

Post-Modern Ethnography, Historical Materialism, and Decentring the (Male) Authorial Voice: A Feminist Conversation

FRANCA IACOVETTA*

I THANK the journal editors for inviting me to respond to Nancy Cook's provocative essay on Joy Parr's *The Gender of Breadwinners* (1990) and my *Such Hardworking People* (1992).¹ Cook writes that both Parr and I effectively used some postmodern concepts but failed to "extend sufficiently" a postmodern sensibility to our historical work. This failure, she suggests, was due in part to our "lingering commitment" to anthropologist Clifford Geertz and to a scholarly convention that assumes the all-knowing, male authorial voice. We perpetuated "oppressive" power relations, she adds, because the "linear narratives" we wove out of our interview material masked difference and conflict and silenced marginal voices. Finally, Cook invokes postmodern feminist ethnography and polyvocality as possible solutions for writing "more emancipatory social histories".

I offer this reply in the form of a feminist conversation, as an opportunity to discuss and debate seriously some of the truly important issues Cook has raised. (I shall not presume to speak for Joy Parr.) I am genuinely flattered by the serious attention paid to work that, though it appeared as a book in 1992, had been conceived, researched, and mostly written while I was a doctoral student in the 1980s. Despite some serious political and theoretical differences, Cook and I evidently share a feminist commitment to egalitarian politics and progressive social change. I, too, have grappled with ways of challenging male-defined and elitist academic conventions, but within

* Franca Iacovetta is a member of the Department of History at the University of Toronto. My thanks to Nick Rogers and Gordon Darroch for their initial invitation. For their varied roles in helping me in my efforts to write a spirited but fair-minded critique, I thank Karen Dubinsky, Gregory Kealey, Cecilia Morgan, Paul Rutherford, Marlene Epp, Craig Heron and Cynthia Wright (both of whom encouraged me to be more self-reflective), Kathryn McPherson (now a journal editor), Bettina Bradbury, and Mariana Valverde (all three of whom offered me excellent feedback in the final stages of writing), and especially Ian Radforth, who read my various drafts, gave me cogent advice, and listened patiently as I struggled with how and how much to risk "getting personal" and how best to use this opportunity to try to make a constructive intervention into current feminist and other scholarly debates.

¹ Nancy Cook, "The Thin Within the Thick: Social History, Postmodern Ethnography, and Textual Practice", *Histoire sociale/Social History*, vol. 32, no. 63 (1999), pp. 85-101.

Marxist-feminist and socialist history contexts associated with, for instance, the British *History Workshop* journal. Cook's piece also prompted me to read some excellent and provocative recent work in feminist ethnography and African and other non-western women's history based on fieldwork methods — a valuable exercise. I now invite other feminists (including men) who have used postmodern concepts to critique social history or have struggled to redefine scholarly research and writing along more egalitarian lines to join the conversation.

The Collapse of Categories?

I turn first to major areas of disagreement with Cook, starting with her characterization of a work of historical materialism as postmodern and post-structuralist² and her claims that I have unacknowledged debts to Geertz. I enjoyed Cook's discussion of the positivist assumptions of conventional anthropology (and history), the influence but also limitations of Geertz's cultural anthropology, and the rise of postmodern and feminist ethnography. I have since learned more about Geertz's critics and his increasing despair by the end of his career over the apparent impossibility of ever attaining anything but "subjective" or "self-interested" knowledge.³

My book was informed not by Geertzian anthropology, however, but by social history traditions as practised by Marxist, "new" labour, and especially socialist-feminist historians of the working classes. Nowhere in the book do I claim a postmodern sensibility, invoke any post-structuralist theories, or acknowledge any debts to postmodern scholars. We need to avoid the trap of stuffing all forms of "gender history" into the post-structuralist pigeon-hole. Historians using a gendered approach come from various traditions and theoretical standpoints, including a material feminist one. I did not call my book "gender history", though subsequently various scholars (including me) have done so — ironic, perhaps, given that post-structuralists proclaim the collapse of categories. That the term "gender history" became associated with influential postmodernists like feminist historian Joan Scott is not sufficient grounds for ignoring how other scholars were developing gendered approaches independent of Scott and in contexts outside post-structuralism. There is nothing intrinsic about a gender analysis that immediately marks it as feminist, postmodern, materialist, or anything else; it depends on how and in what contexts we apply it. I thus encourage a closer look at the relevant feminist works.⁴ We should also avoid a monolithic

2 Although these terms are not identical, many scholars, including Cook and myself, have tended to use them interchangeably.

3 Many thanks to Paul Rutherford and Richard Lee for some stimulating conversations on these topics. Cook's footnotes contain the relevant literature, including Lynn Hunt, ed., *The New Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

4 Among the recent collections edited by socialist feminist historians is Kathryn McPherson, Cecilia Morgan, and Nancy M. Forestell, eds., *Gendered Pasts: Historical Essays in Femininity and Masculinity in Canada* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1999); see especially their introduction.

treatment of postmodern scholars, many of whom, unlike Cook, show little interest in emancipatory scholarship. More generally, let us not assume that we are all addressing the same literatures.

