 A small sample of this literature includes Alessandro Portelli’s early and still influential *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), especially pp. 29-44; Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Steven High’s Introduction and the essays in *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009); Joan Sangster, “Telling our Stories: Feminist Debates and the Use of Oral History,” *Women’s History Review*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1994), pp. 5-28.

a set of interviews with South Asian women conducted for the Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO) – once a major advocate of “doing” oral history with marginal subjects – by the feminist academic Vijay Agnew in the mid-1970s.⁷ Now an established Social Science and Women’s Studies professor at York University and an author of well-respected books and articles on immigrant and diaspora women in Canada,⁸ Agnew recorded the 39 interviews in the MHSO collection not for herself but for the newly created ethnic archive. Most are with men; some are in Hindi. My focus here is on the seven English-language interviews Agnew conducted with women. They were recorded in 1977, at a time when theorizing about sharing authority had barely begun in the international oral history movement, with little impact as yet in Canada. Mindful of the MHSO’s role as an institution committed to building an ethnic archive, I evaluate these archived interviews using theoretical paradigms developed by oral historians, especially feminists, to locate and interpret the shifting dynamics of power in recorded testimonies, with particular attention to the authority of the interviewees. Analytically, the contribution of my article is threefold.

First, guided by Luisa Passerini’s call for attention to “the story of empathy” as it unfolds in “the peaks and abysses of communication” in the interviews,⁹ I highlight the relationship between empathy and authority and show how friction between interviewer and subject, or the breakdown of empathy, can provide important “clues” to a struggle for authority that can help elucidate the shared or competing discourses at work during this period. When discussing interview technique, oral historians often use the term “rapport” rather than empathy to characterize an ideal relationship between interviewer and subject.¹⁰ These are distinct if related concepts. Empathy implies an abiding, imaginative identification with the interior life of the other, even in moments of discord, while rapport, as oral historians characterize it, implies a more situational harmony, something instrumental that can be achieved through deliberate social behaviours. While empathy may lead to rapport, a mood of conviviality can be achieved through social behaviours enacted without empathy. People can *choose* to be agreeable, even if they do not empathize with each other. When considering the interpretive work of oral history, Passerini appears to be using the term empathy in the more nuanced psychological sense. (This use is also in evidence in the work of feminist scholars listening carefully to the silences in the testimonies of women

7 At the invitation of *Histoire sociale / Social History*, Professor Vijay Agnew read this paper and was given the opportunity to share her reflections on it. She did not wish to do so.

8 Vijay Agnew, *Resisting Discrimination: Women from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean and the Women’s Movement in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996) and *In Search of a Safe Place: Abused Women and Culturally Sensitive Services* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998); Vijay Agnew, ed., *Diaspora, Memory & Identity: A Search for Home* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005) and *Interrogating Race and Racism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007). These texts contributed to my understanding of Agnew’s intellectual development; my focus here is on biographical details in the memoir corroborated by evidence on the audiotapes.

9 Passerini, “Memory,” p. 195.

10 Charles T. Morrissey, “Oral History Interviews: From Inception to Closure” in Charlton *et al.*, eds., *The History of Oral History*, pp. 160-196.

concerning experiences of wartime rape.¹¹) When calling attention to the “peaks and abysses of communication” in the interview, however, her usage also implies rapport and invites the researcher to determine whether and when participants choose to be agreeable or not, and then to ask why. The *ability* to choose, of course, is relational; itself a product of the distribution of power or authority in the interview relationship, it is hence much debated by oral historians.¹² Passerini’s call for attention to empathy, then, provides a way to analyse the operation of authority in interviews conducted by others. Acknowledging her insight, I use both terms, but particularly empathy, in this article.

Secondly, working through the lens of authority and empathy, I evaluate how the institutional framework provided by the MHSO, itself a product of the newly-minted official discourse of multiculturalism, shaped the interviews Agnew collected for its archive. The interview, as Passerini reminds us, “is always the result of two subjectivities which meet.”¹³ In that meeting, the bearers of subjectivity are engaged in what Elizabeth Tonkin has called “purposeful social action”¹⁴ or the exercise of agency, situated in, and therefore constrained by, the contingencies of “time and space” to which “the interview, as a document, bears witness.”¹⁵ The oral testimonies thus provide a record of the contest between complementary and competing discourses and how individual women, including Agnew, both articulated and deployed these discursive formations in the course of the interview. My analysis shows how racialized immigrant women, a group typified as marginal, and their racialized immigrant interviewer navigated through an institutional context framed by official multiculturalism and by what legal scholar Constance Backhouse has called Canada’s “ideology of racelessness”¹⁶ to speak, or avoid speaking, about the racism they experienced in 1970s Toronto. It also reveals how this conversation about race intersects with the nexus of class in a cross-cultural context.

The third contribution concerns a common but less widely debated problem for the researcher who uses an existing oral history archive: gaining sufficient

11 For example, Marlene Epp, “The Memory of Violence: Soviet and East European Mennonite Refugees and Rape,” *Journal of Women’s History*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Spring 1997), pp. 562-590.

12 See Kathryn Bleck, “Evidence, Empathy and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan” in Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 322-332, where both terms are used interchangeably, and the ethical dilemmas associated with deliberately fostering rapport in a context where the researcher struggles with empathy are illustrated. See also Judith Stacy, “Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?,” in Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 111-120. Parr in “‘Don’t Speak for Me’” and High in “Sharing Authority” (especially p. 13) address similar ethical issues.

13 Passerini, “Memory,” p. 195. See also Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *History Workshop Journal*, no. 12 (Autumn 1981), pp. 96-107.

14 Elizabeth Tonkin, *Narrating our Pasts: The Social Construction of Oral History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 3.

15 Jean-Pierre Wallot and Normand Fortier, “Archival Science and Oral Sources” in Perks and Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, pp. 366-378, 372.

16 Constance Backhouse, *Colour Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 3-17, especially p. 14.

knowledge of the interviewer. Here, my analysis of the interviewer's role in the story of empathy and authority, and its relationship to the discursive formations associated with official multiculturalism, was made possible by the publication of Agnew's memoir, *Where I Come From* (2003).¹⁷ Now an important historian of South Asian women, Agnew was herself a recent immigrant of Indian origin at the time of the interviews. The memoir tells the story of her own migration and life in Canada, as she adjusted and re-adjusted her sense of self as an individual and an intellectual, through moments of struggle and crisis. It also tells us far more than we can usually discover about the factors affecting the subjectivity of researchers conducting (later archived) oral history interviews. Usually, the historian conducts and analyses her own interviews, and recent work, animated by the ethical considerations discussed above, has taken on a more intensively reflexive turn, attending closely to the relational dimensions of interviewing. In 1970s Canada, however, the early oral history movement was led by archivists and archives like the MHSO that now house large collections of oral testimonies gathered during the heyday of the movement, for the explicit purpose of filling the gaps in the historical record.¹⁸ These interviews were conducted by third-party researchers, elusive figures whose role needs to be more closely understood when these sources are used for historical analysis. Such collections have been used to add colour or authenticity to historical research, but have seldom been the centrepiece of theoretical and methodological analysis, in part because little is known about the interviewers.¹⁹ Drawing on Agnew's memoir, especially as it illuminates the dynamics of empathy and authority in her interviews for the MHSO, I suggest one approach to how such oral interviews, held in archived collections and conducted by researchers other than the primary investigator of a historical project, might be analysed.

Agnew was one of more than 50 people hired by the MHSO during its first busy year of operation in 1977 to help build what its founder and academic director, historian Robert F. Harney, envisioned as one of the largest collections of "oral testimony about ethnicity and immigration in North America."²⁰ A US-born historian of Italy at the University of Toronto who became one of Canada's leading immigration historians,²¹ Harney argued that the MHSO was created to widen recognition of the pluralism of Ontario's past through the preservation of "historical records which help free people from ignorance of one another and

17 Vijay Agnew, *Where I Come From* (Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2003).

18 Besides references above, see Robert F. Harney, "A History of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario," *Polyphony: Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1987), pp. 1-16.

19 An important exception is Alexander Freund, "Oral History as Process-Generated Data," *Historical Social Research*, vol. 24 no. 1 (2009), pp. 22-48.

20 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, p. 131; Harney, "A History of the MHSO," p. 11.

21 John Zucchi, "Ethnicity and Neighbourhoods: Looking Backward, Facing Forward," *Urban History Review*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Fall 2010), pp. 73-79, 72; Bruno Ramirez, "The Making of an Ethnoculture: Robert Harney's Contribution" in *Migration and the Transformation of Cultures: Proceedings of a Conference held in Calgary, Alberta, October 22-23, 1989* (Toronto: MHSO, 1992), pp. 91-98, 94.

dangerous dependence on stereotypes.”²² In keeping with social history principles that immigrants be protagonists in the writing of their history, Harney made creating an oral archive a priority on the grounds that “the best source” for the study of migration was “the immigrant himself.”²³

As it was then understood, however, oral history practitioners were more concerned with arguing for the reliability and value of this new “demotic” source, as compared to the documentary sources to which their colleagues were more accustomed.²⁴ For Harney and others, social history meant first and foremost the inclusion of the experiences and perspectives of marginalized people in the scholarly narratives professional historians constructed so as to demonstrate the rationality and agency of those previously considered marginal. Nowhere in the MHSO records that I investigated, nor in contemporary documentation from this period, is there evidence for the kind of intensive, formal, and highly theorized discussion present-day scholars have explored about the relationship between power, authority, and the “creative process”²⁵ of the oral history interview. Inclusion, not interpretation, was the issue.²⁶ However much Harney may have urged students and colleagues to seek out the issues of interest to interviewees, the research agenda at the MHSO, with its emphasis on ethnicity, would be set and reported on by the historian.

