



Cultures du témoignage | Testimonial Cultures

# Convergence and diversity

A study day on the production of testimonials



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Espace La Fontaine  
Montreal



## Convergence and diversity : A study day on the production of testimonials Activity report

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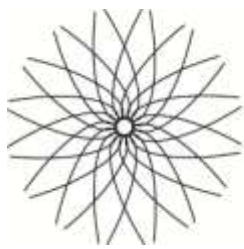
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*A cultural study of testimonials as a social intervention strategy for sexual and gender minorities: applications, challenges, issues, and impact of a renewed practice*

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## Introduction

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According to *Webster's New World Dictionary*, testimony is a "public avowal", that is, a report of what one has seen, heard or knows. As first-person narratives that are delivered before a group or circulated in the media, testimonials are personal declarations that often involve sharing experiences common to communities past or present. Although generally considered to be spontaneous accounts (of a person's HIV status, sexual orientation, experience in sex work, etc.), they therefore have a social dimension that is in large part constructed or prefabricated.

Moreover, testimonials do not occur in a vacuum. They are part of a dynamic of social interactions involving the people who give testimonials, the people who accompany and support them or who help to co-produce testimonials, the audiences on the receiving end, and the media, technological and social contexts within which testimonials are produced. Because testimonials bring together a range of knowledges, media technologies and symbols, the term "testimonial cultures" provides a way to consider and reflect upon these aspects and issues.<sup>1,2</sup>

People who identify as members of sexual or gender minorities (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex), people who live with HIV/AIDS and people who have an experience in sex work face similar issues of social exclusion and discrimination. Some people who belong to these groups take the step of telling their personal stories, giving testimonials in the context of media reports or educational activities in order to raise awareness, to teach and inform audiences or possibly even to shock them. Testimonials can assume a wide range of formats and be given in a variety of media and contexts (presentations, printed material, radio, video, internet, mobile networks, etc.).

As a collaborative research action partnership, the goal of *Testimonial Cultures* is to share ideas and expertise in order to better understand the use of testimonials by sexual and gender minorities as

strategies for social and cultural intervention. On November 9, 2012, the project brought together 48 individuals from a range of community, institutional, artistic, and media settings. Held at Espace La Fontaine in Montreal, the study day provided an opportunity for participants to share their opinions and experiences with regards to giving testimonials in various contexts of production and distribution.

Specific objectives for the day included:

- sharing experiences, thoughts, and questions related to the production of testimonials as a form of social and cultural intervention
- taking stock of the diversity of perspectives on this topic as well as our points of convergence.

The structure and content of the day's activities are presented in this report.



# 1 Exploring testimonial cultures

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## Working committees

This study day on the production of testimonials was made possible thanks to the efforts of four working committees. Lead researcher Maria Nengeh Mensah and research coordinator Thomas Haig participated in each of the **committees' meetings**.



## Testimonials by sexual or gender minorities

The issue of inclusion is of particular interest to the working committee on testimonials by people who identify as being part of a sexual or gender minority. "Who is more likely to end up giving a testimonial?" is one of the key questions committee members have examined. This question raises a range of intra-community issues given that some groups that are more easily accepted within the so-called "LGBT community" than others. Similarities and differences among different forms of testimonials are another key focus for the committee. How can these various forms be helpful in reclaiming our collective history in all its diversity? The committee has also looked at the political dimension of giving testimonials. Can testimonials extend democracy? What issues are specific to trans identities? What can an anti-capitalist perspective offer? How can the public voice of intersex people be amplified? The following people took part in committee discussions:

- Janik Bastien-Charlebois, Département de sociologie, UQAM
- Marie Houzeau, GRIS-Montréal
- Olivier Vallerand, GRIS-Montréal
- Bruno Laprade, PolitiQ
- Claudia Pâque, Iris-Estrie
- Jean-Denis Quirion, Iris-Estrie
- Sabrina Paillé, Arc-en-ciel d'Afrique
- Alexis Musanganya, Arc-en-ciel d'Afrique

## Testimonials by people living with HIV/AIDS

Points of intersection among different testimonial cultures and among the different working committees are of particular interest to the committee on testimonials by people living with HIV/AIDS. The hope is that this will lead to the development of new approaches and resource materials. Issues of concern to committee members also include the social support provided to people living with HIV/AIDS who give testimonials and the roles played by those who co-produce testimonials (social workers, journalists, researchers). Dissemination of results from the *VIHsibilité* research project through training sessions offered to the member organizations of COCO-SIDA has been another focus. In addition, a team led by Véro Leduc and Marie-Noëlle Arsenault is producing a video compilation of testimonials by people living with HIV/AIDS.