Like much “new” social and labour history produced in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, my thesis and book were inspired above all by E. P. Thompson’s brilliant *The Making of the English Working Class*.⁵ Also highly influential were other leading British Marxist historians (Eric Hobsbawm, Raphael Samuel) and North American New Left, labour, feminist, and immigration historians such as Herbert Gutman, Rudolph Vecoli, Alice Kessler-Harris, Donna Gabaccia, Gregory Kealey, Bettina Bradbury, Robert Harney, Craig Heron, and Bruno Ramirez. Thompson’s elegantly crafted study emphasized the dynamism of class as lived experience. It encouraged countless historians to search for the roots and evolution of class identity and class consciousness in the material lives, everyday acts, proud cultural traditions, and strategies and protests of working people. Outstanding socialist-feminist scholars such as Barbara Taylor and Ellen Ross offered invaluable feminist correctives to Thompson’s analysis, which was based on the study of artisans and skilled male workers. Still, a Thompsonian sensibility and politics, explicitly acknowledged or not, remained central to many working-class histories, including mine.⁶

As a graduate student in the 1980s, I was immersed in the debates within Marxism (one of my doctoral fields), as were my friends and colleagues in the York University feminist reading group and the Toronto-based labour studies and socialist-feminist study groups to which I belonged.⁷ Especially important to us were the critiques of historical materialism raised by Marxist-

5 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963). To avoid overly long footnotes, full citations to the work of authors cited here, unless otherwise specified, are in *Such Hardworking People* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992) or my “Manly Militants, Cohesive Communities and Defiant Domestics: Writing About Immigrants in Canadian Historical Scholarship”, *Labour/ Le Travail*, vol. 36 (Fall 1995).

6 Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London: 1984); Ellen Ross, *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870–1918* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). Ross described her Thompson-inspired material feminist approach as “a rhetorical strategy in which many statements are made by accumulating detail; a belief in the significance of the material world to shape individual lives; and an aesthetic pleasure in and respect for the past. The identities of my historical subjects — as women, mothers, and participants in the collective ‘experience’ of their class — I have taken as givens here, though in another kind of study, these might well be open to question” (p. 10).

7 As a PhD student in history at York University (1981–1988) I turned to the Social and Political Thought programme for one of my three comprehensive fields of study. A graduate seminar in Marxist cultural studies (where we read and debated the work of key British scholars such as Raymond Williams and Raphael Samuel) and a reading course on E. P. Thompson and his critics (both feminist and not) let me develop further an interest — first kindled in undergraduate courses at York on Marxist theorists, Latin American revolutionary and feminist politics, Franz Fanon and African decolonization struggles — in what Samuel aptly called *People’s History and Socialist Theory* (London, 1981).

feminist scholars theorizing ways of integrating patriarchy into class analyses (Heidi Hartman, Sheila Rowbotham, Sarah Eisenstein, Michele Barrett, Meg Luxton) and by feminist labour historians (Kessler-Harris, Ruth Milkman, and others) who successfully redirected the debates over the primacy of class or gender by demonstrating the centrality of patriarchy and gender to working-class women's lives and to class formation and politics.

Similar debates between left ethnic and labour historians over the greater importance of class or ethnicity in shaping experience and class consciousness also produced more nuanced articulations of the interrelated nature of these categories. Studies by Vecoli, Meredith Tax, Gabaccia, Varpu Lindstrom, Allen Seager, Ian Radforth, Ruth Frager, and others demonstrated that immigrant workers and ethnic radicals could simultaneously possess a class-conscious politics and ethnic identity. The transplanted radical politics of labour migrants also became the topic of collaborative projects coordinated by European-based historians such as Dirk Hoerder and Christiane Harzig.

Within women's history and feminist theory, scholars of immigrant women and minority women, such as social scientist Mirjana Morokvasic (a specialist of non-western migrant women workers in Europe) and African-American specialists (such as Angela Davis, Jacqueline Jones, and bell hooks), challenged feminist historians' emphasis on the commonalities among women rather than the class, racial, and other differences that divided them. They offered compelling ways of theorizing the connections between feminism, racism, and capitalist class relations. The debates among feminist academics overlapped similar debates within the women's movement. Together, these various literatures and political debates helped me think my way towards my class-gender-race/ethnicity paradigm.

My "feminist reworking of class", as Cook very graciously puts it, was an attempt to demonstrate the interrelationship of class, gender, and race/ethnicity. It did not require a shift to postmodernism. Concepts central to my book — for example, that working-class immigrants like Toronto's postwar Italians might simultaneously possess a class, gender, and ethnic identity and that women and men might understand differently their class and immigrant experiences — had already emerged in the debates among labour, ethnic, and feminist historians. This was especially so in the case of the labour history written by North American feminists, where Kessler-Harris, Mari-Jo Buhle, Bradbury, Joan Sangster, Frager, Linda Kealey, Lindstrom, and others were writing about immigrant and ethnic women workers (including Irish and francophone *Québécoises*), female ethnic radicals, and gender politics and social relations within the ethnic left.

Similarly, my efforts to study men and women outside the workplace, to see them also in their households, neighbourhoods, and community, reflected my training as a left feminist historian: hence, my interest in studying workers beyond the point of production, the focus of most male and Marxist labour history. In exploring gender relations and power dynamics within peasant and immigrant families, households, and to a lesser extent communi-

ties, I used the insights of feminist theorists and historians of working-class women to respond directly to ethnic scholars who had treated social arrangements and institutions in monolithic terms yet nevertheless emphasized men's roles and their public activities.⁸ I also "listened" to my evidence and to my living subjects.