Certainly, consideration was given to employing “researchers with the same ethno-cultural background as their interview subjects,” but this was an instrumental concession, made to increase “the rapport” between interviewer and interviewee and to facilitate outreach and exploit community networks.²⁷ As Harney then noted, “serious” scholarship was “compatible” with “community participation,” especially in ethnic studies, but there was a clear distinction between “serious” academic writing and “the filiopietist writings of the ethnic community”: between “scholarly ethnic studies and community-based heritage presentation,” where the latter served, but did not direct, the more respectable, “objective”

22 Harney, “A History of the MHSO,” p. 2.

23 Robert F. Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* (MHSO pamphlet, 1978[?]), provides the only sustained discussion of his approach I have found. See also Preface to Pierre Anctil and Bruno Ramirez, eds., *If One Were to Write a History: Selected Writings by Robert F. Harney* (Toronto: MHSO, 1991).

24 For archivists’ perspectives on oral history, see, besides references above, *Oral History Forum*, <http://www.canoha.ca/forum>, especially essays by Leo La Clare and Richard Lochead in vol. 1 (1975-1976), pp. 1-4 and pp. 5-12; and by Hugh Taylor and Peter Stursberg in vol. 2 (1976-1977), pp. 1-4 and pp. 6-10.

25 Sangster, “Telling our Stories,” p. 6.

26 On oral history in Canada being criticized for being too much like popular journalism, see Steven High, “Sharing Authority in the Writing of Canadian History: The Case of Oral History” in Christopher Dummitt and Michael Dawson, eds., *Contesting Clio’s Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2009), pp. 21-46. In communication with me, Franca Iacovetta, Carmela Patrias, and Ian Radforth, who all used the MSHO archives or studied with Harney in the late 1970s, recall that researchers there discussed interview techniques and issues of interpretation or representation, but these discussions did not become part of their published work. Zucchi has emphasized Harney’s interest in urban history and ethnicity, not theory. If Harney was influenced by Italian colleagues such as Portelli and Passerini, there is no evidence in his published work.

27 Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* and “A History of the MHSO,” pp. 5-8.

ambitions of the former.²⁸ There is, in this familiar dichotomy, no formally theorized recognition of the power relations or discursive formations within which such knowledge-making practices were situated. That (post-structuralist) critique would come later. In the archived testimonies from the 1970s, however, the struggle for authority, which emerges in those unguarded moments when empathy falters and rapport fades, reveals that the interviewed women recognized the discursive formations through which they were meant to operate. Interviewees demonstrated this recognition in their resistance to how these discourses situated them as “ethnic” and therefore marginal, and they contested these ascriptions through a determined assertion of their own authority.

The MHSO, as Harney acknowledged, was closely connected to Canada’s then freshly minted official discourse of multiculturalism. Its implementation in Ontario involved the creation of knowledge-making agencies like the MHSO, which were sorely needed because, as the commission that gave rise to the policy had anxiously noted,²⁹ very little was actually known about the many non-British “others” then entering Canada, primarily from East and Central Europe and increasingly, in the wake of liberalized immigration policies in the 1960s, from the Caribbean, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. As Franca Iacovetta has observed, nationalist historians had long recognized the importance of immigration as a nation-building tool, but paid scarce attention to the lives particularly of non-British immigrants, and ethnic history remained “a marginal topic” in Canadian historiography.³⁰ In fact, Agnew’s interviews in the MHSO collection are among the earliest first-person accounts of the immigrant experience of South Asian women in a Canadian public archive. Thus, while the MHSO would, in the social history paradigm of the time, work to fill the gaps in Canadian history by giving face and voice to marginalized immigrants, it would also, Harney observed, function as a “legitimizing instrument, or handmaiden, for whatever public policy was adopted.”³¹

Official multiculturalism was intended, as then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau put it, to “break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies” and lay the foundation for “a society . . . based on fair play for all.”³² As the evidence on the

28 Robert F. Harney, “Ethnic, Archival and Library Materials in Canada: Problems of Bibliographic Control and Preservation,” *Ethnic Forum: Journal of Ethnic Studies and Ethnic Bibliography*, vol. 2, no. 2 (Fall 1982), pp. 3-31, 10-11, and “A History of the MHSO,” p. 1.

29 *Report of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Book IV: The Other Ethnic Groups* (Ottawa: Queen’s Printer, 1969), especially “Postscript,” pp. 225-227; Harney, “Ethnic, Archival and Library Materials,” p. 12; Ramirez, “The Making of an Ethnoculture,” especially pp. 92-93.

30 Franca Iacovetta, “Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities, and Defiant Domestic: Writing about Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship,” *Labour / Le Travail*, vol. 36 (Fall 1995), pp. 217-252.

31 Harney, “Ethnic, Archival and Library Materials,” p. 13.

32 Pierre E. Trudeau, House of Commons, October 8, 1971, quoted in Harney, “Ethnic, Archival and Library Materials,” p. 14. The literature on Canadian multiculturalism is extensive. Among the most relevant are: Himani Bannerji’s critique in “On the Dark Side of the Nation: Politics of Multiculturalism and the State of ‘Canada’,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 31, no 3 (Fall 1996), pp. 103-130, and her re-evaluation, “Multiple Multiculturalisms and Charles Taylor’s Politics of Recognition” in Barbara Saunders and David Haljan Leuven, eds., *Whither Multiculturalism? A Politics of Dissensus* (Belgium: Leuven University Press, 2003), pp. 35-45, 36;

audiotapes shows, however, prejudices were not only firmly entrenched, but erupting into racial violence, especially against South Asians, at the time the MHSO initiated its ethnic history project.³³ Additionally, multiculturalism, though a new and soon-to-be central feature of the valorizing nationalist discourses within which Canada's nation-building institutions were situated, nevertheless contained traces of an older and deeply ingrained "ideology of racelessness," with roots in the colonial period,³⁴ that made speaking about racism difficult, especially as the policy seemed to imply a respect for difference that did not accord with the interviewed women's lived experience. Not yet schooled in the discourse of English Canadian nationalism, which saw multiculturalism as yet another benchmark in the progressive evolution from British colony to nation, but well-versed in both the lingering colonial and contrasting anti-colonial nationalist discourses that circulated in the subcontinent's various struggles for unified post-colonial identities, these women had first-hand knowledge of the racial discrimination occluded in Canadian nationalism, and they were unwilling to remain silent about it.

Agnew's interview subjects were, at a superficial level, very like their interviewer: racialized immigrant women striving to find their place in a largely white dominant culture. Three, Brenda, Cherie, and Ruby, were Christians from India; two, Tahira and Noor, were Muslims from Pakistan; and two, Saraswati and Neela, Hindus from India.³⁵ Agnew was nominally Hindu, but like most of her interviewees, not overtly pious. All were married with children and English-speaking. They had arrived in Canada between 1962 and 1976, the majority before 1970. Agnew had arrived in 1970 as an unmarried graduate student, settling first in Waterloo, where she completed an MA at the University of Waterloo before moving to the University of Toronto for a PhD in history. By the time of the interviews she had completed her dissertation on elite women in the Indian nationalist movement.³⁶ Additionally, her own decision to stay in Canada, in defiance of her father's wishes, and her marriage to a Canadian citizen (a white

Leo Driedger, "Changing Visions in Ethnic Relations," *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, vol. 26, no. 3 (Summer 2001), pp. 421-451; Richard J. F. Day, *Multiculturalism and the History of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); Eve Haque, "Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework: Language and the Racial Ordering of Difference and Belonging in Canada" (PhD dissertation, University of Toronto, 2005).

33 Milton Israel, *In the Further Soil: A Social History of Indo-Canadians in Ontario* (Toronto: Toronto Organization for the Promotion of Indian Culture, 1994), especially chap. 1, pp. 3-30; Norman Buchignani, Doreen M. Indra, and Ram Srivastava, *Continuous Journey: A Social History of South Asians in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart with the Multiculturalism Directorate, Secretary of State, Canadian Government, 1985), especially chap. 12, pp. 205-231.

34 Backhouse, *Colour Coded*, p. 14. See also James Walker, *Race, Rights and the Law in the Supreme Court of Canada: Historical Case Studies* (Waterloo, ON: Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1997), especially "Orientation," pp. 12-50; Emmaline E. Smilie, "An Historical Survey of Indian Migration Within the Empire," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 4, no. 3 (September 1923), pp. 217-257.

35 The MHSO archive (University of Toronto, Kelly Library, MHSO, South Asian Collection) was authorized to identify the women by name, but since most of them are still alive and active, I have shielded their identities to some extent.

36 Vijay Agnew, *Elite Women in Indian Politics* (Ghaziabad, U.P. India: Shakti Press, 1979).

man) had made questions of national identity, though not race, a pressing concern for her in this period.³⁷

The memoir tells us little about Agnew's work experience at the MHSO (she mentions it only in passing, as having led to work at York University³⁸), but a great deal about where she was, emotionally and intellectually, during that period and her struggles with the discourses she candidly acknowledges governed her own subjectivity. It is at times a painfully honest, often courageous, stripping of the self: a subject revealed in the difficult process of shedding one identity and remaking herself into the woman she "chose to be,"³⁹ asserting, thereby, a hard-won self-assurance in the very act of revelation itself. An analysis of the substantive literature on memoir as historical source is beyond the scope of this article, but in drawing on Agnew's memoir, I recognize that memoirs, no less than oral testimonies, are deliberate constructions, acts of agency by authors enacting a "double subjectivity" in which the "I" of the memoir is both the narrator and the protagonist, the recollecting self and the recollected self, the teller and the told.⁴⁰ Examining the shifting status of memoirs among historians, Jennifer Wallach argues compellingly that "the subjective, firsthand character of autobiographies actually enhances their value as a historical source" because they can "render emotional truths that cannot be conveyed through a mere recitation of facts."⁴¹ Here, I turn to the memoir, not as unmediated truth, but as another, albeit important, documentary source, which contextualizes, corroborates, and is corroborated by other sources, including the recorded interviews.

