This series presents distinctive works that challenge conventional understandings of not only who speaks for history but also how history is spoken, and for whom. In an era when the possibilities for collaborative research and public engagement are almost limitless — when the term *history* can at once embrace deeply personal life stories and the broad scope of a public museum exhibit — the need to explore new methodological models and assess their ethical implications has never been so vital. This series, unique in its focus, provides the pivot for a transformative vision of historical practice.

This is the second volume in the series. The first is:

*According to Baba: A Collaborative Oral History of Sudbury’s Ukrainian Community*

*Stacey Zembrzycki (2014)*
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Introduction

We need projects that will involve people in exploring what it means to remember, and what to do with memories to make them active and alive, as opposed to mere objects of collection.

– Michael Frisch, “The Memory of History”

We have a good deal to learn – as much about ourselves as about survivors – by reflecting on the different ways survivors’ accounts have been gathered, utilized, and interpreted.

– Henry Greenspan, On Listening to Holocaust Survivors

Frédéric Mugwaneza grew up in Kigali in an intercultural family, the child of a Rwandan father and a Belgian mother. After twenty-five years of living in Kigali, his mother spoke perfect Kinyarwanda and she was very well integrated into the community. “She became a real Rwandaise,” he recalled with pride in an interview with Emmanuel Habimana and Annita Muhimpundu. In the interview, Frédéric remembered hearing two explosions on the night of 6 April 1994. At the time, he did not think much about it. The next morning, however, his mother woke him to say that there would be no school because the president had been assassinated. With this, his family sat down to eat breakfast “comme à l’habitude.” The lingering sense of normality began to unravel at around eight or nine o’clock, when the sounds of distant gunfire became a veritable bombardment. He saw his father nervously make a number of telephone calls. Frédéric, then a young man of seventeen or eighteen, went out into the garden to see what was going on.

At this point in the interview, Frédéric stepped out of the moment to provide Emmanuel, who is a psychology professor of Rwandan origin, with some context. He explained that he survived what followed due in part to his education and to the high social standing of his family. He had attended a Belgian school and rubbed shoulders with the sons and
daughters of government ministers and high-ranking military officers. He admitted that he had not taken politics very seriously, likening it to a football match: “These small rivalries were simply pleasantries between young people of fifteen or sixteen.” He was nonetheless proud of the fact that his father was a senior member of the opposition Liberal Party.

Having established his family’s class position, Frédéric went on to say that his family’s ethnicity could not be so easily categorized. His father’s political party was aligned with the Tutsi minority, but his uncle (Robert Kajuga) was a senior figure in the president’s Interahamwe organization – the group largely responsible for the violence to come. His family never understood why his uncle joined the Interahamwe. This troubled Frédéric. He gave this as his principal reason for agreeing to be interviewed by us. He wished to present his view of what happened and, perhaps in doing so, to remove some of the weight carried by his family. His uncle remained a mystery to him. In many respects, his uncle’s situation was indicative of the confusion of the time. It was, perhaps, this same confusion that led the young Frédéric to ask his father about the ethnicity of their own family. His father was adamant: “We are like everybody. We are Hutus.” The fact that he had to ask is, of course, telling: ethnic lines were not always clear within or between families.

Having provided this important context, Frédéric Mugwaneza returned to the morning of 7 April 1994. The radio carried messages asking people to stay in their homes. At noon, the family ate lunch together. He remembered the tension in the air. Over the years, this meal had taken on the appearance of the Last Supper in his memory. Soon afterwards there was a knock at the door. The army demanded to speak to his father. First his white grandfather went out to speak with them, then his white mother, but the soldiers continued to insist. They also wanted to search the house for weapons. As the number of men outside grew, so did their impatience. There was no escape. The soldiers finally entered the house and ordered everyone out onto the terrace. He thought that they were about to die. When the teenaged Frédéric began to cry, his mother took him into her arms.

What happened next was seared into his memory. The soldiers ordered them into the garden and onto the ground. The ten people living in the house obeyed. He lay down next to his mother, who placed herself partly on top of him. He could hear loud voices and someone saying, “Tirez, vite, vite. Visez les têtes.” The soldiers were about two metres away when they began to fire their rifles, one shot at a time. He could not lift his head to see around him. But as the shots came closer, he felt
the ground jump around him. He felt his mother’s body jerk two or three times. For a moment he thought he was dead, but he heard the voice of his father: “What have you done?” Frédéric Mugwaneza remembered sensing the despair of his father and hearing his final breath. He then lost consciousness, waking up a few minutes later to groans and cries of grief. His mother did not move.

Before the arrival of the soldiers, his father had spoken with the leader of the Liberal Party, who lived nearby. This man had soldiers assigned to him. Now Frédéric asked his grandfather to give him the telephone number so he could call for help. A woman answered the phone. He quickly explained what happened and said that there were injured. Could help be sent? After a few minutes, the soldiers arrived. Frédéric recognized a few from earlier, so he hid in the attic. He heard them kill the survivors. He remained in his hiding place for a long time until he heard an old classmate call out to him. This friend brought him to his influential family’s home. It was under the protection of the army, and again he recognized familiar faces in uniform. The next day, they went to a refugee centre set up near the Hôtel Diplomate in Kigali. Two days later, he was evacuated to the airport with other Belgian nationals, and, shortly thereafter, he was reunited with his brother and sister in Belgium. But the violence continued in Rwanda.