Cook sees my sensitivity to the complexities of working-class Italian immigrant lives, identities, and class politics as in some ways congruent with certain postmodern insights. I am prepared to agree with her observation but offer a different explanation. Materialist historians, particularly Marxist-feminist historians, were far better attuned to the influence of things seemingly less rooted in the material (such as language, culture, ethnicity, and ritual) than postmodernists and even some current feminist historians have recognized. After all, it was Marxist feminists who argued most persuasively against monolithic and essentialist models of patriarchy. I think it important here to note the continuing value of that influential body of work.⁹

Many social historians have indeed sought to convey the richly textured quality of lived lives, and such an approach shares some features with Geertz's "thick description". But this kind of approach also has its own history: for example, much "new" labour history consisted of richly textured case studies, whether of a single group of workers, a workplace, an industry, a community, or a moment of heightened class conflict, and much care went into careful reconstruction at the micro level. Social and labour historians certainly did and do borrow insights and methods from anthropology and other disciplines, as do African, Latin American, and other historians researching oral traditions and using fieldwork methods.¹⁰ While histories such as Robert Darnton's *The Great Cat Massacre* offer particularly strong examples of Geertzian influences in cultural history, working-class historians like myself owe far more to historians such as Thompson (whose own work

8 Feminist scholar Wenona Giles, a specialist of minority women, insightfully pointed out that, in addition to offering a feminist analysis of institution building and community politics and events, I might have more explicitly challenged conventional, male-defined notions of "community" by focusing on women's everyday acts and gossip and their relations with neighbourhood women, for example.

9 I discuss these points in more detail in "Gossip, Contest and Power: The Making of Postwar Suburban Bad Girls", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 80, no. 4 (December 1999), and in my essay in McPherson *et al.*, *Gendered Pasts*. Catherine Hall made a similar point in the introduction to her *White, Male, and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

10 Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre: And Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Random, 1985). My well-published colleague Nakanyike Musisi's forthcoming book on the Queen Mother of Kabaka (deposed because she took a commoner lover) is a wonderful recent example of feminist history drawn from oral history and fieldwork methods. So is Marc Epprecht's "The 'Unsayings' of Indigenous Homosexualities in Zimbabwe: Mapping a Blindspot in an African Masculinity", *Journal of Southern Studies*, vol. 24, no. 4 (December 1998), which also draws effectively on gay history and queer studies.

on plebian culture was highly influential), Gutman, and Kessler-Harris than to specific anthropologists. It would also be misleading simply to label all cultural historians — Natalie Davis and her tremendously influential work come immediately to mind — as “Geertzians”.¹¹ Furthermore, when social historians draw on anthropological, literary, and other approaches, they tend to do so selectively and carefully; they also critique and revise them in light of their own research.¹² I wholeheartedly support multidisciplinary scholarship and encourage Cook to explore further both the links and tensions between social and cultural history, cultural anthropology, literary theory, Marxism, the *Annales* school, Foucauldian approaches, feminist critiques, and other approaches. I also caution against reductionist and caricatured portraits of social historians.

Did I impose a monolithic portrait of my subjects and silence conflict? In suggesting that I portrayed Italian women as “homogeneously resourceful” and all Italians as experiencing racism in identical ways, Cook raised an important point: on what basis do we claim to have discovered dominant or minority or resistant patterns? In my discussions of employed, unemployed, and injured women workers, abused and deserted wives, and murder and suicide victims, and in my examination of women’s encounters with social welfare personnel, I tried to illustrate the remarkable degree of resiliency and resourcefulness I found while also acknowledging that inequitable resources and differing circumstances meant that some women were better equipped than others to resolve challenges and crises and to control intrusions from outside gatekeepers. Certainly, I did highlight women’s agency and working-class resistance and I used a family-strategies approach then common among many feminist working-class historians.¹³ Elsewhere, I drew attention to class and political divisions among Italians, gender conflicts in immigrant households, and Italian versus Italian male violence on the picket-lines.

When discussing racism, I tried to show that government files, newspapers, social work cases, letters, and other sources tended on the whole to portray Italians in a fundamentally racist way. While individual experiences and

11 Regardless of their own theoretical or methodological approach, most historians remain impressed with the innovative ways in which Davis has used concepts from cultural anthropology (such as ritual, inversion, and rites of passage) to write about community and culture. See, for example, Lenard R. Berlanstein, ed., *Rethinking Labor History: Essays on Discourse and Class Analysis* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), p. 3; Hunt, *New Cultural History*, which is dedicated to “Natalie Zemon Davis, inspiration to us all”.

12 An excellent recent example is Nicholas Roger’s impressive study, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), especially his superb introduction.

13 For a valuable discussion of these issues, see Cynthia Comacchio’s insightful review of Bettina Bradbury’s *Working Families* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1993) and related scholarship: “Beneath the Sentimental Veil: Families and Family History in Canada”, *Labour/ Le Travail*, vol. 33 (Spring 1994).

perceptions differed, Toronto's postwar Italians lived in a historically specific time and place shaped in part by prevailing and racist stereotypes. Like all forms of racism, these stereotypes were gendered and composed of contradictory images, yet nevertheless powerful and enduring. They shaped the wider context that helps to explain, for instance, why specific acts of kindness or cruelty towards Italians had such a profound and lasting impact on my immigrant informants. While my analysis might partially reflect the influence of cultural approaches in social history, I stress here my direct debts to the important multidisciplinary literature on racism, nativism, and race relations, including the work of Canadian Marxist-feminist social scientists such as Roxana Ng and Agnes Calliste. I readily admit to having drawn large generalizations from my analysis of the evidence, however. I accepted that informed judgement, however incomplete, was my responsibility.

Polyvocality and Historians: Can We Pass the Test?

I strongly caution against a naive embrace of a polyvocal approach, for it can so easily slide into a complacent form of liberal pluralism. I warn as well against letting intellectual self-reflection descend into naval-gazing. The impossibility of objective truth should never become merely a pretense for writing self-centred studies that use (and abuse) one's human subjects as a mere backdrop for talking about oneself. After all, most of us are not that interesting or clever! While Cook did not offer such counsel, I think it worth stressing that we need to distinguish between self-indulgent examples of "personalized scholarship" and "standpoint theory" from such brilliant practitioners of the genre as Patricia Williams, the African American feminist legal theorist.¹⁴ I concur as well with Cook's call for more reflection on the biased and politically and culturally embodied character of our sources; these requirements have long been central to the historian's craft. For example, Cook's praise for my "triangulated" research methodology (consulting more than one type of source, seeking various vantage points on a topic) is much appreciated, but it is not a novel approach to doing history. It is what many trained historians do as a matter of course. (Indeed, many historians, who often consult more than three types of sources, consider it an odd term.) As I was studying the recent past, I also had the option, not available to most historians, of interviewing living subjects, though oral interviews were by no means my only source.