Reading it, we learn that the woman we hear on the tapes, acting as an agent of institutional authority, was herself a recent immigrant coping with her own settlement struggles and conflicts: the delightful freedom of being away from the constraints of home and family; the misery, longing, and loneliness of being away from everything familiar and comfortable. She was a junior academic striving to establish herself in the largely white male academic world of the mid-1970s, an effort complicated by her "colonial education" (primarily British and European history) at the convent school she, like some of her interview subjects, had attended in India. The Indian history she eventually studied

37 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 102-120. While researching this paper, I tried but was not able to contact Professor Agnew.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 131.

39 *Ibid.*, pp. 104-118, 277.

40 Research addressing experiences of racism is particularly relevant, for example: Allison Berg, "Trauma and Testimony in Black Women's Civil Rights Memoirs: *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women who Started it*, *Warriors Don't Cry*, and *From the Mississippi Delta*," *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 21, no. 3 (Fall 2009), pp. 84-107; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'You Must Remember This': Autobiography as Social Critique," *Journal of American History*, vol. 85, no. 2 (1998), pp. 439-465; Jennifer Jensen Wallach, *Closer to the Truth than any Fact: Memoir, Memory, and Jim Crow* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008); bell hooks' fusing of feminist theory and personal testimony in *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1989). Similar issues emerge in the extensive scholarship on Jewish women's memoirs; for just one example, see Marion Kaplan, "Jewish Women in Nazi Germany: Daily Life, Daily Struggles, 1933-1939," *Feminist Studies*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 1990), pp. 579-606.

41 Wallach, *Closer to the Truth*, pp. 4-5.

at Bombay University before emigrating did not prepare her for the consuming interest of Western scholars in the stereotypically exotic markers of Indian identity such as Indian spirituality and especially caste, which her Canadian professors “seemed to consider ... very important.” Only after writing a “frantic” letter to her father did she discover that he “supposed” their caste was Kshatriya. It conferred privileges that, like her family’s middle-class status, Agnew had taken for granted, accepting as “natural and normal” the restrictions endured by the lower-caste people at the periphery of her childhood world.⁴² Nor had she been conscious of race or racism, though the Indian preference for “light-skinned people” was, she observes, “akin to racism” of the kind she would experience herself in Canada.⁴³ In India, her professors expected students to “memorize” and “regurgitate” rather than to engage in critical essay writing or discussion,⁴⁴ leaving her unequipped to question, much less challenge, the condescending views expressed by some of the academic authorities with whom she would study in Canada. An “intellectually insecure and impressionable student” but determined to “fit in,”⁴⁵ Agnew also struggled with a growing ambivalence about the “Indian” identities ascribed to her by both white Canadians and other South Asian immigrant women with whom she occasionally socialized. Yet she had a stubborn determination that enabled her not only to stay, but also, in the years following her work at the MHSO, to recognize and challenge the racist exclusions that constrained her professional life and the colonial scripts that shaped her own outlook.⁴⁶ For me, the memoir was a gift, a revelatory text to which I returned repeatedly as I listened to and tried to interpret the dynamics of empathy and authority I heard on the audiotapes.

My analysis of Agnew’s interviews is informed by the work of feminist scholars, among them Canadian specialists of immigrant and racialized women, for whom the sharing of authority has long been a central concern. Recognizing the importance of gender and positionality (of both interviewer and interviewee), feminist oral historians were among the first to engage with issues of authority and ethics arising from the relational dynamics of the oral history interview.⁴⁷ One of the earliest interventions, however, was published in 1977, at the very moment when Agnew was doing her interviews, and we cannot suppose

42 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 20-22. See Arun Mukherjee, “Facing the Interrogations of Dalit Writing” in *Postcolonialism: My Living* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 1998), pp. 52-64, especially p. 63, for another South Asian Canadian scholar’s reflections on upper-caste privileges taken for granted in childhood. See also Avtar Brah, “Diaspora, Border and Transnational Identities” in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 178-210, for the need to attend to positionality within diasporas. For a useful and relevant discussion on “knowledge production as a contingent process involving power and resistance,” in relation to colonial ways of knowing caste, see Kevin Walby & Michael Haan, “Caste Confusion and Census Enumeration in Colonial India, 1871-1921,” in this volume (p. 303).

43 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 8, 111-112.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 74.

45 *Ibid.*, pp. 90, 102.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 208-214.

47 Besides works cited above, a sample of important feminist approaches to oral history includes Sherna Gluck, “What’s so Special about Women? Women’s Oral History,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, vol. 2,

this scholarship was readily available to her, given the novelty of oral history method at that time. Nor did these early feminist debates enjoy immediate attention, outside women's studies or women's history, in then more male-dominated fields such as immigration or ethnic history. As their scholarship shows, feminist approaches have evolved over time, developing ever-more nuanced strategies to trace the complex intersections of race, class, genders, and sexualities situated within the cultural contexts through which subjectivities are constituted. Attentive to location, they have learned to evaluate carefully how their own postures intersect with interviewees' situations to reveal that power (or authority), far from being the secure possession of one side or another, is mobile and variable, shifting sinuously and continuously between both parties in the interview relationship. In making ethical and relational issues and careful historical contextualization a critical element of their work, feminist scholars have focused attention on the subtle and contradictory workings of authority in the gathering and interpretation of oral testimonies, as well as the risks associated with simplistic notions of sharing authority. Egalitarianism, however appealing, is not so easy to practise under complex ethical conditions; nor does a commitment to egalitarian research practice relieve researchers of the responsibility to interpret the content of interviews, especially where conversational clues such as pauses, silences, and omissions speak more loudly than what is actually said. Thus researchers must now grapple with the historical contingencies affecting how subjects speak, or do not speak, about particular things, as well as their own roles in enabling or silencing interviewees. Among these located historical contingencies are the "narrative forms," "collective scripts," and received "ideologies" or discourses, "whether dominant, submerged [or] oppositional,"⁴⁸ which, taken together, constitute the cultural resources available to interview subjects engaged in the construction of memory with the collaboration, however fraught, of the interviewer herself.

The MHSO, however, was created in the 1970s, well before such issues were formally debated. It was, like the scholars who founded it, circumspect about the power relations embedded within its own knowledge-making practices, and there is no evidence that authority was meant to be shared in these interviews.⁴⁹ Therefore, we must rely, following Alessandro Portelli, on the orality of the oral

no. 2, "Women's Oral History" (Summer 1977), pp. 3-17; Susan Geiger, "What's so Feminist about Doing Women's Oral History?," *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 2, no. 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 169-182; Pamela Sugiman, "Passing Time, Moving Memories: Interpreting Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadian Women," *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 36, no. 73 (May 2004), pp. 51-79, and "'Life is Sweet': Vulnerability and Composure in the Wartime Narratives of Japanese Canadians," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 186-218; Stacey Zembrycki, "Sharing Authority with Baba," *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 219-238; Katherine Borland, "'That's not what I said': Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research" in Perks and Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader*, pp. 310-321.

48 Sangster, "Telling our Stories," p. 7.

49 Although oral historians of the 1970s may not have been quite as "naïve" about the nuances of the practice as some later historians have suggested, there is little evidence of an explicit engagement with the theoretical problems associated with a method that was, at the time, relatively new. See Sangster, "Telling our stories," especially p. 15.

evidence,⁵⁰ what we hear on the tapes, to discern what the interviewed women thought about the ethnic history project, about the questions they were asked, and about the demeanour of their interviewer, itself a vital piece of the recorded evidence.

Generally, Agnew's interviews cover the basic features of the migration and life stories of the individual women. Besides place of origin, education, arrival, and job search, she also asks about diet, dress, leisure, social activity, and first impressions. On the audiotapes we can hear pages rustling as Agnew pauses to consult a list of questions, perhaps like those found in *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies* (1978), a pamphlet Harney had written to guide researchers in this once novel method of historical work. Concerned mainly with using oral history to study ethnicity, which Harney understood to be "as much a dynamic North American invention" as a "holdover from the country of emigration," the pamphlet advises historians that, to study "the ecology of immigrant adjustment," they investigate "the intensity of ethnic feeling" and how the "psychic and cultural baggage from the Old World" affected "all aspects of life in North America." By "elicit[ing] the perceptions of personal and group history of identity, and of response to immigrant life which shape that invention [of ethnicity] and cause ethnic persistence" in its new North American context, the oral history interview could access the "gradual altering of identity and culture," or the process of *becoming ethnic*, that constituted "the interior history of immigrant groups."⁵¹

Agnew's MHSO interviews therefore open with questions designed to explore the dynamics of adaptation and changing identities as seen through changes in the daily practices of people whose identities were produced "elsewhere," with very "different" material and cultural resources. For Canadians imagining South Asia in the 1970s, these distinctions meant that South Asia was "lesser," poorer due to outmoded or "under-developed economies," caught within unchanging ancient traditions, and beset by backward cultural values,⁵² an aggregation of differences that are themselves the product of historic power relations.⁵³ For Agnew, in the early 1970s, material differences were among the most significant. The sharp contrast between the relative scarcity of luxury and consumer goods in India then, as compared with the visible affluence of "the West," was, to her youthful gaze, somewhat dazzling. As a teenager, she had "avidly read Western magazines for their advertisements of clothes and makeup, and still secretly longed to possess them." While in Waterloo, she was interested not in the Old Order Mennonites her Canadian friends took her to see, but "the local supermarkets, with their well-displayed shelves of food," the many different cars,

50 Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History," pp. 97-102.

51 Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies*, lists over a hundred topics of possible interest, but admits they may be "too retrospective for many purposes and based on an east or south European immigration model of the turn of the century." Only three entries relate to bigotry or prejudice in the receiving culture.

52 Buchignani *et al.*, *Continuous Journey*, pp. 205-209; Israel, *In the Further Soil*, pp. xxvii, 18-21.

53 Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond 'Culture': Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 7, no. 1 (February 1992), pp. 6-23.

and the department stores where she wanted to “buy ready-to-wear clothing off the rack.”⁵⁴ Although these aspects of the North American encounter were not on Harney’s list, they were fascinating to the young Agnew, and they shape her interviews in remarkable ways, most strikingly because the interviewees – five of whom had lived outside India in England, Germany, or the United States before migrating to Canada – claimed to be largely unimpressed by North American affluence.