Profoundly moved by Frédéric Mugwaneza’s story, Habimana asked Frédéric if he could pause the interview:

Me, after a testimony like the one that you just gave, it is like if … the direction of the next question of … I am uncertain … It is very, very moving, for sure, to hear a story like this one and to deliver such intense testimony. I don’t feel right to now ask you additional questions, some of which are more technical. How you functioned afterwards? How you studied? I want us to take a small break. 

The video recording flickered as it was turned off for an indeterminate period of time and back on again. As the interview continued, Habimana told Frédéric:

There is something very strong in you. Already, when these events occurred, already, the desire to take leadership to save your family and all of this courage, all of this internal strength that you already had […] Wh[at] helped you up to today, with all that you experienced and effectively that which you endured
Introduction

[...] many people would ask for psychological support or even a psychiatrist or a social network, but you, where did you find this strength? This strength of character, this energy?

In reply, Frédéric said that he had the impression that his mother suffered a great deal during her life but that she kept it hidden. She was a strong woman, “une combattante.” The fact that she gave her life to save his gave Frédéric courage in the years that followed. Whenever there were problems, he thought of her: he could almost hear her speak to him. He felt supported by her memory.

Since the death of his parents, Frédéric has sought to reconstruct his family in Montreal, to recover the emotions that he had before the genocide. He has tried to speak plainly of events, without hate. One day he thinks he will tell his daughter what happened in 1994, when she is old enough to understand. But his extended family does not speak of his uncle. It is a taboo subject. Back in Rwanda, some have criticized his family for the role that Robert Kajuga played in the genocide. Frédéric has come to believe that there is a double sadness in his family: the grief of having some family members killed and the guilt of having another do the killing. For him, this represents the genocide: it harmed everyone.

The life story of Frédéric Mugwaneza, like the stories of others, can teach us a great deal about the impact of mass violence and its legacy. We can sense his grief. But it also teaches us about the love between a mother and child. Emmanuel reflected on this after the interview was over: “Frédéric’s story is rich in what it can teach us. Far from crystallizing in bitterness, the suffering he experienced shaped his personality. We sense behind the image projected by this young father a great strength of character, profound human values and a profound spirituality.” Frédéric’s story therefore offers us much more than an eyewitness account of what happened that terrible day: it provides us with a sense of the long-term consequences of this horrific event in the life of one person, one family.

Oral History at the Crossroads tells the story of the Montreal Life Stories project, a major collaborative research initiative investigating the life stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide, and other human rights violations. Through the evidence of life history interviewing and collective storytelling, we asked how large-scale violence is experienced and remembered. What does it mean to be a “survivor” of mass violence and to be living in North America? How do individuals and
communities construct and transmit their stories to their children and grandchildren? When, where, and why are particular stories about mass violence told, and by whom? We also ask how these life histories can be represented and communicated to wider publics in Montreal and beyond. Oral history has a pivotal role to play in educating us and our communities about the social preconditions, experiences, and long-term repercussions of crimes against humanity.

From the outset, the Montreal Life Stories project was built on the idea of a “shared authority,” a phrase coined by historian Michael Frisch in 1990 to describe the co-creation of the interview. The dialogic nature of the interview – the researcher’s questions and narrator’s responses – produces a unique source. Not every interview is the same, however, and true partnership must be constantly worked at. A “good interview,” wrote psychologist Henry Greenspan, “is a process in which two people work hard to understand the views and experience of one person: the interviewee.” A “good” collaborative project works in much the same way. Community–university collaboration need not begin and end with the recorded interview.
We began with a core group of forty university faculty and community-based researchers as well as eighteen organizational partners from the city’s Rwandan, Haitian, Cambodian, and Jewish communities and human rights, social media, arts, and educational institutions (see Appendix 1 for a complete list of the community partners). In time, the team grew to 305 affiliated faculty members, students, artists, interns, and community members. Many team members were themselves survivors of mass violence. Others were the children or grandchildren of those displaced. The presence of large numbers of young people in the project changed the conversation, raising questions about intergenerational transmission and identity. To ensure that we went beyond the collection of interviews (a common failing in other oral history projects), we incorporated recorded life stories into a range of theatre performances, art installations, historical exhibits, radio programs, online digital stories, audio tours, and pedagogical resources.9

Our seven-year project (2005-12) was funded by the Community–University Research Alliance (CURA) program of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. The CURA program is unique as it is predicated on the idea of partnership in research. Community participation in the research process must therefore be real and sustained:
SSHRC believes that by working together as equal partners in a research endeavour, postsecondary institutions and community organizations can jointly develop new knowledge and capabilities in key areas, sharpen research priorities, provide new research training opportunities, and enhance the ability of social sciences and humanities research to meet the needs of Canadian communities in the midst of change. The Community–University Research Alliances program is designed to facilitate such collaborations.