How might historians apply polyvocality as a research method? What are the limitations of a method that, at least ideally, requires us to map but never select or assess every voice and story we hear or uncover? Or that discourages us from drawing generalizations? In my view, an approach that begins and ends with an endorsement of relativism or diversity is neither

¹⁴ See, for example, her *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

subversive nor emancipatory — things that Cook and I clearly both care about. Instead, it can lead to the absurd position that we can never evaluate or enlighten, even after years of careful research and reflection, because there is always another voice to collect, another scenario to record. Where does this leave historians who study antiquity, the middle ages, the early modern period, and other distant eras? What of historians who study dead people in literate western cultures that do not possess a rich oral tradition but have left us incomplete archives of written records? Given that these surviving records will almost certainly reflect mainly (but not entirely) the voices and actions of the powerful, the chances that such historians will pass the polyvocality test are slim indeed. I fully realize that Cook was not addressing this kind of historical research, but I want nonetheless to underscore the point that history cannot be treated exclusively as anthropology or ethnography, especially with regard to the remote past. Whatever our disciplinary commitments, we share an intellectual responsibility to do more than advocate a history that records but never concludes. As my father, a bright man with a grade five education, used to say, “I do the best I can do with what I have, and maybe later somebody does it better, maybe not.” By the same token, we, as observers of the past or present (or future?) must accept that new evidence or approaches may at any point challenge or revise our assessments.

Outsider or Insider Intrusions?

The Politics of Situated Knowledge

Cook’s central criticism of social history comes out of recent debates within anthropology and ethnography provoked by postmodern and feminist critiques. Put baldly, conventional ethnographic practice largely consisted of white, middle-class, western-educated professional anthropologists conducting field work on “Third World” or indigenous peoples. Rather than acknowledge the inconsistencies and contradictions they observed, these academic outsiders imposed an artificial order on their research. In so doing, they masked complexities, ignored divergent practices, and silenced alternative and resistant voices. Theirs was an authorial voice: rather than reflect on their own biases and vantage points, they “bracketed” themselves from their findings and assumed an all-knowing, third-person stance. In response to the real pitfalls of this approach, postmodern ethnographers have rejected monolithic descriptions of their subjects. Instead, they are engaged in self-reflective analyses of their relations to their subjects and field notes and experimenting with ways of giving greater “voice” to their subjects.

I sympathize with the anti-imperialist, anti-elitist, and anti-racist impulses behind Cook’s embrace of postmodern ethnography. Also, I share with feminist academics from working-class and racial-ethnic minority backgrounds an ambivalent relationship to the academy, even while I devote much time and energy to academic responsibilities and publishing commitments. Even I, an untrained anthropologist, could see how the few conven-

tional ethnographies available on the topic of southern Italians (who at times have been consigned the status of “Third World” peoples) were highly problematic; they posited static, ideal types of south Italian culture that pathologized peasants and denied female agency. For these same reasons, I challenge the suggestion that I easily fit the mould of the imperialist anthropologist scrutinizing from an ivory tower a culture foreign to me. I wrote about my own culture and community;¹⁵ my subjects included my parents and kin who were southern Italian peasants who had remade their lives as urban working-class people in postwar Toronto. My life and identity have been profoundly shaped by that reality, though not in predictable or linear ways. How I have perceived, accepted, rejected, and rearticulated the pieces of that “heritage” is central to who I am. I know this, and I thought my preface made it clear.

Given Cook’s interest in “situated knowledge”, I am surprised that she did not discuss my preface, which begins on an intensely personal note and seeks to position my personal and political relationship to my subject. I situated myself as a daughter and granddaughter of women whom I loved but whose suffocating gender codes I fought, a point that surely says much about my evolution as a left feminist. I tried also to convey a sense of the emotional baggage that children of working-class immigrants from “undesirable” racial-ethnic backgrounds carry with them — a complex mix of respect, pride, anger, and at times even embarrassment triggered by our knowledge that our elders were exposed to much ridicule and suffering and denied a life with an array of genuine opportunities. What did Cook think when she read that my brother’s struggle with severe mental anguish had sensitized me to the reality of psychological pain? Or when I spoke of my mother’s many personal losses? On these points alone, I shall claim the right to be angry with my critic and at the same time agree with feminist claims that the personal and emotional can be legitimate forms of scholarly writing. Indeed, I find it fascinating that within less than a decade feminist efforts to decentre the scholarly voice, though still contested, nevertheless now have the “authority” of an established and still growing literature.

Suzanne Fleishman notes that most scholars who situate themselves in relation to their research do so in the “safe margins” of their study — preface, afterword, acknowledgements.¹⁶ Some disciplines are more predisposed to personalized writing, and certain fields, such as literature and anthropology, have been the site of both its most ardent converts and critics. Furthermore, even when men adopt this practice, it is gendered female.

15 I shall trust that my readers will accept that I am in no way suggesting that these are monolithic terms.

16 Suzanne Fleishman, “Gender, the Personal, and the Voice of Scholarship: A Viewpoint”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Summer 1998). Thanks to Cynthia Wright for alerting me to this article.