These different positionalities emerge clearly in Agnew’s interviews with Cherie and Saraswati, who arrived in Canada in 1972 and 1974 respectively. Most of the women were committed to life in Canada, but Saraswati, a foreign student studying linguistics at McGill University, intended to return to India, where she was an established scholar of Sanskrit,⁵⁵ while Cherie was seriously considering returning home, thereby providing a useful contrast with those, including Agnew, who, having chosen to immigrate, had more at stake in comparisons that supported that decision. As Sunil Bhatia observes of South Asian immigrants to the United States, the decision to immigrate implicates migrants in the valorizing claims of their chosen nationality, especially if they believe that as minorities they “are located socially as foreigners and outsiders.”⁵⁶ Because the tension in these interviews is so striking, the following somewhat lengthy excerpts seem warranted. They also reveal conversational patterns that recur in other interviews.

- AGNEW: What was your first impression of Montreal?
- SARASWATI: Montreal? I don’t know. I liked it.
- AGNEW: Were you impressed by the affluence, the modernity of Montreal?
- SARASWATI: No. I don’t think so. I think I am beyond that because, say, about 15 years ago, I lived for two years in Germany and that was the peak of the economic wonder of Germany. And I don’t think I would be impressed by this modernity. I think it has something to do with me.
- AGNEW: Were you impressed by the cleanliness? Did you think the streets were clean compared to Delhi?
- SARASWATI: Oh yes, they are clean. I would say they were clean. But that is not what impressed me because I take that for granted.
- AGNEW: Uh-huh?
- SARASWATI: I don’t find it surprising that the streets are clean.

54 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 38, 17-19.

55 Information on the cassette tape indicates the interview was recorded in Toronto, which Saraswati may have been visiting at the time. It also suggests a certain haphazardness about the selection of interview subjects, which seems likely given that the MHSO’s lavish \$3 million grant had to be spent within five years (Harney, “A History of the MHSO,” p. 4).

56 Sunil Bhatia, “Analyzing Assignations and Assertions: The Enigma of Brown Privilege” in *American Karma: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Indian Diaspora* (New York: New York University Press, 2007), pp. 184-219. Similarly, see Sugiman, “Life is Sweet,” on Japanese Canadian internment survivor memoirs.

- AGNEW: You expected it.
- SARASWATI: Of course I did.
- AGNEW: So you weren't surprised by it?
- SARASWATI: After all, with all the facilities they have in the way they are organized, one, one, [pause]. Actually, I am surprised by certain things that I saw here.
- AGNEW: For example?
- SARASWATI: I was surprised when I saw somebody rummaging through the garbage here. I had not expected that though that is something which is common here, you see?
- AGNEW: Mmm. It's really not common here.
- SARASWATI: But I have seen. I've seen people asking for money, at least, during my three years stay here, in Montreal. I must have been approached at least ten times. I mean, ten times is nothing, but yet when you see in an affluent country like that, people just asking me, can you give me [she trails off and pauses briefly]. Mostly it was old men. Sometimes it was children. And the other day I met a young girl, just asking, can you give me one dollar.
- AGNEW: Mmm. When I first came to North America I was impressed. I was taken aback by the lack of people, that you very rarely see people on the roads etc. etc. Did you have that impression?
- SARASWATI: No. I didn't have that impression. I think Montreal is – when I first came it was summer, I think that has something to do with it. Because in summer people are around. And I didn't get that impression. Of course I could say relatively speaking, they were not crowds. . . .
- AGNEW: There was more an element of space . . .
- SARASWATI: Yes, but, again, that was expected. [She laughs slightly, and Agnew joins in.]⁵⁷ As we learn from the memoir, for Agnew, who had lived in densely populated Bombay before moving to Canada, “all the empty space around the [University of Waterloo] campus,” where she first went to live, and the “near absence of people on the sidewalks” created “the feeling of living in a deserted, desolate place.”⁵⁸ Presenting herself as too sophisticated to be surprised by the spatial appearance of Western cities, Saraswati emphatically does not share Agnew's feelings of desolation, or admiration. Neither had Cherie in an almost identical exchange recorded just three months earlier:

57 Toronto, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, South Asian Collection [hereafter MHSO, SAC], audio-cassette recording, interview by Vijay Agnew, August 20, 1977.

58 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, p. 17.

- AGNEW: What was your first impression?
- CHERIE: I thought, gee, there's nothing so fantastic about this place. [Agnew giggles. Both laugh.] Honest, I didn't. Nothing really impressed me. You know, like people said, everything is so clean. The streets are so beautiful, but I've been, I lived in Bangalore for a while and, you know, there's nothing different. Even, when we came it was September, and the gardens were still in bloom and, you know, it was pretty, ah, but I wasn't really star-struck or anything.
- AGNEW: No?
- CHERIE: No.
- AGNEW: Weren't you struck by the affluence?
- CHERIE: Not really. Honestly speaking, not really.
- AGNEW: No? What about, did you think there was a lack of people around, on the streets, etc. etc.
- CHERIE: No. I guess that's because I was always brought up in a military area. In a military area, you know, in India, it's not overcrowded.
- AGNEW: Right.
- CHERIE: So I didn't find this difference. And, ah. . . . The only one thing was perhaps, you know, that the streets were so clean. That's the only thing. Other than that, you know.
- AGNEW: What about the grocery stores?
- CHERIE: Well. . . .
- AGNEW: Did you think there was lots of food and lots of choice?
- CHERIE: Yes. Yes. And, you know, it was just at your fingertips, you know, you really didn't have to go to many places to get the things you needed. You got it all under one roof and, that was, the convenience of it.⁵⁹

A distinctive feature of these two excerpts is Agnew's insistence on the issue of Western affluence. In both cases she begins by asking her interviewees what "impressed" them upon arrival. When they are both dismissive about the markers of Western modernity, however, Agnew responds by reframing her first neutrally worded question about "impressions" into a value-laden one about the specific features she herself found impressive, such as the affluence, cleanliness, and spaciousness of Canadian cities, features we now recognize from the memoir. However, Saraswati, having lived in Germany for a time, declares that she was "beyond that," implying that she might have been impressed once, but was now too well-travelled to remain, as Cherie puts it, "star-struck." For her part, Cherie was familiar with equally clean and low-density areas in India. In both

59 MHSO, SAC, Agnew, May 16, 1977.

interviews Agnew has at least five responses (i.e. “no?” or “uh-huh?”) or follow-up questions, all closed and specific rather than open or neutral,⁶⁰ in which she seems, almost anxiously, to be seeking agreement from her interviewees. Eventually, she asks Cherie, “What about the grocery stores?” and Cherie concedes grocery shopping in Canada was more convenient than in India. Saraswati, however, resists Agnew’s prompting by focusing instead on the unexpected evidence of poverty in Montreal, conceding Canada’s affluence but only to underline its “impressive” failure to distribute that wealth equitably, as proven by the commonplace homelessness she says she observed. Agnew’s reaction is a swift denial. “It’s really not common here,” she says, disapprovingly. Saraswati, however, disputes this and provides examples. While there is a clear breach of empathy (or rapport) here, as Saraswati asserts the authority of her own experience in the face of Agnew’s contradictory claims, she also offers some conciliatory gestures (referring to her personality and Montreal in summertime). But the young Agnew, determinedly pursuing her own agenda here, was looking for something else; what exactly begins to emerge as the exchange continues. Saraswati has, again, insisted that the cleanliness of Canadian streets was merely expected, causing Agnew to laugh lightly.

AGNEW: [still chuckling] I think Canada loses out [still giggling] because it doesn’t [make?] a good impression. [Pause.]

SARASWATI: Yeah. [Pause.] Mmmm [in the affirmative]. [Pause.]

AGNEW: Well. [Pause.] What about your social life in Montréal besides your academic work? Did you kind of find yourself kind of lonely when you moved out of your niece’s home?

Although both women were far from home, Saraswati, unlike Agnew, had not been lonely and could, she says, “have had a very brisk social life” but “chose to focus” on her work. As the memoir reveals, Agnew was often terribly lonely when she first arrived, sometimes retreating to her room to cry in private.⁶¹ While a student at the University of Toronto, she socialized with a small but diverse (in regional, linguistic, and class terms) group of other single South Asian women students. They “could not have been more unlike,” she writes, but the relationships “served emotional and psychological needs” as shared reference points made it easy “to communicate thoughts and feelings and establish a rapport.” Some, like Agnew, “were interested in learning about some Canadian practices,” but others “preferred to retain their cultural norms” in dress, appearance, and behaviour. One in particular was given to “comparing Indian values and norms favourably

60 Regarding interview techniques, on the need to maintain a neutral demeanour, see Harney, *Oral Testimony and Ethnic Studies*; on benefits of sharing ideological perspectives with politicized informants, Alessandro Portelli, “Research as an Experiment in Equality” in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, pp. 29-44.

61 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 100-101.

to those of ‘Canadians’,” and Agnew found this woman’s “commitment to rigid traditional Indian values and culture somewhat frustrating.”⁶² As we learn from the memoir, Agnew had only recently made the decision to stay in Canada, hence her investment in Canada’s status relative to India was perhaps greater than it may have been earlier when, according to the memoir, she joined her South Asian friends in efforts to defend India from the commonplace critique that it was underdeveloped and backward.⁶³

If we keep this in mind, then, Agnew’s concern in her interview with Saraswati emerges more clearly. Non-verbal cues, such as the laughter and repeated pauses, guide us to both the breakdown of empathy and to an underlying struggle over questions of national pride that occurs in this and other interviews. For example, Cherie’s reply to the “impressions” question – “there’s nothing so fantastic about this place” – causes *both* women to laugh, and there is something of the quality of a shared transgression to the sound. There is a similar moment of shared laughter in Agnew’s interview with Noor, when the two women – a Hindu from India and a Muslim from Pakistan (nations that had by 1976 been at war three times) – touch on the cultural stereotypes each group (masking its own internal fractures) held about the other. The discussion began with a question about food preferences. Noor had, with a mischievous laugh, declared that not only did she eat pork, but she also drank alcohol (both taboos for strict Muslims). Yet, in spite of this cosmopolitanism, life in Canada had afforded opportunities for social interaction not available in Pakistan.