The CURA model of doing research in partnership represents a fundamental shift in academic research from knowing about to knowing with. Who controls the research process of course matters. Not only do university-based researchers, typically working alone or in collaboration with each other, control the research undertaken, the questions posed, and the sources consulted, but they also retain a monopoly over the resulting interpretation. The community–university model therefore promises to widen the circle and to enable a rethinking of how and for whom we conduct historical research. Still, the community–university model provided us with a challenge. How do we carry forward...
the notion of “shared authority” from the interview to subsequent stages of the research process? How do we include a wider circle in the conversation? And how can we integrate digital technologies and the arts into our research practice in order to bridge divides?

In shifting from “shared authority” to “sharing authority,” the Montreal Life Stories project has suggested a more expansive meaning of the term than Frisch originally proposed. Collaboration is an ongoing process of dialogue and sharing. At its best, sharing authority is about much more than speaking to new audiences: it requires the cultivation of trust, the development of collaborative relationships, and shared decision making. This cannot be rushed. “A commitment to sharing authority is a beginning, not a destination,” observes Michael Frisch, and “the beginning of a necessarily complex, demanding process of social and self discovery. There are no easy answers or formulas and no simple lessons.” Conducting oral history is therefore “long-haul” work. It is sometimes suggested that the promise of extending this idea outward from the interview towards a more broadly democratic practice has generated enthusiasm but few concrete results. Oral History at the Crossroads represents an effort at sustained reflection on the methodology and ethics in multi-layered, collaborative research.

The Montreal Context

Like most urban centres in Canada, Montreal has a large and diverse immigrant population. In 2001, 25 percent of the city’s 1.6 million residents were born outside the country. A distinguishing feature of Montreal is that a significant proportion of its immigrant population is composed of people displaced by mass violence, ranging from the Holocaust to war and atrocity crime in Rwanda, the Congo, Cambodia, Latin America, and Haiti. Many emigrated from countries where French is spoken, language being a key ingredient in their decision to come to Montreal and in their ability to get in.

Language is an explosive political issue in Quebec, whose population represents the only French-speaking majority in North America. Quebec’s “national question” has polarized people for decades. Should Quebec be a sovereign country? The province has held two independence referendums, the first in 1980 and the second in 1995, in which the “no” side won, albeit narrowly. Categories of national difference, on both “sides” of the Quebec sovereignty debate, are therefore entrenched. In some respects, Montreal represents neutral middle
ground between Quebec and Canada, a political safe haven of sorts for city residents. There is a large and growing scholarship that sees Montreal as a plural, or cosmopolitan, city.\(^{18}\) Viewed from elsewhere within Quebec, however, Montreal’s cultural diversity and large anglophone minority are sometimes seen as a threat to Quebec society.

Soon after our project began, Quebec underwent an often vitriolic debate over the “reasonable accommodation” of immigrants.\(^{19}\) To what degree should Quebec society accommodate new arrivals? Responding to a series of “veil crises,” a government commission was appointed, and the subsequent public hearings tapped into a deep wellspring of nationalist anxiety about the religious beliefs and cultural practices of immigrants.\(^{20}\) Hijabs and kirpans now loom large in the public imagination.\(^{21}\) What was particularly interesting about this debate was the degree to which public attention shifted from the French language to race and religion. The old linguistic line between a French-speaking “us” and an English-speaking “them” that has defined Quebec society and politics for a generation proved inadequate in the face of changing patterns of immigration (which have resulted in many non-white immigrants being French-speaking) and Bill 101 (which requires that all children attend
French-language schools unless one parent was previously educated in English in Canada).³²

In this heightened political atmosphere, to study the transnational lives of survivors of war, genocide, and other human rights violations now living in Montreal is, in some small way, to challenge old binaries of us and them, here and there, then and now. Rwanda in 1994 is not some distant place or time. As Lisa Ndejuru wrote in the 2006 partnership letter for the Rwandan youth organization Isangano: “The life stories project made perfect sense: continuing in the vein of speaking us into existence, out of hiding, out from under the radar, out of our own silences and into awareness, it was and remains to this day a fabulous and unique opportunity to hear our different stories and to actualize.”³³

The importance of a shared language was perhaps most apparent in our interviews with Haitians exiled during the dictatorships of François Duvalier (1957-71) and his son Jean-Claude Duvalier (1972-86). In the 1960s and 1970s, Haitian intellectuals forged strong connections with Quebec nationalist poets like Gaston Miron and Jacques Godbout, “establishing a two way exchange.”³⁴ This political solidarity was plainly evident in the struggle against the deportation of Haitians living in Quebec in the early 1970s.³⁵ Leftist anti-Duvalier activists and Quebec nationalists found that they shared the language of anti-colonialism.³⁶ Quebec’s Quiet Revolution of the 1960s continues to symbolize the affirmation of francophone québécois who faced discrimination, particularly in the economy. Haitian intellectuals confirm this linguistic and political communion. Exiled novelist Émile Ollivier, for example,
wrote: “We were also francophones, we who had known independence since 1804, we understood their struggle.” Our interviewees said much the same thing. Frantz Voltaire, director of the Centre international de documentation et d’information haitienne, caribéenne et afro-canadienne (CIDIHCA), recalled: “Here, in Montreal, there is Creole and French, therefore a kind of continuity for Haitians who can express themselves in the two languages of the country.” And Elizabeth Philibert, who arrived in Montreal on the eve of Quebec’s first independence referendum, remembers feeling a strong emotional connection to the sovereignty cause. Philibert recognized another oppressed group struggling to be free. In the four decades after François Duvalier came to power, more than 1 million Haitians (or 20 percent of the population) fled the country. Some fifty thousand Haitians settled in Montreal.