Fleishman also observes that most academic women (and men) who have opted for “the autobiographical turn” in academic scholarship waited until after they had proved a “mastery” of their respective discipline through publications, obtained tenure, and developed established careers. I did it as a newcomer, in a male-dominated discipline where this practice was (and largely remains) unconventional,¹⁷ and at a time when a tight university labour market meant that much was hanging on senior male colleagues’ reactions to my work. Yet it was not a difficult choice because I had long been a convert to the claim that the personal is political and, like many historians, had long ago rejected the myth of objective knowledge. Significantly, readers, both male and female from both inside and outside the university, have told me they liked my book because it was not “dry” and “academic” but “emotional” or “moving”. Given that most of the text is written in academic prose (my book is a hybrid that reflects the tension between my desire to earn my academic stripes and reach immigrant readers), is it even accurate to call the preface a safe margin?¹⁸

All this discussion is not to suggest that power dynamics were absent from my book simply because I wrote about “my own kind”: they informed every interview, every word I wrote, every quotation I used, every photograph I chose. As it earned me a PhD and helped me land a privileged job as a tenured academic, the book irrevocably propelled me out of the class position I had shared with my numerous working-class cousins (though that process had already begun) and into the ranks of the professional middle classes. Yet it hardly erased my class, gender, and cultural legacy. I do not think that I blissfully imposed on an unsuspecting people an outsider perspective shaped entirely by an elitist university training far removed from my subjects. In many respects, the usual outsider-insider dynamic was reversed in this instance, and the resulting power dynamics were of a different quality.

Feminist scholars like African anthropologist Marjorie Shostack and Aboriginal specialist Julie Cruikshank have well articulated the dilemma facing those who research from the position of the outsider. We need also

17 For a very recent (and both humorous and moving) example, see Karen Dubinsky’s second monograph, *The Second Greatest Disappointment: Honeymooning and Tourism at Niagara Falls* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1999).

18 Personal prefaces or acknowledgements can have a profound and enduring influence on readers. I note, for instance, the responses of students and instructors to Bradbury’s personal and moving introduction to her important and widely used *Working Families*, a study of wage-earning families in industrialized Montreal in which life-cycle approaches, quantitative methods, and daily survival strategies receive serious attention. “In ways I could never have anticipated and would never have wished,” she tells us, “my own experiences followed the structure I had set out for the book, which proceeds from marriage, through an examination of the work roles of husbands, wives, and children, to an examination of how people managed in crises like the death of a husband or wife.” As historian Marlene Epp put it, “it stays with you.”

to consider what happens when we encourage students from working-class and immigrant and minority backgrounds not only to pursue postgraduate studies but to devote their professional training and apprenticeship to scrutinizing and writing about their own group or community. Does validating our histories necessarily carry a contradictory logic, that our entry into the academy is premised on turning our subjects (and ourselves) into specimens? Do those of us who choose to write so explicitly about our immigrant and working-class elders run the risk of being forever infantilised in the historiography, our scholarship defined more in terms of our personal relationship to the subject rather than our intellectual contribution?

While all working-class and minority scholars might share certain difficulties, those who study subjects, eras, and topics far removed from themselves or their communities (such as mediaeval monasteries or the enlightenment or, to take examples from outside history, bio-chemistry or chamber music) are less likely to have their scholarship described in terms of their personal history. Historians from working-class and minority backgrounds who write labour and minority history are more vulnerable to such critiques, although now perhaps those most susceptible of all to such reductionism are scholars writing gay or lesbian history and queer studies. I want to say to junior colleagues from less-than-privileged backgrounds who have discovered the joys of intellectual work yet fear that they may never “belong” in the academy: take the risk, storm the ivory tower, help redefine scholarship, and do not let anyone (even your mother, because she worries about you) question your right to dare to be a scholar. Even those of us who are the daughters, granddaughters, and nieces of ditch-diggers, laundry workers, worm pickers, and peasant and immigrant women virtually illiterate in their own language can earn the right to make that claim. Genuine intellectuals — like my thesis supervisor, Ramsay Cook — will offer you both support and compassion. Yet I cringe at the prospect of giving advice or, worse, becoming a role model — what do I offer? My lack of professional (“wasp”) reserve? My working-class “brashness”? My ethnic feminist hutzpah? Or simply my scholarship? The responsibility is too daunting.

The insider-outsider dynamic is not simply a matter of individual biography, but has also structural and historical roots. Nor are the categories insider and outsider merely linear concepts. I am neither a total insider to my community and the academy nor a total outsider to both those worlds. Even while I feel overwhelmed by my professional responsibilities and try hard to reduce my many commitments, I cannot believe my good fortune. More ironic is receiving praise, awards even, from the academy for writing history peopled with janitors, underground tunnel workers, cleaning ladies, and maimed construction workers. Was the goal not to write subversive history?

As Cook’s essay suggests, oral history methods bring these and related questions into sharp relief. For several decades, scholars in various disciplines have used oral history methods as a means of both reclaiming the

history of the marginal and silenced and centring women's lives. Earlier, I noted that history differs from anthropology by suggesting that historians working exclusively with preserved records are not responsible for creating their documents, but for finding and interpreting them. By contrast, historians and anthropologists who conduct interviews with or observe living subjects help to shape the documents they later scrutinize; as Cook well knows, it is both an act of retrieval and creation. Well before the advent of postmodernism, debates and self-reflective criticism in various disciplines addressed issues of authority, authenticity, power, and interviewer-subject relations. I faced these challenges in ways that many feminists, who tend to restrict themselves to interviewing female subjects, have not. During several interviews with retired men, it became at some point obvious to me that, though my male informant had politely listened to my explanations of my doctoral research project, he did not actually believe that I could be more than sixteen, at the most eighteen, years of age. Only when my questions shifted from "easy" (descriptive) questions (date of migration, work experiences) to "serious" political or economic questions about, for instance, Italy's historic 1948 elections or postwar land reforms in southern Italy did my informant accept that I was some kind of "authority" on Italian emigration and immigration. When, after the publication of the book, I went on the lecture circuit, some of these same men expressed their astonishment that the "young girl" they had "talked to" had become a *professoressa*.