AGNEW: Would you distinguish between Indian and Pakistani [food], or it doesn’t really matter?

NOOR: Yes I would. I’m afraid I would.

AGNEW: Why?

NOOR: Since I’ve been here. Because when I was in Pakistan I was never really exposed to anything that was from India. But since I’ve been here, I’ve been able to meet people from India. And we have such varied friends. We have friends who are Sikhs, and Hindus, and this was the first time that I could meet them. And yes I certainly see that there is a difference. And the difference all comes from the religious, um, you know. Because the religions are different. Some of the, um, life, sort of, concepts are different. I find the Muslims are more pleasure-loving, less disciplined human beings, whereas the Hindu has an aesthetic sort of spirit and, ah, is probably a more solid person. [Both laugh.] You know, I’ll probably be butchered for this.

62 *Ibid.*, pp. 101-103.

63 *Ibid.*, pp. 105-106. Agnew and her South Asian friends cited India’s 1974 nuclear test and the election of a female head of state (Indira Gandhi in 1966) well before other Western states.

AGNEW: [Also laughing] Puritanical maybe.

NOOR: Yes, definitely, definitely. More disciplined.

Here, the laughter is shared, a moment of warm mutual recognition and play with stereotypes, acknowledged by both as profoundly flawed, yet relevant as evidence of a shared background in the long history of cultural encounter in South Asia.⁶⁴

In other interviews, however, the laughter is different. Sometimes, Agnew reacts with laughter to defuse tension when the conversation takes an awkward turn or when potentially controversial issues (such as homelessness in Canada) are raised. Even Saraswati, whose tone has been somewhat autocratic, murmurs her criticism so quietly that it goes almost unnoticed beneath Agnew's embarrassed laughter, but for the repeated pauses throughout the exchange. If we listen to them carefully, the pauses illuminate the issue with the force of a spotlight. It is as if Agnew is waiting, perhaps for Saraswati to say something else, something polite to soothe the obvious disappointment implied in Agnew's observation that "Canada loses out because it doesn't [make?] a good impression." In the recording, Agnew's chuckles die down and beneath them we hear Saraswati, not laughing *with* Agnew (as Cherie and Noor had), nor disagreeing the way a polite, appropriately courteous visitor might, but quietly agreeing – "Yeah" (Canada does lose out) – and underlining her position (after another pause) with a soft but firm, "Mmm," in an affirmative tone. There is a long pause. Agnew is briefly speechless. "Well," she says, almost in protest and sounding very taken aback. Again, she waits for Saraswati to say something else, perhaps something less troubling, and when she does not, Agnew changes the subject.

Close attention to the orality of the interviews reveals that Agnew had provided both the above interviewees with enough conversational evidence about her own point of view regarding Canadian affluence that they might have chosen to "go along" with it, as Cherie eventually does. However, Saraswati's determination not to comply with Agnew's obvious prompting for some kind of positive reaction to Canadian modernity or affluence, in comparison to India, posed a different kind of problem. On the one hand, we know from the memoir that Agnew, at this youthful age, delighted in a Western lifestyle and was frustrated by a South Asian acquaintance who compared India favourably to Canada. As we can hear from the audiotapes, she is clearly taken aback by Saraswati's critical remarks, so much so that she actually disagrees with her interviewee's observations about homelessness. This suggests that not only was Agnew aware of the sensitivities embedded within Canada's nationalist discourse and may well have shared them herself at this time, but that she was also thinking of the unseen presence implied by the quietly humming tape recorder. In these interviews, the interviewees, no less than the interviewer who manipulated it, were demonstrably aware of the

64 Agnew's family had fled Pakistan in 1948 during Partition (Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 47-54), but, she recalls, those events were seldom discussed; the memoir addresses this silence through retrospective use of subsequent research. See also Agnew, "Introduction" in *Diaspora, Memory & Identity*, especially p. 6,

recording device and of the unseen third parties who might one day be listening. While other interviewees can be heard obviously exercising discretion when expressing critical opinions, some, like Saraswati, took the opportunity *to be disagreeable* and insist that critical observations be recorded and made official, as it were, even if this insistence eroded empathy and involved a minor conversational struggle for authority with their interviewer. What this dynamic produces, even in the absence of empathy, are conciliatory and contradictory offerings that become part of the oral testimony (or constructed memory), which close attention to the historical context helps us to interpret.

For both these women, the Indian and the “new Canadian,” that context required them to navigate the turbulent cross-currents produced by the nationalist discourses of two post-colonial states then actively engaged in the construction of post-colonial identities out of the detritus of an empire to which both nations had once belonged. When the historian situates this conversation in its historical context, the interviews can provide an “intricate key” to the discursive cross-currents at play.⁶⁵ On the Canadian side, we have the aftermath of the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, created to address the growing mood of separatism in francophone Quebec, but which led also to the new policy of multiculturalism and addressed the influx of a new racialized group of immigrants to a country that had, until very recently, zealously protected its white identity while busily pretending that it was not racist – a claim that historians like Backhouse have demolished.⁶⁶ All of this was taking place under the ever-present shadow of the military and economic superpower to the south and with the lingering after-effects of white settler colonialism in which many British-origin Canadians of “pioneer” stock took considerable pride, even as they worried about the growing presence of non-British others.⁶⁷ On the Indian side there was, as Partha Chatterjee outlines, an equally complex adaptation of the modular form of the nation state in which the spiritual, and by implication moral, development of the East was proposed as the core identity of a colonized people poised to assume the technologically developed apparatus of the “modern,” but morally bankrupt, Western state,⁶⁸ a national identity complicated by regional variations within India and Pakistan which are beyond the scope of this study. On both sides was the legacy of the colonial discourse of civilization and development, essential to the rationale for colonial dominance but which, as Chatterjee and others

65 Robert F. Harney, “Ethnicity and Neighbourhoods” in Harney, ed., *Gathering Place: Peoples and Neighbourhoods of Toronto, 1934-1945* (Toronto: MHSO, 1985), p. 103.

66 Backhouse, *Colour Coded*.

67 Jose Eduardo Igarua, *The Other Quiet Revolution: National Identities in English Canada, 1945-71* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006), as well as multiculturalism references cited above. See also Robert F. Harney, “‘So Great a Heritage as Ours’: Immigration and the Survival of the Canadian Polity” in Anctil and Ramircz, eds., *If One Were to Write a History*, p. 228, first published in *Daedalus*, vol. 11, no. 4 (1988).

68 Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 4-34; David Ludden, “India’s Development Regime” in Nicholas B. Dirks, ed., *Colonialism and Culture* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), pp. 247-288. See also Israel, *In the Further Soil*, especially Author’s Introduction and chap. 6.

have shown, continued to shape the discursive terrain upon which South Asians asserted their claim to a role on the world stage.⁶⁹

While the effort to invent a post-colonial identity for Canada (one that excluded the First Nations), may have required less imaginative side-stepping for white Canadians, who were the inheritors of a settler colony rather than disaffected South Asians throwing off the yoke of imperial rule, what the content of Canada's new non-British but also emphatically not-American identity should be was always in question. Wryly observing that "survival of the Canadian polity" was "a recurring theme in public discourse," Harney wrote that the endless debates about Canadian identity constituted "a single national obsession, a state of affairs that can be characterized as a polity in search of a nation."⁷⁰

That these fluid and contradictory discursive arrangements were at stake for South Asian immigrants to Canada during this period is clear from Agnew's memoir, especially in her description of the defensive way that she and some of her South Asian university friends reacted to negative comments about India or Pakistan, a reaction heightened by the growing racial discrimination they faced in the mid-1970s. That these discursive conflicts would inform her interviews was assured by the fact that she was employed by an institution committed to creating an "archival and library collection of ethnocultural material"⁷¹ designed to put flesh on the nascent form that was official multiculturalism and led by the foremost historian of "the study of ethnoculture" in Canada.⁷²

Harney represented both the range and the limits of possibility within the academic mainstream of his time and, although she never studied with him, Agnew, as an employee of the institution he led, would have been influenced by his approach to ethnicity as an intellectual category. Insecure and impressionable as she was then, she was also unlikely to challenge it. For example, when confronted as a student by a professor of African history at the University of Toronto who claimed that the work of African scholars was "emotional," "subjective," and "tainted by nationalist ideology," in comparison to Western academics who were more "dispassionate and objective," Agnew felt too "unsure" and "intimidated" to question his views. Writing from the vantage point of one whose intellectual work and academic career has been focused upon understanding and undoing this form of imperialist patriarchy, both for herself and her students, she now candidly acknowledges that, as a young student, she even sought to "adopt a perspective similar to his and those of other like-minded academics" because she "believed that they had knowledge of the truth" and the "right perspective . . . from which to see the world."⁷³ Thus, although her conduct in the interviews was complicated by her own needs and experiences, as shown above, it was also framed, however imperfectly, by her employer's interest in a particular formulation of the category ethnic.

69 Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*.

70 Harney, "So Great a Heritage"; Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, p. 228.

71 Harney, "A History of the MHSO," p. 1.

72 Ramirez, "The Making of an Ethnoculture," p. 95.

73 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 82-83.