The life stories of exiled Haitian intellectuals and socialists reveal other transnational connections and political solidarities. The election of Salvador Allende in 1970 as Chilean president mobilized hope across Latin America. Santiago, Chile’s capital, became a magnet for democrats and left-wingers fleeing right-wing dictatorships. Haitians were part of this ideological diaspora. Philibert, after her expulsion from a Haitian jail in which she had been tortured, spent a month in Mexico and then went on to Chile. There she experienced freedom for the first time in her young life: “Having arrived in Chile, it was there that I felt what we call ‘la liberté,’ there, there, it was really something. It was good times.” Frantz Voltaire also found freedom in Chile. He describes Santiago as “a town bubbling with ideas,” a place of “permanent mobilization, permanent activism.” The country became a veritable open university where everything was debated.

It was also a time of right-wing mobilization and violence. After the coup d’état of 11 September 1973, Voltaire was arrested and interned in the National Stadium, where he was tortured. His interrogators mistakenly believed that he was Cuban. His student bursary from the United Nations saved him. He was permitted to leave the stadium when former Chilean president Ricardo Lagos, a lawyer, arrived to bring UN-supported students to the airport. Voltaire flew first to Peru and then bounced from one country to the next until he arrived in Montreal on 28 December 1973. As he explains it, he did not leave Haiti just to live under another dictatorship in Brazil or Argentina. When he arrived in Montreal, he could breathe again. “J’ai pu souffler,” he sighed. The same “ghost of dictatorship” haunted Chilean exiles living in Montreal.
Orlando Gutierrez, for example, recalls how the memory of September 1973 “keeps torturing. It is like you wake up in a country that is upside down. To see those soldiers walking around with their guns in downtown Santiago, in the streets, in the suburbs, soldiers that stopped you at any time of the day and did whatever they want. There was nothing [you could do at the time].” These transnational stories of resistance and exile are now part of Quebec’s story.

If language and politics sometimes united people, class divided them. Montreal had a very small Cambodian community before the Khmer Rouge took power in 1975. “When we first arrived, there were not many Cambodians here, so we searched and travelled to see each other,” recalled Thong Nguon Ith. After Vietnam invaded Cambodia and pushed the Khmer Rouge to the area around the Thai border, many more Cambodians arrived as refugees. Cambodian Canadians had mobilized themselves politically to get the federal government to open the doors. Community members were also active in the reception and integration of new arrivals, many of whom were poor and came from the countryside. In his interview, Ith noted the sharp class divide within the community. Many who came here first were those who had, before that, left Cambodia to study in France or the United States. Even the French language divided Cambodian refugees along class lines, with some Khmer-language interviewees noting that they had little opportunity to speak French before arriving in Montreal:
These people received some education, so generally they have the basis of English or French language. Hence, the earlier group of people had higher education and knowledge of languages that made their adaptation into this society easier. But for newcomers they needed to improve their language ability and adapted to the new way of living. These were the differences between the two groups.38

For this reason, according to Ith, “the mingling together of the community of refugees with those who came first or even the mingling of those educated newcomers with people from rural areas had never been possible even up to now. People who came here as refugees keep contact with other refugees or with their relatives, as some people have their relatives here.” Clearly, in Ith’s mind, the term “refugee” was associated with the poor farmers who fled to Canada after Vietnam’s invasion of Cambodia and not the middle-class students exiled at the outset of the Khmer Rouge regime. The line between refugee and exile was thus understood in terms of class.39

Race also played out differently in Montreal. Haiti’s biracial order of “blacks” and “mulattos” did not match Quebec’s view of all Haitians as simply “black.”40 Some Haitian immigrants were suddenly confronted by their own blackness. When asked if he was québécois, Céradieu Toussaint replied in the affirmative. However, he immediately qualified this by saying that he was not “pure laine” – a colloquialism that translates as “pure wool.” Here is the exchange between Céradieu (CT) and Jonathan Roux (JR), his interviewer:

JR: Are you québécois?

CT: Oh yes! I am not able to say “pure laine,” because I was not born here.

JR: What do you mean when you say “pure laine”?

CT: It is the same thing. Pure laine are les québécois who are born here.

JR: And your children who are born here? Are they québécois?

CT: Even there, again, they don’t have the “right” colour. [Laughter] Pure laine, it is the white québécois who are born here. That is the pures laines. Ultimately, for a québécois I think that this is it, I don’t know. [Silence]
JR: Therefore, you are a Haitian in Quebec, a haïtien québécois?

CT: Well, I am both of these. Haïtien québécois, québécois haïtien, I am both. Because I live here, and all that I do here, and my children are here, I am québécois haïtien, haïtien québécois. At the same time.

[...]