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The following people have participated in committee discussions:

- Thomas Waugh, School of Cinema, Concordia University
- Ken Monteith, COCQ-SIDA
- Mélina Bernier, COCQ-SIDA
- René Légaré, COCQ-SIDA
- Aurélie Hot, COCQ-SIDA
- Bruno Laprade, PolitiQ
- Marie-Eve Gauvin, Service aux collectivités, UQAM
- Claire Vanier, Service aux collectivités, UQAM
- Véronique Leduc, École de travail social, UQAM
- Alain Ayotte, School of Cinema, Concordia University

### Testimonials by people with an experience in sex work

The development of tools to raise awareness and fight the stigmatization of sex workers is of particular interest to the working committee on testimonials by people with an experience in sex work. Committee members are also interested in issues of disclosure in the context of both personal and family relationships and public venues (media, presentations etc.). A video compilation of testimonials that give voice to sex workers is in the process of being produced. The committee has also organized two workshops, one at Stella in Montreal and a second for members of POWER in Ottawa, in which participants discussed the personal, educational, and political dimensions of giving testimonials. Committee discussions have brought together:

- Chris Bruckert, Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa
- Émilie Laliberté, Stella, l'amie de Maimie
- Emily Symons, Prostitutes of Ottawa/Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist (POWER)
- Véronique Leduc, École de travail social, UQAM
- Julie Marceau, Alliance féministe solidaire pour les droits des travailleuses du sexe

### Oral history and digital storytelling

Ethical and methodological issues related to giving testimonials are of particular interest to the working committee on oral history and digital storytelling. The committee draws on the expertise of Concordia **University's Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling (COHDS), a focal point for the development of expertise among researchers, students, and community groups.** As an interdisciplinary research centre, COHDS provides supports to the other working committees that are part of the *Testimonial Cultures* project. The following **people have contributed to the committee's discussions:**

- Steven High, Canada Research Chair in Public History, Concordia University
- Eve-Lyne Cayouette Ashby, COHDS
- Neal Santamaria, COHDS

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## Structure and content of the day

The day was structured around two kinds of activities: plenary activities that brought all participants together, and discussion in small groups. The day was structured in this way for several reasons. During a meeting of the *Testimonial Cultures* general assembly, project partners had asked that the study day agenda include activities that would allow each working committee to meet in its own small group for more in-depth discussion of issues specific to the group. Plenary discussions were aimed at encouraging connections between groups and broadening the scope of the discussions.

### Plenary activities

Several plenary activities took place over the course of the day. A compilation of video testimonials was screened at the beginning of the day to provide the discussion groups with a common point of departure. Collective interpretation was used later on as a method for exploring different dimensions of the testimonial experience by way of personal items that participants had brought to the study day. During a final plenary, each discussion group provided a summary of the key points it had considered and a panel of three presenters shared their thoughts on the issues and questions that had been raised. Throughout the day, participants could visit various locations in the room to view a mini-exhibition drawn from the project's compilation of testimonial examples. Because the study day was also a celebration, the final activity consisted of a cocktail that featured a moving performance by artist and activist Jordan Arseneault.

### Discussion groups

There were two one-hour discussion groups during the day, the first in the morning and the second in the afternoon.

During the morning session, each group discussed the same two questions:

- What are my impressions of the video testimonials presented during the plenary?
- What is different from or similar to my own testimonial experience?