In Harney's own scholarly writing, the idea of an "ethnoculture," which he also referred to as an *ethnie* or an *ambiente*, is considered primarily in relation to Italian immigrant communities in North America, seen through the prism of geographically defined urban spaces such as the neighbourhoods known as "Little Italies." As a proponent of immigrant history at a time when few practised it, he also encouraged the application of these concepts to the study of other groups in Toronto and elsewhere. Rejecting an older paradigm of immigrant communities as backward ghettos that resisted modernity by clinging to old ways and refusing to assimilate, Harney showed that ethnic neighbourhoods were not a static and undifferentiated mass of working-class people ripe for exploitation by "the dominant classes and institutions of the metropolis," but rather generated their own fully-realized internal social structures.⁷⁴ These structures, he argued, did not merely reproduce Old World social relations and idioms, but remade, overturned, and transformed them, even while producing new North American hierarchies and cultures within "the ethnie" and also in the wider urban community. He was, John Zucchi recalls, "trying to make us aware of the significance of transnational history," although he did not use the term then.⁷⁵ Thus Harney was equally critical of social science models that studied ethnicity primarily for what it might say about rates of homogeneity or assimilation, an approach that regarded the *ethnie* as little more than "a holdover from the country of origin"⁷⁶ and, as such, a problem for the production of a unified national identity in the host society. Harney's approach, like that of the cadre of students who took up his call to research their own ethnic communities, assumed spatially defined, urban, working-class communities as the subject of analysis, albeit communities marked by gradations of wealth, status, and power.⁷⁷

Although Harney saw ethnicity as dynamic, a process arising from migration and the encounter with North American society, he did not ask whether the migrants saw themselves thus. For him, they simply were ethnic, and the ascription of ethnicity did not seem particularly problematic, at least not in 1977. A decade later, he would write that "ethnicity is proving itself an epiphenomenon of several postmigrant generations rather than a basis for permanent communal differences" and that the ethnic itself would "disappear unless regularly funded institutions of ethnic maintenance are legislated." He also conceded that "to be called ethnic in Canada is to be called less, as in 'ethnic writer,' and marginal, as in 'ethnic enclave,'" which is the closest he came to recognizing publicly how his own institutional authority in the construction of the category ethnic might be open to question.⁷⁸ In 1977, however, he simply took ethnicity as given, effectively ascribing subjectivities on grounds of culture or ethnicity while also

74 See especially Robert F. Harney, "The Commerce of Migration" (1977), "Ethnicity and Neighbourhoods" (1985), and "Toronto's Little Italy 1885-1945" (1987) in Ancil and Ramirez, eds., *If One Were to Write a History*.

75 Zucchi, "Ethnicity and Neighbourhoods," p. 175.

76 Harney, *Oral Testimony*.

77 Zucchi, "Ethnicity and Neighbourhoods," p. 74; Ramirez, "The Making of an Ethnoculture," p. 94.

78 Harney, "So Great a Heritage," pp. 255, 241, 261.

reserving the right to define the category “ethnic,”⁷⁹ an assumption of authority so implicit as to be almost occluded.

Agnew’s interview subjects, however, would not relinquish the authority to define themselves. To begin with, they were not at that time part of anything defined by spatial nor even linguistic (the interviews are in English) boundaries. Indeed, given the near total exclusion of South Asian immigration until the 1960s, they were relatively novel in the overwhelmingly white post-colonial context.⁸⁰ Furthermore, their repeated assertions of cosmopolitan tastes in food, clothing, and culture indicate a resistance to the ascription of ethnicity implied in questions about their lifestyles. Not viewing themselves in a process of “gradual altering,” they believed themselves perfectly suited and ready for full participation in Canadian life just as they were, regardless of whether their decision to continue dressing (in saris) and eating in the manner to which they were most accustomed rendered them “ethnic” in the eyes of others.

Although, as Agnew notes, “a few entrepreneurial Indian men” had started showing Indian movies in high school auditoriums on the weekend, there was as yet no “Indian bazaar” or “entertainment district” with theatres and restaurants of the kind that would emerge in Toronto’s east end in the late 1970s.⁸¹ When it did, it would not contain these particular educated middle-class professional women who, like Agnew, did not care for “Hindi movies, with their escapist adventures, family tragedies, and lewd song-and-dance routines set to loud music.”⁸² Tahira (a Muslim from Pakistan), for example, tells Agnew that she enjoyed religious-theme movies like *The Ten Commandments* and *Jesus of Nazareth*, but did not watch Hindi films then broadcast on late-night television.⁸³ Noor says she missed classical Pakistani music but not “our pop music or the filmy music.”⁸⁴ Ruby, a classically trained Indian dancer specializing in the Kathak style, was concerned to share her heritage with her daughters, but was also passionately interested in folk dance traditions from around the world.⁸⁵ Agnew herself “had been raised on Western novels, music, and movies” and had not been allowed to attend the family-owned movie theatre in Bombay where her father showed popular fare. In Canada, she writes, she and her “Westernized” South Asian friends had “looked down” on this form of popular entertainment as well as the working-class South Asians who consumed it. Viewing themselves as “educated, middle-class, and aspiring to professional jobs,” with the English-language skills and manners that

79 In “Multiple Multiculturalisms and Charles Taylor’s Politics of Recognition,” Himani Bannerji observes that, unlike “popular multiculturalism,” which “means mutual respect and critical recognition of each other’s cultures or multiple ways of social being,” “official multiculturalism ... is a device for ascribing subjectivities and conferring agency to the nation’s ‘others’ on non-structural or nonmaterial grounds, on the ground of their culture or ethnicity, while also retaining the right to define what qualifies as their culture or ethnicity” (p. 36).

80 Israel, *In the Further Soil*, pp. xxviii-xxx.

81 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, p. 107.

82 *Ibid.*, pp. 106-109.

83 MHSO, SAC, Agnew, April 12, 1977.

84 MHSO, SAC, Agnew, May 6, 1977.

85 MHSO, SAC, Agnew, April 2, 1977.

enabled them to interact with “Canadian friends,” they were embarrassed by what they considered the “ill-mannered and uncouth” conduct of the working-class South Asians they observed at film screenings that, despite feeling “superior,” they attended because it gave them “a touch of home.”⁸⁶

Given that Agnew had been hired, in part, for the access to the South Asian community that her status as a “member” of that community might provide, it seems likely, if ironic, that some of her interview subjects were from this same group of “Westernized,” educated, middle-class women with whom she socialized then (although she has given them pseudonyms and altered details to mask their identities in the memoir).⁸⁷ Not only did they not conform to the characteristic working-class *ethnie* whose interior life social historians like Harney were so keen to study; the oral testimonies, interpreted in light of the memoir, reveal that some (though not all) of the South Asian women whose voices actually entered the archive may have preferred to keep themselves “aloof” from the working classes, preferring instead to represent themselves as cosmopolitan and urbane.⁸⁸ In fact, Agnew notes, it came as an “unpleasant shock” when she and her university friends realized that “the internal distinctions” they made between themselves and working-class South Asians “mattered little to most white Canadians” who saw “all South Asians” as “an undifferentiated” and unsettling category of person.⁸⁹

Although Agnew and the women she interviewed did not depict the working-class experience Harney sought within the urban *ethnie*, his own overriding focus on the interior life and social structures of ethnic neighbourhoods, framed within official multiculturalism and Canada’s ideology of racelessness, may inadvertently have led him and the institution he founded to neglect or understate the significance of discrimination and exclusion by the host society for the ways in which ethnicity was produced. As Zucchi observes, Harney knew the sociological and historical literature on assimilation/aculturation and on racism and discrimination, but he was not deeply engaged by issues that reflected the host society’s fascination with its own questions and unease over diversity. His focus was on the immigrant experience and its link to ethnicity,⁹⁰ so much so that his silence on the subject is noteworthy. Indeed, his determination to transform the image of the ethnic neighbourhood from “the rubbish heap of the American dream” to a site of social mobility, notes Roberto Perin, led him to exaggerate its autonomy with respect to the dominant society. Even if an Italian immigrant went from “ditchdigger to a grocer,” Perin notes, his position in the Canadian

86 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 108-110.

87 *Ibid.*, especially chap. 6, “In Search of Community,” pp. 100-120.

88 Saraswati represents herself as highly sophisticated, unsurprised by Western modernity. Cherie, when asked about diet, insists that she could cook many international styles and would feel easy doing so anytime, not just on special occasions. Ruby also expresses utter indifference to the comforts of home, insisting that, as a classically trained dancer who had lived in London for a time, she was more interested in folk dance traditions from around the world, not just her native India.

89 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, p. 109.

90 Zucchi, “Ethnicity and Neighbourhoods,” p. 74.

class structure might not change.⁹¹ Or, if it did, it might change for the worse, as middle-class South Asian immigrants soon realized.

By the autumn of 1976, just as the MSHO was funded and a few months before Agnew began her interviews, what Harney meant by a “dangerous dependence on stereotypes” was painfully clear to South Asians in Toronto. That year they became the targets of “repeated and increasingly violent racial attacks” in public places, especially on the city’s transit system (one man had been pushed off a subway platform into the path of an oncoming train, breaking both his legs)⁹² but also at their schools, temples, workplaces, and even in their cars at traffic lights or in parking lots, with a frequency that “created an environment of fear and anger within the communities.”⁹³ The violence attracted the attention of an American news network and deeply embarrassed Canadian officials who, in keeping with the ideology of racelessness, preferred to believe Canada had avoided the racial upheavals that had shaken American cities.⁹⁴ A municipal government task force was set up, as well as a community-based investigation, whose findings were eventually submitted to Ontario’s attorney general at a formal meeting which Agnew also recorded.⁹⁵ As the MSHO was born and Agnew began her interviews, Toronto’s scattered middle-class South Asians were being driven to form a community in an environment of racial violence and heightened attention from civic officials. As one task force report, delicately avoiding the category “white,” noted, some “English-speaking Canadians” reacted to the “large numbers of black, brown and yellow skinned people suddenly . . . on the streets, the buses, and in public places” by declaring they had become “a minority themselves.”⁹⁶ In spite of Agnew’s reluctance to criticize Canada, for the interviewed women and the MSHO, the topic of prejudice or discrimination was, at that moment, immediate and unavoidable; it was, therefore, addressed explicitly in the oral testimonies.