CT: Yes, you must be a white québécois born here. Only at this moment are we pure laine! Even if you are born here, but not the colour white, you are not pure laine. 41

In this exchange, we hear Céradieu explain to Roux who is and who is not a real québécois in the eyes of society. Quebec is revealed as a highly racialized society with white sheep and black sheep. Being white, Roux, an international student from Switzerland, was well positioned to ask for clarification on this. For Céradieu, race rather than language determines community membership. Public discourse surrounding youth gangs and criminality in Montreal, for example, like elsewhere in North
America and Western Europe, is heavily racialized. For other communities, language and race act as a double barrier separating them from the white French-speaking majority.

If québécois identity is still very much bound up with race, civic identity is not. To be “Montréalais” is to live in a culturally diverse metropolitan city, Canada’s second largest. The rise of the multicultural neighbourhood, some scholars suggest, combined with the wide diffusion of immigrants across the island (where no district has fewer than 15 percent foreign born), indicates that interculturalism has taken hold in the city, if not within Quebec as a whole. In this context, Montreal’s cosmopolitan character is thus amplified. For sociologist Annick Germain, whose work explores cultural diversity and everyday co-existence, Montreal is a city of “in-betweens.” Linguist Patricia Lamarre agrees that the city’s linguistic reality is increasingly complex. While a majority of adults are bilingual, most of the city’s residents of immigrant origin are now trilingual. This certainly reflects my own family. My eleven-year-old son, Sebastian, is fluent in English, French, and German. Yet he does not stand out from other neighbourhood kids in the working-class Point Saint-Charles district of the city.

**Origins of the Project**

The Montreal Life Stories project can, perhaps, be likened to one of the city’s intercultural neighbourhoods. Project spaces teemed with people from a variety of backgrounds. Cambodians, Rwandans, Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jews, Haitians, Armenians, Iranians, Congolese, Chileans, and those born in North America lived and worked together. Many languages could be heard, even within the same cultural community. French and English were the languages of cross-cultural and intergenerational interaction, but one regularly heard Khmer and Kinyarwanda as well. The project comprised many overlapping communities and transnational networks. Like the intercultural neighbourhood, it existed locally and globally. Spaces of intercultural exchange coexisted with spaces of intracultural or intergenerational exchange. As a result, Montreal Life Stories can be described as both an intercultural and a multicultural project. It was not either/or. Our project “neighbourhood,” if you will, had its own community associations, artists, teachers, activists, and researchers. It even had its own choir. The Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS) served as a central meeting point or community centre.
The project was collectively imagined over a six-month period in 2005-06. The group met regularly, talking it through. It was all quite informal and organic. Team members felt free to approach others. Various networks were tapped. We quickly agreed, however, that all team members had to be based in Montreal. In part, we hoped to avoid the costly travel expenses that chip away at the budgets of large projects. We also wanted to build face-to-face relationships as the forging of new community–university relationships takes time. They also require a blending of disciplinary knowledges and practices, a kind of scholarly interculturalism. One way “to move past disciplinary paradigm conflicts and ‘turf wars’” is “to create an intellectual and structural neutral space.” Sharing authority provided us with a common methodological and ethical framework as well as a common language for our work together. It also signalled our intention to create something new. The fact that few team members had any previous experience with a large-scale research project probably helped us in this regard. We had no fixed assumptions, only questions.

To signal our commitment to sharing authority, we decided in our grant application to avoid making the common distinction between university-based “co-applicants” and community-based “collaborators,”

The Living Histories Ensemble elicits memories during the 2011 Rwandan commemoration. Photograph by David Ward.
which we thought would create an unhelpful hierarchy. This distinction also did not reflect the high level of community participation and direction in the project. Community partners were present from the start. We also agreed to community–university parity in the composition of the project’s coordinating committee, hiring committees, and project-wide committees (such as our ethics and training committee). Our approach therefore differed from that of other projects in that we emphasized an integrationist model of community–university teams of researchers rather than the partnership model of the “formal memoranda of understanding” between institutions. Organizational partners were thus integrated or blended into the project via the community co-applicants.

Our coming together was, of course, not without its challenges. In the early days, we struggled to find common ground. Some project researchers and community partners were primarily interested in understanding mass violence and in ensuring that it is never forgotten. Others were more interested in the refugee experience here in Montreal. Our decision to forefront the life story resolved this tension. It also had the value of putting people first, exploring what mass violence meant to those most affected. Too often war and genocide are understood in the abstract or the aggregate. We also wished to sidestep some of the definitional debates that have animated the fields of genocide and refugee studies. Who was or was not a survivor? Was this genocide or “merely” a mass atrocity crime? There is of course a great deal at stake in how people’s experiences are legally defined or otherwise categorized: words matter. Article 2 of the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of Genocide, for example, defines genocide as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group.” These intentional acts range from mass murder and serious bodily harm to imposing the conditions to bring about a group’s physical destruction.51

In our effort to understand the past and present, we tend to place our evidence into nicely labelled boxes and impose order on disorder. “Refugee” emerged as a legal category in the wake of the Second World War when camps were set up to handle the large numbers of displaced people in Europe. The 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees later defined who is a refugee, their rights, and the legal obligations of sovereign states. Anthropologist Liisa H. Malkki, however, cautions us against universalizing the “refugee experience.”52 Refugee studies, she
s says, risks flattening the differences, reducing root cause to the backdrop. For his part, postcolonial scholar Edward Said has juxtaposed the genealogy of refugee with that of exile:

Although it is true that anyone prevented from returning home is an exile, some distinctions can be made between exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés. Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. Refugees, on the other hand, are a creation of the twentieth-century state. The word “refugee” has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas “exile” carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality.53

As an oral historian, I believe it is essential that we try to understand the ways in which people define themselves. What words do they use to describe their experiences? Whom do they identify with and against? Haitians, for example, are not “survivors” in the same sense as are Rwandans or European Jews. Words like “exile” and “refugee” come easier. It is for this reason that Haitian group members decided to focus on the political violence of the Duvalier era as it was viewed as a point in common with other parts of the project.54 It was a strategic decision, but it was not only that. For left-wing Haitians, the scale of the violence inflicted by the Duvalier dictatorships was staggering.55 Friends and loved ones were imprisoned, tortured, killed, or disappeared. The life story interview, as Alessandro Portelli reminds us, affords interviewees the opportunity to consider “what is our place in history, and what is the place of history in our lives?”56

Despite the increasing funding for collaborative research, there has been remarkably little discussion of the public’s place in the research process. Collaborative practice encourages, even demands, renewed ethical reflection. It requires a “continual monitoring” of one’s own practice as well as corresponding adjustment “in the light of its effects.”57 Substantial concerns about the ethics of project-based research as a distinct academic mode of production are raised by sociologists Natasha S. Mauthner and Andrea Doucet, who argue that proponents of collaborative research have been largely “unreflexive and uncritical in its adoption of team-based research models and practices, and there appears to be an unspoken assumption that team research is ‘better’ than solo research.”58 These are important words of caution.
At the outset, we needed to determine how to organize ourselves. We were big and getting bigger. Should working groups be organized around specific cultural communities? If so, how would we undertake intercultural or comparative research? Did we risk creating cultural silos? Or should groups be organized transversally around key themes? If so, would this put university researchers into the driver’s seat? You can see the subtle push and pull. In the end, we agreed to a process. Project members would form into working groups of their choosing that spoke to the key research questions posed by the project. To form a group, however, members had to prepare a research plan, demonstrate a community–university partnership, and outline a strategy for sharing authority. The onus was placed on those sitting around the table; therefore, not every working-group idea saw the light of day.

In the end, seven groups formed: four organized around specific diasporas (Haitian, Rwandan, Cambodian, and Jewish) and three around transversal themes (Refugee Youth, Education, and Performance). Each working group had a team leader or co-leaders. Most functioned as collectives, operating by consensus. This consensual approach to research was perhaps clearest in the Rwandan and Cambodian groups, which were community led. Strong subgroups also formed in several working groups. Yolande Cohen’s cluster of researchers and partners...
interviewing Sephardic Jews from Morocco became so active that the project’s Holocaust group had to change its name to Holocaust and Other Persecutions against Jews. The potential to grow was also built into our structures. Faculty, students, and community members could apply to become an affiliate of a working group. This flexible structure has served the project well as working groups have expanded and evolved over time. The project’s structure also enabled team members to collaborate in multiple languages. The working languages of the Cambodian group, for example, alternated between Khmer and French; the Rwandan group, Kinyarwanda and French; and the Performance group, mainly English. The project thus operated at multiple levels simultaneously.

Another potential problem facing large projects is fragmentation as they devolve into a number of small projects. How might we ensure a project-wide research horizon while still working in smaller groups? Our project’s coordinating committee, composed of four faculty members and four community members, was responsible for overall direction. Meeting monthly, the coordinating committee was also a place where ideas were exchanged among working groups. The project also organized an annual assembly and a series of six international conferences that provided team members with the opportunity to share with one another and with others. But what bound the project together even more strongly was our shared oral history and digital storytelling methodology. The project’s compulsory six-hour training workshop provided everyone with a shared foundation and language. Subsequent interviewer debriefing sessions and blogs encouraged further reflexivity and project-wide sharing. Our new media choices, explored in Chapter 6, further contributed to building project-wide horizons and connections. But it was the physical space of the oral history centre itself that did the most to foster a sense of solidarity. Team members were constantly coming and going as they picked up or dropped off equipment, used the video-editing facilities, interviewed in the studio, or attended the many meetings, workshops, and seminars. Nothing replaces face-to-face collaboration.

Project research can be quite hierarchical, leading to a division of labour between fieldwork and interpretation. While this problem is mitigated when interpretive power is widely shared, how might we ensure that a maximum number of people participate in life story interviewing? At the outset, we agreed that every member of the project (applicants, co-applicants, collaborators, project assistants, staff,
students—everyone) would participate in the interviewing process. We wanted every team member to share this experience, hearing for herself the life stories of refugees in Montreal. As I regularly explained it in training workshops and public talks, we wanted team members to feel these stories in their chests. We also wanted team members to reflect on the interviewing experience in compulsory written reflections and regular debriefing sessions. “To sustain empathic listening to stories of extreme trauma,” writes South African oral historian Sean Field, “sensitive introspection of one’s feelings during and after the interview is essential.” We wanted team members to work through these experiences together. Our hope was that this shared commitment and experience would serve to further deepen the university–community alliance.