Still more unusual was to find that I had influenced my subjects' subsequent versions of their stories. The most poignant example involved Frank Colantonio, a former immigrant carpenter and labour organizer involved in a set of construction strikes to which I devote an entire chapter in my book. He was an interviewer's dream, graciously agreeing to several lengthy interviews and enthusiastically responding to follow-up questions in subsequent phone calls that spanned several years. At retirement age, he attended York University, where he studied my book in immigration courses taught by colleagues like Lindstrom. Under Heron's steady guidance, Colantonio also went on to write his autobiography, *From the Ground Up*. Sadly, it appeared a few months before his death. What struck me most about his memoirs was how much Colantonio had come to "see" the construction strikes in the terms in which I had written about them. It was not simply that he agreed with my general descriptions or interpretations. It was the degree to which my gendered language and feminist analysis had come to shape significantly Colantonio's final telling of his own tale.¹⁹

19 Frank Colantonio, *From the Ground Up: An Italian Immigrant's Story* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1997). When the publisher asked me to help promote the book, I happily agreed because it offered me a concrete way of thanking a man who had helped me earn my doctorate and publish a book. His book is a fine example of the power of insider knowledge.

The “Autobiographical Turn”: Promise and Limits

In recent years, growing numbers of feminist academics of various persuasions have tried to address the question of the researcher’s power over her subjects largely by seeking ways of minimizing it. Some have chosen to interview women with whom they share much in common, including class, race, occupation, and politics. Others have tried to subvert their power as the final authority by inviting their informants to read and revise their scholarship — and here we should acknowledge the enormous time and energy this kind of negotiation involves. Perhaps the most dramatic attempt to challenge conventional academic writing, however, is the increasing shift towards “autobiographical” scholarship. This phenomenon, evident in varying degrees across disciplines and extending far beyond oral history projects, is at root a critique of the kinds of positivist assumptions with which Cook is grappling. It has emerged from an ongoing critique of a model of scholarship that assumes objective knowledge is attainable and sees the writer as a dispassionate authority devoid of emotion, personality, and subjectivity, and which relies on a specialized and impersonal vocabulary. Recent efforts at personalized scholarship, as Fleishman observes, have sought to give a personal identity back to the scholar, restore the emotion and excitement that accompany discovery, and replace “high-wire theory” with ways of theorizing from the particular and concrete.²⁰

Like other feminists keen to unsettle the conventional ways by which academics create “the authority effect” (Fleishman’s term), Cook uses the much-cited example of Marjorie Shostack’s important book, *Nisa*, in which the author’s scholarly prose is continually juxtaposed with the words of “her” !Kung female subject.²¹ Other feminist anthropological studies offer useful articulations of the author’s “positional” knowledge, including Gracia Clark’s fine study of West African women traders, *Onions Are My Husband*. Significantly, Clark explains her decision to abandon an earlier interest in the history of mediaeval cloth towns for anthropology in the following manner:

Ethnographic research attracted me as I came up against the starker limitations of archival research. The archives of all three major Flemish cloth towns had been completely burned; if not leveled in the First World War they had burnt in the Second. The immediacy of interviewing live people was irresistible, simply asking them what I wanted to know. Fieldwork presents its own stark

20 For a valuable sample of strategies, see Sherna B. Gluck and Daphne Patai, eds., *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Boston: North Eastern University Press, 1987).

21 Marjorie Shostack, *Nisa: Portrait of a !Kung Woman* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1981).

limitations, negotiated in a continuous wrestling with one's own assumptions and suspicions in eliciting answers. But this struggle looked enjoyable and rewarding ... compared with facing a more implacable adversary in the systematic construction and destruction in the historical record.²²

Clark proceeds to explain the various professional and political contexts that led her to study the complex lives of market women in Kumasi Central Market, Ghana, and the intricacies and challenges of ethnographic fieldwork. The study itself, however, largely conforms to an academic format and relies on a dense scholarly prose.

A more explicit example of "the autobiographical turn" is supplied by feminist ethnographer Ruth Behar's *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza's Story*. It is at once a fascinating and unsettling narrative of the life of a Mexican woman pedlar (and village "witch") and an exploration of Behar's journey from conventional anthropologist to angry, then reflective, and finally astute critic. From the start, writes Behar, Esperanza did not meet the expectations of an oral informant: she sought out the *gringa* who had come to her village (not the other way around), she determined when, where, and how she would tell her *historia muy grande* (my grand story), and she urged Behar to take her story across the border into the United States. Esperanza's harrowing tales of poverty, abuse, and loss of children, like her talents as a storyteller, prompted Behar to reflect on her own position as a "model" Cuban immigrant (of Jewish heritage) who had attained success in the academic establishment. The book becomes a series of ongoing encounters between two translated women differently located on opposite sides of the border. The result is a powerfully moving and illuminating text, but, as Behar admits, she can neither deny nor erase her position of privilege.