Interestingly, although they describe their own personal experiences of racism, neither Agnew nor her interviewees explicitly address the political work then underway at both the government and community level to respond to the racial upheaval.⁹⁷ These women were approached as ethnic, not political, subjects, though documentary sources like the memoir show that many in the community, including Agnew herself, were engaged in political action. This may also reflect institutional reticence.

91 Roberto Perin, “Clio as an Ethnic: The Third Force in Canadian Historiography,” *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 64, no. 4 (1983), pp. 441-457, 459.

92 Israel, *In the Further Soil*, p. 18.

93 Buchignani *et al.*, *Continuous Journey*, p. 216; Israel, *In the Further Soil*, p. 19.

94 Task Force on Human Relations, *Now is Not Too Late* (Toronto: Council of Metropolitan Toronto, 1977), Walter Pitman, Chair, p. 22.

95 Bhausahab Ubale, *Equal Opportunity and Public Policy: A Report on Concerns of the South Asian Canadian Community Regarding their Place in the Canadian Mosaic* (Submitted to Attorney General of Ontario, 1977); Public Meeting (presenting the Ubale report to Ontario Attorney General Roy McMurtry), MSHO, SAC, Agnew, October 30, 1977.

96 Task Force, *Now is Not Too Late*, p. 38.

97 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 112-113; Israel, *In the Further Soil*, pp. 18-20.

Harney, for example, writing in the first (1977) edition of the MHSO journal, *Polyphony*, only hints at the headline-making events, sharing the hope that the new journal might “also serve to thwart the dark chill of prejudice and ignorance which steals over our commonweal.”⁹⁸ It is a peculiarly oblique, if evocative, characterization of the events from a historian at the vanguard of immigrant and ethnic history. In fact, the word “race” barely surfaces in Harney’s own work. This skirting of the subject suggests how deeply the ideology of racelessness had taken root, even among genuinely progressive scholars like Harney. It is evident, too, in his role as advocate of women’s histories of immigration and ethnicity. Canada’s feminist immigration historians, many of them, like Harney, interested in working-class subjects, have credited him with initiating a groundbreaking conference and foundational volume in the field, while they themselves have shifted from the recovery project characteristic of this early research and its focus on white Europeans towards more nuanced, if still heavily materially based, readings and critical analysis of the many intersecting identifications and locations shaping women’s lives – and through which women seek to shape their own lives – including race, class, and sexuality.⁹⁹ Agnew herself has contributed significantly to shifts in Canadian feminist scholarship on racialized women through, for instance, the application of post-modern concepts like “double consciousness” to reframe immigrant experiences (like her own) through a diasporic lens denoting the simultaneity and multiplicity of factors, including memory, both personal and collective, that shape and reshape identity and belonging.¹⁰⁰ Seen retrospectively, Agnew’s research agenda seems to have followed productively the issues raised by her own settlement experience as identified in the life story she constructed for herself as a mature scholar who had largely worked through the answers to questions that had troubled her as a young newcomer to Canada.

In 1977, the MHSO archive that Harney helped create provided Agnew’s interview subjects with a site from which to make their own declarations of belonging or alienation, as they made a historical record of the very public racism they had personally endured, as well as their widely varied reactions to it. Noor, for example, like other South Asians in the city, had been taunted with racial epithets by white youths in a nearby truck, while she paused at a stop sign in her car. She had, she told Agnew, backed up and shouted right back: “You stupid, un-educated so-and-so . . . you have a problem. And . . . I’m going to fix it!” Then she drove home and reported the incident to police, along with the truck’s licence plate, enabling the arrest of the offending youths; such a

98 Harney, “Polyphony [Introduction],” *Polyphony: Bulletin of the Multicultural History Society of Ontario*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall/Winter 1977), p. 3; Israel, *In the Further Soil*, p. 19.

99 See Jean Burnet, ed., *Looking Into My Sister’s Eyes: An Exploration in Women’s History* (Toronto: MHSO, 1986); Marlene Epp, Franca Iacovetta, and Frances Swyripa, eds., *Sisters or Strangers? Immigrant, Ethnic and Racialized Women in Canadian History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), whose co-editors were all contributors to the first volume. Also important in this context is Franca Iacovetta and Mariana Valverde, eds., *Gender Conflicts: New Essays in Women’s History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992).

100 Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory & Identity*, p. 14.

police response was unusual, according to other victims of racial harassment at this time.¹⁰¹

Other interviewees had more painful, less triumphant stories. Neela, who had arrived in 1965 and trained as a school teacher in Canada, was told by a former principal that only if she was *better* than a Canadian would she stand a chance at a job. Neela can be heard on the tape, sniffing quietly, as she tells Agnew she had “never forgotten” his words, adding: “the majority, they don’t let you belong, you know?”¹⁰² Ruby, who had developed a multicultural dance programme for Toronto schools, describes similar challenges finding work as a teacher, including being told by one principal that she would have to dress differently (she wore saris) at work. Cherie’s ten-year-old son, who pleaded with his mother not to take public transit, had been bullied so often that she had relocated her family in part to place him and her other children in a safer school. She and Brenda both told Agnew about the discrimination they faced in the search for housing and the pain of watching their husbands struggle with racism in employment. At her husband’s factory, Cherie reported, racialized men were denied jobs and promotions and faced verbal and written taunts. When told the manager had invited employees to come to him with their concerns, she expressed scepticism about his motives, saying he was only feigning concern because one of the “coloured boys” had just filed a human rights complaint and he probably wanted to forestall others. Indeed, Cherie found the racism she encountered in Toronto so disturbing that, as she reports towards the end of her interview, she wanted to go back to India and re-evaluate her options. When Agnew suggests that “perhaps” she was “just homesick,” Cherie insists she could “only decide” if she wanted “to stick for sure” if she went “back one more time.” Then, this interesting postscript: after Agnew, having asked if there was something “I’ve missed out,” turns off the tape recorder, we hear it turned on again, so that Cherie can add the following, final comment.

Another reason why we decided for Canada rather than Australia [to which they had also applied], I knew there is, I mean, you know there is discrimination in Australia and my sister [in Canada] wrote and told us, gee, this is such a wonderful country. There’s just no discrimination at all. And we said, gee, you know, let’s go to Canada.

Thus Cherie – again – asserts her authority in this quasi-official and documentary context. Contesting her sister’s claim that there was no racism in Canada and dismissing Agnew’s theory of mere homesickness, she insists that not only had she experienced racial discrimination in Canada, but that it had also transformed her perspective of Canada as a desirable place in which to raise her children. The interview ends here, and one wonders if Agnew, like other scholars, alert to Canadian sensitivity about accusations of racism at this time,¹⁰³ pursued the issue more readily once the conversation was literally “off the record.”

101 Ubale, *Equal Opportunity*, pp. 54-65.

102 MHSO, SAC, Agnew, March 4, 1977.

103 See Buchignani *et al.*, *Continuous Journey*, especially chap. 12, “South Asian Canadians and Others,” pp. 205-230. Referring to a study showing that “South Asians presently believe that racial prejudice plays an

We hear an intriguing variation of this dynamic in Agnew's interview with Brenda, who, like Cherie, came from a military background.¹⁰⁴ Brenda spends the first fifteen minutes of the interview describing a litany of struggles her family had faced upon arriving in Canada.¹⁰⁵ Suddenly she pauses and asks if she should go on because "it's been negative when I talk this way," a gesture towards self-censorship that indicates her awareness of the recording device. Agnew's response is remarkable. "No, no," she says, "That's fine. That's fine. Because you're expected to have that type of experience." Then, she immediately changes the subject.¹⁰⁶ Although the implied authority of her institutional employer seems to license the interviewee to be critical, both women are cautious, exercising the same kind of discretion shown by established white authorities such as Harney on the subject of racism.

As Milton Israel notes, the "troubles of the mid '70s" prompted efforts to establish community-wide organizations to address various issues of concern to a now briefly united community,¹⁰⁷ one of which was to combat stereotypes about the backwardness, impoverishment, and irrationality of South Asian countries that were represented always as delinquent or failed in comparison to Western modernity. For South Asian activists, including Agnew, doing so meant drawing attention to the positive contributions Indians were making. As she writes of the public meetings she attended during this period: "We thought that if we could communicate that we were professional people (engineers, scientists, physicians, and teachers), the racism against us would dissipate. We disregarded the presence of a substantial proportion of working-class Indians and Pakistanis in Ontario, preferring instead to focus on ourselves."¹⁰⁸

This emphasis on a professional, middle-class identity, with its accompanying assertion of a cosmopolitan modernity, is also evident on the interview tapes. Yet, even if all the women shared experiences of racism, their interpretations of those experiences varied widely; it was another way in which they asserted their own authority. Agnew, as she notes in the memoir, "did not feel outrage at the name-calling," opting, if confronted, to stare her abuser down. That kind of determination would serve her well when, in the mid-1980s while working as contract faculty at York University, she had to stare down the university which had hired a less qualified white woman for a position that Agnew had been denied. Backed by her union, her case resulted in a precedent-setting grievance that established seniority as a criterion for qualified contract faculty appointments at the university.¹⁰⁹

important role in their occupational careers," the authors implore readers "not [to] be too highly critical of this reaction" (p. 218).

104 MHSO, SAC, Agnew, January 21, 1977.

105 Brenda's husband, a retired pilot from the Indian Air Force, was, after many rejections, finally hired as chief instructor at the Toronto Island Flying School. Her family of ten had trouble finding accommodation, were demeaned by landlords, and struggled to get the children's Indian school credentials recognized.

106 See Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, "Learning to Listen: Interview Techniques and Analyses" in Gluck and Patai, *Women's Words*, for how interviewers committed to institutional agendas can miss opportunities to explore "off-script" topics.