Another criticism of large-scale projects is that researchers continue to work in individualistic ways. A certain amount of parallel play occurs in any project, including this one, but we tied the project’s budget to working groups rather than to individual researchers. This effectively empowered the constitutive parts of the project. Any surpluses remaining at the end of the financial year were directed towards central interviewing and collective storytelling funding envelopes. This money was then redistributed to team members through an annual competition for new (unbudgeted) project ideas that were adjudicated by a community–university panel. This process allowed us to shift project resources to emerging areas and to fund newly affiliated researchers and artists. A number of important initiatives were funded in this way.

Our interviewing policy produced another innovation: a common source base for team members. It was agreed that all project interviews, as well as the interviewer reflections, would be available to other team members. As a result, every member served as everyone else’s research assistant. My “own” interviews and blogs are thus grist for the mill of other project researchers and vice versa. Initially, I had expected to encounter some opposition to this idea among faculty members as the university academy is nothing if not territorial, but there were no objections. It helped that the project was able to handle all the post-production at the COHDS, a very time-consuming task. Interview recordings had to be captured and rendered and DVDs burned. Anonymous interviews also had to be transcribed and chronologies produced for the others. Later all “public” interviews were incorporated into the project’s searchable database. This lifted a huge burden from individual researchers, including graduate students.
It would be a mistake, however, to claim that the project had no organizational hierarchy. As principal investigator, I was constantly required to make decisions in the day-to-day running of the project. Inevitably, much of my time was spent at meetings or in dealing with administrative matters. I found myself signing over a thousand consent forms as we determined that it was important that a project signature join that of the interviewer and interviewee. As a result, despite my best efforts, I only interviewed sixteen people in multiple sessions. Therefore, most of the life stories that you encounter in the chapters that follow, and the interviewer reflections that you read, are those of others. My primary intellectual contribution to the project, as Mauthner and Doucet have suggested more generally, was “more strategic.” That said, project design and management require considerable creativity and imagination. They need be no more mechanical than the life story interview itself.

In shifting our oral history practice from collection to public curation, we expand our discussion outward from the interview itself to encompass other spaces of collaboration and collective storytelling. “Taking the word ‘curate’ in its root meaning of ‘caring for,’” anthropologists Erica Lehrer and Monica Patterson and historian Cynthia Milton encourage us to rethink our approach to historical exhibition. For Roger I. Simon, curating difficult knowledge “cannot be a neutral enterprise.” A pedagogy of witness, Simon writes, “is concerned both to establish the factual occurrence of violence and its lived consequences, and to mobilize a productive affective response to the representation of this violence.” Embedded within the curatorial act is the hope of effecting social change: to make the world a better place. Curatorial judgment is therefore critical. But this raises the question of who is responsible for the curatorial process. How might we extend notions of sharing authority and community–university collaboration into this discussion?

The concept of community is, of course, a complicated one. John Walsh and I have written previously about the need to go beyond static notions of community to view it as lived, imagined, and reproduced. For some scholars, community is a “romantic discourse” that suffers from being an “unequivocal good.” Sociologist Craig Calhoun, for his part, writes that community is more an “evocative symbol” than an “analytical tool.” At a minimum, community deserves more scrutiny. The question of who speaks on behalf of community is highly political. We need to be attentive to the structures of power that shape our lives
and those of our research subjects and partners. It is vital, according to David Frank, to go beyond the suggestion that history is shared to say that it is also divided. These concerns are fundamental to anyone engaged in building community–university research alliances. If community is multiple, contingent, and contested, as Walsh and I argue, how might we usefully think of community in the context of collaborative processes? Consent – what is it? Where is our authority as researchers coming from? In embracing community–university collaborative projects, do academics set themselves up to speak with a dual authority: experiential and expert?

The Montreal Life Stories project is an example of emergent research, according to which our methodology evolved as our practice deepened. In the beginning, the working groups were structurally divided between those who wished to focus on life story interviewing (Haitian, Rwandan, Cambodian, and Jewish) and those who wished to integrate these stories into various artistic or public outcomes (Performance, Education, and Refugee Youth). As time went by, these differences diminished as all seven groups engaged in life story interviewing and sustained storytelling. Rather than some kind of linear production line, interviewing and collective storytelling developed a dialogical relationship. Project-wide, we saw the ascendancy of radio production, playback performance, online digital storytelling, and artist residencies. Individual members also began to operate between and across working groups. Our emergent research and creative practice thus united us more and more. As time passed, the Life Stories project also became something of a family affair. Team members interviewed friends and family and were themselves interviewed. In some cases, a kind of chain migration of family members into the project occurred. This phenomenon was particularly evident in the project’s Cambodian and Rwandan groups as well as within the Sephardic research cluster. Circles within circles emerged. In collaboration, old lines between the researcher and the researched blurred. One week a team member could be conducting an interview only to be interviewed the next. It is hardly surprising, then, that the notion of fieldwork as being somewhere else lost a certain amount of its significance for us. As a result, it was sometimes unclear where the project ended and the community began. Nor was it always obvious what parts of our conversations were on and off the record.