I confess, however, that I was captivated by Esperanza's, not Behar's, storytelling. Apart from the sections that most explicitly chart Behar's transformation from obedient to defiant anthropologist, I grew tired of her repeated efforts to keep the reader abreast of her every thought and action, especially when she described mundane daily routines. I much prefer how Cruikshank handles similar challenges in the majestic volume, *Life Lived Like a Story*, a "collaborative autobiography" produced by her, the anthropologist, and three truly remarkable First Nations women in the southern Yukon territory. There are plenty of parallels between these two ethnographies, including the importance of the narrative structure to all four female subjects (Esperanza and the Yukon First Nations women) and their insistence upon controlling the form of and pace at which they tell their respec-

22 Gracia Clark, *Onions Are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. xi. My thanks to my African history colleague Sean Hawkins for this and other works in feminist ethnography.

tive life stories. The Yukon female elders begin with creation stories and family genealogies (the “necessary scaffolding”) before shifting to personal biography and, finally, specific historic events. Cruikshank positions herself and her fieldwork much like Behar, providing us with crucial background on her life subjects, her role as anthropologist, and the history of the region. In contrast to Behar, however, Cruikshank does not keep drawing attention back to herself.

Nevertheless, Behar’s book effectively taps into the ambiguities and contradictions that accompany the uneven transition that those of us raised by humble people have made from “outsider” to the bourgeois world of university intellectuals to “insider”. In her new book, *The Vulnerable Observer*, where again ethnography and memoir are merged in powerful essays based on fieldwork in Cuba, Spain, and the United States, Behar writes of the reactions of female and male readers to *Translated Woman*. What most impressed her was that “readers needed to see a connection between Esperanza and me, despite our obvious differences, and they need to see a connection back to themselves”. “When you write vulnerably,” she adds, “others respond vulnerably.” It is a deeply moving book, though, in my view, it does at times (when, for instance, she writes repeatedly about her own personal guilt) border on the self-indulgent.²³

Getting Personal: Liberating or Oppressive Scholarship?

Obviously, I am sympathetic to feminist attempts to decentre the authorial voice; ironically, I chose not to call my oral histories into question (despite having delivered numerous lectures and conference papers on the issues Cook raises) simply because I had wanted the narratives to be accessible to those who had relayed them to me and to other “lay” immigrant readers. Still, I want to address some fundamental and perhaps unsolvable problems. Fleishman identifies several risks inherent in personalized writing, including whether it undermines our authority as (feminist) scholars and hurts our chances for tenure and promotion within the academy. She also asks whether the greater popularity of this genre in the United States is part of a larger American-style “me generation” obsession with the self or, alternatively, a feminist disenchantment with highly abstract theorizing that encourages researchers to sacrifice human experiences to the altar of Theory.²⁴

My concerns also require us to revisit issues of knowledge and power. I return to a central question: do polyvocal or positional approaches to re-

23 Ruth Behar, *Translated Woman: Crossing the Border with Esperanza’s Story* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), and *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology that Breaks Your Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996); Julie Cruikshank in collaboration with Angela Sidney, Kitty Smith, and Annie Ned, *Life Lived Like a Story: Life Stories of Three Yukon Elders* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1990).

24 Fleishman, “Gender, the Personal, and the Value of Scholarship”.

search and writing actually get us closer to some kind of truth, actually produce a more egalitarian or superior form of knowledge? Implicit in Cook's critique is the suggestion that I ought to have written myself into my text in a consistent manner. Would such a strategy have enabled me to accomplish my goal any better — to feature my subjects' lives and histories? For one thing, we, as authors, have the power to insert ourselves into our text at any point and in any manner we choose. We can decide how much we want to tell our readers about ourselves (a luxury not necessarily shared by our subjects) and where and how we want to juxtapose our life history or personal reactions to our subjects or our scholarly analysis.

What if I had decided to write myself into my history in a more thorough fashion? I genuinely believe that I would have found it easier to write a book that used my culture as a foil for my (thinly disguised) autobiography than what I actually attempted to do. I could easily have turned the discussion about Italian women's work and culture, for example, into a springboard for showcasing me and my recollections — for example, of faking menstruation as a teenager to get out of canning tomatoes or making sausages (thereby using the power of women's polluted blood, I could have written, to defy my mother and grandmother). I could have told about my fury at learning that my mother had tried to prevent my leaving home at age 19 by hiring a sorcerer to cast his spell on me, and how I punished her by refusing to speak to her for many months. My tale did not have a happy ending, and I reserve my right not to reveal it, thereby also illustrating how writers can determine when, where, and how much they divulge. I could have recounted many other stories — about myself — and in this and other ways fed my readers' (voyeuristic?) curiosity.

Instead I opted to write about my now elderly subjects, to tell their history as best I could within their terms of reference and by a careful examination of available historical sources. Yes, it was mediated by me. I helped to shape the interviews and I, not my subjects, chose how to interpret the historical documents I uncovered. I am not suggesting that an autobiographical approach to my topic is unacceptable.²⁵ Rather, I am drawing distinctions. I did not want to use the topic of Italian immigrant workers as a backdrop for constructing or reinventing myself. As a left feminist historian who had fought her culture during much of her life, I found this book was indeed a way of making peace with my cultural and class background, of giving back to these elderly immigrants by making my project their history, their experiences, their struggles, their triumphs, their perceptions, and their recollections. It was also a tremendously rewarding experience (I learned far more than I had ever imagined I would) and, moreover, a hum-

25 It would be interesting, for instance, to consider how I might have "rewritten" this history using Behar's approach, through the dual lens of mother and daughter. Unfortunately, my mother's death means it will never happen.

bling one (a good thing for any academic). We cannot possess objective knowledge, but we can choose to try to write about others even if the final product is incomplete, uneven, and filtered through us. Unlike Geertz, I can live with these limitations.