107 Israel, *In the Further Soil*, pp. 18-19.

108 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, pp. 112-113.

109 *Ibid.*, pp. 111, 208-214.

For Neela, however, the racism of the mid-1970s was wounding; she craved belonging, but felt she would always be excluded. Cherie was disturbed but defiant, insisting on recording her complaints, saying she would abandon Canada if it continued to treat her children “as if they were something lower or second-class.” Although Tahira was “bothered” by the racism, she considered it “very recent.” She had not encountered such behaviour upon arriving in Edmonton in 1962 and attributed it to the recession and changes in immigration policy. She even tried to understand the resentment shown by some white Canadians because she had heard South Asian friends, who had immigrated earlier and now also faced diminished economic opportunities, express similar sentiments towards the new arrivals. “So, if a Pakistani or Indian here can think that way . . .” she trails off, implying, then why not white Canadians? Brenda, who had recounted so many experiences of discrimination that she worried about being too negative, denies emphatically that her family had ever felt “resented as Indians”: “No. No, I do not. I’m very strong about that. I do not think at any stage we have been resented against, resented as Indians. . . . When you do come to a country, you may or may not like it. Personally, I wanted to go back because my heart belongs to India. But it would be unfair to say that it was due to racism. . . .” In fact, rather like the younger Agnew and her university friends, Brenda approved of a certain discernment about the kind of company she kept, observing, “You cannot help but discriminate, to a certain extent, about those with whom you could mix and those with whom you can’t.” These seemingly contradictory middle-class perspectives are summed up by Noor, who insists, in spite of the name-calling incident described above, that she herself had not been the victim of racism.

NOOR: To me, the way I felt, I will again say that it was no racial discrimination. There had been talk in the newspapers. These were young teenagers out on a lark. They saw dark coloured people. Obviously they’re pakis, it’s a general term, and, and, um, this is what happened. . . .

AGNEW: But, otherwise you don’t think there’s any discrimination? What do you make of . . . [Noor interrupts].

NOOR: No. No, I’m sure there is. I am sure there is, Vijay, I’m not going to be that blind and say there isn’t, but I haven’t personally experienced it. Neither has my husband. Nor, have my children in any way that I know of, experienced it. . . . I don’t think my future is jeopardized here . . . I don’t think I’m a third class citizen, you know.

Class, then, was the distinguishing factor for those women such as Noor and Brenda, who, in spite of their dramatic encounters with racism, chose not to characterize their own life experiences, status, and future possibilities in racial terms, acknowledging thereby that to be racialized (or made ethnic) meant to be denied

class privileges to which they were accustomed.¹¹⁰ Even if Canada's ideology of racelessness may have constrained the way the interviewed women spoke about their experiences of racism, it did not silence them on the subject. Their ability to assert their class identity as a counterweight to the racism they faced in the wider context, as well as the ethnicity that was being investigated by the MHSO's hired interviewer, suggests that authority, even when not *meant* to be shared, can and will be seized by interviewees determined to define themselves in their own terms. Even Brenda, who grew anxious about listing the many discriminations her family had encountered, insisted that there was "one thing" she did "hold against them," by which she meant white Canadian employers, who "kept giving one hope, giving one the idea that a fair competition was being held." Having witnessed her husband's long, and in her view unfair, struggle to find work appropriate to his qualifications, this was one issue on which she would not remain silent. Noor, who did not think being called a "paki" qualified as an experience of racism, was "not going to be that blind and say there isn't [discrimination]." They all knew what was going on. The critical difference was the way in which they calculated their own ability to deal with it, and that depended on several factors, including the degree to which they felt they could escape the racialized or ethnic identities ascribed to them by others and the degree to which their own conception of self was governed by the collective scripts (whose presence can be felt in the interviews) generated by post-colonial nationalist discourses at work in the period. In Canada, within these discursive frameworks, "white" meant "Canadian," "professional," and technologically and socially "developed"; "brown" meant "Indian" and backward. But these middle-class women came to the interview equipped not only with a competing discourse in which, for some, South Asian meant steeped in antiquity, spiritually developed, and morally superior, but also their own lived experience, which suggested that Canadian could sometimes mean racially exclusive and morally deficient. For Ruby, a professional dancer, the answer lay beyond particularistic debates about nationality. She did not choose between Indian or Canadian; rather, she was an artist. "To me," she tells Agnew, "home is not a place. It's where I work."

Agnew, as she reports in the memoir, has also fought to define herself on her own terms, struggling against collective scripts, familial and national, Canadian and Indian, and through a determined intellectual effort to understand the racism

110 As Himani Bannerji observes in "Building from Marx: Reflections on Class and Race," *Social Justice*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2005), it has become "conventional in academic and political circles" to speak of "race" in the same breath with gender and class, but this intersectionality has been little theorized (p. 144). Anila Srivastava and Michael M. Ames make the same point for sociological or historical studies in "South Asian Women's Experience of Gender, Race and Class in Canada" in Milton Israel and N. K. Wagle, eds., *Ethnicity, Identity, Migration: The South Asian Context* (Toronto: Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, 1993). A useful survey is Tania Das Gupta's "Political Economy of Gender, Race, and Class: Looking at South Asian Immigrant Women in Canada," *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, vol. 26, no. 1 (1994), pp. 59-73. Agnew, in *Resisting Discrimination*, especially chap. 3, "Race, Class and Feminist Theory" (pp. 44-66) and chap. 4, "Race, Class and Feminist Practice" (pp. 67-92), draws on contemporary critiques by racialized women to problematize the universalizing gender theories of white middle-class feminism from the 1970s and 1980s.

that had affected her own life. By the time of her 2003 memoir, Agnew, now a self-assured, mature woman, could look back with compassion and clarity at the anxious, intellectually insecure, and lonely young woman whose voice we sometimes hear on the audiotapes.

My experiences have shaped my interests and guided them in certain directions. For example, my personal experience as a victim of racism enraged me; it made me willing to commit time and energy to understanding such bigotry. In Canada, I have been termed a “foreign student,” an “Indian woman,” an “immigrant,” an “Indian feminist,” and a “Third World woman.” Each of these designations has affected my relationships with other people and contributed to making me the woman I now am.¹¹¹

“Empathy,” as Luisa Passerini has pointed out, “develops and has its own story in the course of the social relationship which is the interview.”¹¹² As I have shown, the story of empathy in oral testimonies is also, to a considerable degree, the story of the struggle for authority. Historians with an interest in egalitarian research practice once argued for the emancipatory possibilities of oral history as method, because the creation of oral testimonies required the *active* collaboration of interviewees and so necessitated a certain sharing of authority. Yet, in the case of the MHSO during the mid-1970s, the complexities and contradictions associated with the effort to share authority were not only little-theorized; they were not even formally recognized in the design of archival research projects of the time. This may suggest that interviewees whose oral testimonies are housed in the MHSO were somehow constrained or even silenced, and sometimes they were. Yet my analysis has shown that attention to “the story of empathy” can alert the researcher to moments when, in the meeting of subjectivities that is the oral history interview, authority can and will be seized by interviewees determined to represent themselves in their own terms, regardless of how the archival institution – or its agent – expected to represent them.

In the interviews under consideration here, that struggle was related to the meeting of subjectivities constituted – and being reconstituted – within a context of competing post-colonial discourses deployed by interviewer and interviewees at a specific historical moment. It was Toronto in the mid-1970s, at a time of heightened racism towards South Asians, when the Canadian state was also developing a new (with roots in the imperial context) discourse of multicultural national identity to help manage the social transformation being wrought by immigrants like the middle-class racialized women in this study. By attending closely to what Passerini has called “the peaks and abysses of communication,”¹¹³ we can reveal the workings of competing discourses and the way in which sensitive topics such as racism, occluded within official discourses,

111 Agnew, *Where I Come From*, p. 277.

112 Passerini, “Memory,” p. 195.

113 *Ibid.*

nevertheless make their way into the historical record so as to illuminate, in this case, the lives of South Asian immigrant women in Toronto.

My analysis has benefited enormously from access to a documentary source that reveals the subjectivity of the interviewer in a way unusual for archived oral testimonies. Agnew's memoir – a thoughtful retrospective by a racialized immigrant woman reflecting on the historic contingencies that shaped her own subjectivity – better enabled me, as the historian who did not conduct the interviews, to interpret the story of empathy, as it unfolds in the oral testimonies she helped create. Critical reflection need not remain the exclusive prerogative of the interviewer who, having kept her interviews out of a public archive, maintains authorial power over “off the record confessions” about what did or did not happen in the interview process. As my analysis demonstrates, archived oral testimonies can be useful for many different forms of historical analysis, well beyond what the interviewer or the archive may have specifically imagined or intended when the recordings were made.

For their part, the interviewed women used what Himani Bannerji calls the “small opening”¹¹⁴ afforded by Canada's then new nationalist discourse of multiculturalism (within a bilingual framework) to make of it something larger, more expansive and capacious, even if it did not radically alter the underlying class dynamics of the liberal capitalist framework within which it was produced. It is not that racism did not distort these women's lives, as amply demonstrated by the stories they told Agnew. Nor were their subjectivities unaffected by the lingering colonial and post-colonial discourses at work during this period. Although they did not, or would not, see themselves as ethnic or marginal, the ascription of race would render them so, stripping them of middle-class privilege at various times, such that their stories are the true property of social and feminist history. But they were also individuals with their own personal life experiences, their private resources of family and friends, their sense of middle-class entitlement, each with her own distinctive character and temperament that also shaped how they responded to the conditions they faced in Canada. Informed by the anti-colonial nationalist discourses they brought with them from the Indian subcontinent, the interviewed women's reactions to those conditions contributed to changing Canada's nationalist discourse in myriad small, enduring ways. These include the stories they told, and insisted on telling, to the interviewer who came to record their voices for the MHSO archive.

114 Bannerji, “On the Dark Side of the Nation,” p. 22.