At Canadian universities, community–university research functions within the context of institutional ethics reviews, as defined by the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Research Ethics. As true elsewhere in
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“Cambodge d’hier à aujourd’hui” conference poster, May 2011. The conference was organized by the project’s Cambodian group in order to mobilize international academic and artistic knowledge for the community. In part, it was inspired by a previous conference organized along the same lines by the projects’ Rwandan group.
the world, the university research ethics review is predicated on the idea that researchers and human subjects are two distinct groups of people who inhabit different places. Accordingly, the interaction between the two can be regulated and policed in advance. University ethics also assumes that the faculty member is in control of the research process: that she or he “owns” the process and its products.73 True community–university collaboration destabilizes these assumptions. In a project as big and complex as this one, the ethical issues are manifold, posing an extraordinary set of challenges. Ethics thus permeates our practice and the chapters that follow. There is of course much at stake in community–university collaboration, particularly in a project such as ours. The discourse surrounding formal research ethics, however, fails to capture the full import. This was hammered home to me at the public launch of our project at a community centre in the Saint-Laurent district of the city in October 2007. It was organized entirely by the project’s Cambodian group. Community volunteers put hundreds, perhaps thousands, of hours into making it happen. I remember how startled I was when I walked into the hall. It was a huge space. A number of information tables were set up celebrating Cambodian culture (textile and artefacts mainly) and documenting the genocide. Student projects lined one wall. In front, there was a large stage with a black skirt. The group had lovingly pinned dozens of fall leaves onto the fabric. Once the hall filled we were treated to traditional Cambodian dance and a slide show on Cambodian history organized by a young Cambodian student affiliated with the project. Joy and sadness mingled together. The speeches that followed were in Khmer, French, and English. We then feasted on Cambodian food. I think every academic in the room left the event with a huge weight on their (our) shoulders. Clearly, the project had already generated substantial expectations and a sizeable emotional investment. We could not afford to fail. As I walked home with my family, I realized how rare it is to carry this kind of burden of responsibility in the academy. Our focus on tenure and promotion, even ethics compliance, sometimes distracts us from what is really important.

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The ten chapters that follow are organized into two sections. The first section, “Mutual Sightings,” explores the life story interviewing from six distinct angles and scales. In Chapter 1, “Interviewing Survivors,” we hear from interviewers and interviewees project-wide as they reflect
on the meaning and significance of their interviewing experiences. As Alessandro Portelli writes, interpretation begins at the very “point of collection.” In Chapter 2, “A Flower in the River,” we follow the memory work of the project’s Rwandan working group. The social and political function of remembering is clear as Rwandan Montrealers negotiated a single community narrative that couples the experiences of exiles and survivors. Next, “Bearing Witness,” co-authored with Stacey Zembrzycki, shifts our attention to a group of survivors at the Montreal Holocaust Memorial Centre who have served as speakers and docents for many years, asking what they have learned. Chapter 4, “Regenerative Possibilities,” explores the place of (inter)generational dialogue in the project. Entire families were activated. Chapter 5, “Remembering Haiti,” considers how the presence of a large number of young people in the project changed the conversation. In expanding its focus to the post-Duvalier years, the Haitian group was able to record the next generation of activist stories as well as Montreal-born or -raised Haitian-Canadian youth. Finally, Chapter 6, “Smile through the Tears,” considers the life story and artistic practice of a single interviewee. In this first section, then, we move from a project-wide context to a working group, a group of survivors, a generational cohort, and, finally, the life story of a single individual. The oral history interview is “an exchange between two subjects: literally a mutual sighting.”

The second section, “Curating Life Stories,” turns our attention to the collective storytelling activities of the project. Chapter 7, “Sharing Stories,” looks at the place of digital media in listening, sharing, and telling the stories of survivors and others. It also considers how team members used digital tools to connect with each other. Chapter 8, “Walking the City,” reflects on the making of the A Flower in the River audio walk. The audio tour follows the route of the Rwandan community’s own commemorative walk. Chapter 9, “Oral History and Performance,” considers the central place of the performing arts in the Montreal Life Stories project, exploring the unique synergy of history and performance. The final chapter, “Blurred Boundaries,” considers the ethical issues raised in collaborative work. Increasingly, the interview is part of a longer continuum of community–university conversation.

What follows, then, is a sustained reflection on the methodology, ethics, and politics of community–university collaboration and project-based research. According to Linda Shopes, collaboration is a “responsible, challenging, and deeply humane ideal,” but it is not always possible
or even desirable. Community-based oral history projects, she cautions, are often rooted in “naive assumptions” about what represents “history” and how to approach it. Community insiders may not wish to pose difficult questions or to hear discomforting “truths.” The same point can and should be raised about scholars who have their own politics, hierarchies, and disciplinary modes of production. This book offers an alternative model, based on communities becoming partners in research and not simply objects of study. *Oral History at the Crossroads* thus responds directly to Michael Frisch’s and Linda Shopes’s call for more research into sharing authority as revealed in concrete practice and real relationships.