Furthermore, I suggest that the act of social location may actually become a burden, an unfair imposition on one's subjects and readers — an important concern for ethnic, labour, and other historians who regularly share their research with the communities they study. For example, would it have been fair to my subjects — the tens of thousands of Italians whose life histories in early postwar Toronto I had tried to reconstruct — if I had revealed to readers that I grew up in a family plagued by mental illness and tragic deaths? Would it not have been misleading and unfair to the many, indeed most, Italians whose struggles were not played out in the mental health arena? Would some readers have found it impossible not to see everything they read in my book, which actually says little about mental health, as a reflection of the mental qualities of all immigrants? In giving voice to my personal anguish, I might have run the risk of silencing the many different experiences and profiles of my subjects, whose numbers extended well beyond my group of informants. Indeed, I contend that I was justified in claiming the intellectual space to make judgement calls about when it was relevant, or not, to address mental illness in my book.

Ultimately, I gained a knowledge of my topic in various ways. In addition to my immediate family experiences, I learned from my many and varied relationships with aunts and uncles, grandparents, neighbours, and extended kinfolk whose lives were not damaged by mental illness. I also acquired a knowledge of the community as a result of my “triangulated” research methodology, to return briefly to that odd social science term. Those years spent poring over Immigration Branch documents, English- and Italian-language newspapers, confidential case files, labour force statistics, photographs, and other archival records had serious implications for how I conducted and then evaluated oral testimonies and in this and other ways shaped my “final” product.

We cannot ignore the fact that we, as scholars, have considerable power as producers of knowledge. No devices or desires will ever make entirely egalitarian the relationship between researcher and subject, interviewer and informant, observer and observed. Rather than letting our guilt paralyze us, we need to acknowledge our power as intellectuals and debate how we can best exercise it. I am particularly dismayed that younger feminist scholars from racial minority backgrounds are more consumed, even immobilized, by this guilt, to the point that some contemplate abandoning an academic career even after successfully defending their dissertation on women from their community. Deeply felt concerns about exploiting their subjects' pain, fears, and embarrassment has meant long and anguished delays in publication. (To me, this dilemma is far more troubling than the question of whether feminist scholars from middle-class and dominant cultures who already

enjoy race and class privilege ought to be enhancing their research profiles by publishing on minority and marginal women.²⁶ The cost of our silence, however justified in the case of ethnic and minority scholars, is complicity in the “re-silencing” of neglected and marginal women subjects.

It is also important, I think, to recognize the possibility that the researcher, by virtue of years spent studying a variety of sources, might well “know” more, or rather “know differently”, about her topic than an individual informant without our necessarily falling into the elitist trap. Here, I return again to the issue of insider versus outsider knowledge. When I interviewed Italian immigrants, I did know more than they did about how selection agents wrote about them to their superiors and how agents tried through covert means to deny admission to many southern Italians. The moment we consult sources outside the oral testimonies we record, we seriously affect our relationship with our informants. It is not a pristine relationship that allows us, as the researcher and partial creator of the interview, to be entirely self-reflective or self-referential in our portrayal of our subjects.

Depending on the issue and context, it may even be acceptable to disagree with the community to which one both belongs and researches. No community or group is monolithic, of course, and the scholar is not obliged to agree with her subjects’ point of view. Choosing to disagree with one’s community can be difficult. As a historian who has received much praise within the Italian Canadian community for writing a respectful study of immigrants, I admit to some feelings of trepidation as I prepare for the publication of a recent work. It is a collaborative project initiated by left-minded Italian-Canadian historians critical of the ways in which history has been misused in the campaign seeking compensation for Italians interned in Canada during World War II. It will not be popular in my community, yet it springs from the same political convictions and sentiments of passion and respect that informed *Such Hardworking People*.²⁷

Conclusion

Very recently, I have studied some post-structural and postmodern scholarship. I have read the literature with a critical eye. Like some other Marxist and socialist-feminist, working-class, and gender historians, I have rejected postmodernism’s extreme relativism and intellectual elitism, but found useful its (not entirely original) critique of positivism. But there has been no radical shift, let alone conversion, to postmodernism. Instead, I contend that

26 In somewhat different ways, Ruth Roach Pierson addressed these and other related points in her insightful essay, “Experience, Difference, Dominance, and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women’s History”, in Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson, and Jane Rendall, eds., *Writing Women’s History: International Perspectives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

27 Franca Iacovetta, Roberto Perin, and Angelo Principe, eds., *Enemies Within: Italian and Other Internees in Canada and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000).

certain postmodern insights (which are simply that, and not articles of faith) can be critically examined, tested, and revised, and in this way integrated into the feminist, anti-racist, and materialist perspectives to which I remain committed.

As for emancipatory politics, the critical role of historians is, in my view, to demystify history and thus the power of the ruling classes: to show that struggles were won or lost, choices made, other possibilities tried, and alternative lives forged — and in this and other ways never to rule out the possibility for progressive social change. My political work with the Ontario Workers Arts and Heritage Centre, where researching and showcasing workers' history is our aim, similarly reflects a commitment to a people's history that is more than armchair practice. It is about arming people with the intellectual tools to enable them to make critical choices, and — dare I say it? — help shape human history. I prefer this kind of politics, however flawed, to polyvocality, though I agree that we cannot effect real change without giving voice and power to the marginal and dispossessed.

I know little about Nancy Cook; she gave me few clues. But I thank her for provoking me into reflecting on several critical issues. Without Cook's essay, I might never have stopped to read three stimulating books, Behar's *Translated Woman* and *Vulnerable Anthropologist* and Cruikshank's *Life Lived Like a Story*. I can see why this scholarship might inspire Cook. I want also to urge that we, as feminists, continue to seek ways of engaging in genuine intellectual exchange and rigorous political debate (with both women and men) within a context of mutual support and respect. I sincerely hope it is clear that my energetic response reflects the seriousness and enthusiasm with which I have taken Cook's critique of my work.