During the afternoon sessions, specific questions were explored by each discussion group, as listed below:

Discussion group	Specific questions to be discussed
Testimonials by sexual and gender minorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What kinds of testimonials do we use?</li><li>• Which media do we use and why?</li></ul>
Testimonials by people living with HIV/AIDS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What are the strengths and weaknesses of using testimonials as a way to foster social change?</li><li>• What are the political challenges associated with using testimonials?</li></ul>
Testimonials by people with an experience in sex work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What strategies have we developed for disclosing that we are sex workers? Or to avoid disclosing that we have an experience in sex work?</li><li>• What are the consequences of telling our stories in the first person? What are the risks and what are the benefits?</li></ul>



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## Attendance and main audience

Participants attended the study day out of interest as well as on the basis of personal or professional experience. Particular attention was paid to balancing the number of participants affiliated with each working committee.

**In total, 48 people participated in the day's activities. Nearly 80% of participants (n=38) indicated when registering that they had previously given a public testimonial as a member of a sexual or gender minority, a person living with HIV/AIDS or a person with an experience in sex work.** The study day was successful in reaching an audience that has had direct involvement in one or more testimonial cultures. A majority of participants reported living in the greater Montreal region, with the rest coming from the Ottawa region.

## Participating organizations

### *Community*

- Aide aux transsexuels et transsexuelles du Québec (ATO)
- AIDS Community Care Montreal (ACCM) / Sida bénévoles Montréal
- Alliance féministe solidaire pour les droits des travailleuses du sexe
- Cactus-Montréal
- Coalition des organismes communautaires de lutte contre le sida (COCQ-SIDA)
- **Groupe de recherche et d'intervention sociale de Montréal (GRIS-Montréal)**
- **Maison Plein Cœur**
- PolitiQ Queers Solidaires
- Prostitutes of Ottawa / Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist (POWER)
- Stella, l'amie de Maimie
- Students for Sex Workers Rights (SSWR)

### *Institutional*

- Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling, Concordia University (COHDS)
- School of Cinema, Concordia University
- Department of Criminology, University of Ottawa
- Département de sociologie, UQAM
- Department of Sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University
- École de travail social, UQAM
- **Institut de recherche et d'études féministes, UQAM**

## 2 Video testimonials

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### An unprecedented compilation

The day began with the screening of a compilation of video testimonials produced by the research team under the guidance of Véro Leduc and Marie-Noëlle Arsenault. Short excerpts from the following ten films were shown:

- 1 Lara Roxx, former pornographic actress living with HIV  
**INSIDE LARA ROXX** (Mia Donovan, Montreal, 2011)

In the spring of 2004, 21-year old Lara Roxx left her hometown of Montreal and headed to L.A. to try to make money in the American adult entertainment industry. Within two months of working there, she contracted HIV while performing sex in front of the camera for a porn movie. *Inside Lara Roxx* is a documentary about the events leading up to that scene and the years that followed. The selected clip **shows Lara Roxx explaining how her appearance on television's popular *Maury* show was fabricated, resulting in the misrepresentation of her HIV prevention message.**

- 2 Zackie Achmat and Tim McCaskell, activists living with HIV  
**FIG TREES** (John Greyson, Toronto, 2009)

*Fig Trees* is a documentary opera about AIDS activists Tim McCaskell from Toronto and Zackie Achmat from Cape Town as they fight for access to treatment. In 1999, Zackie Achmat went on a treatment strike, refusing to take his pills until they became widely available to all South Africans. This symbolic act became a *cause célèbre*, **helping build his group, "Treatment Action Campaign," into a national movement.** The selected clips show the two activists discussing their relationship to medication.

- 3 Lynn and "D.C.", women living with HIV  
**POSITIVE WOMEN: EXPOSING INJUSTICE** (Alison Duke, Ottawa, 2012)

*Positive Women: Exposing Injustice* tells the personal stories of four women living with HIV in Canada. **These stories seek to tell the truth about what it's like to live in a society that all-too-often criminalizes intimate behaviour between consenting adults and discriminates against those living with HIV.** The selected clips show a Quebecois woman and a two-spirited Aboriginal woman explaining the personal impact of laws that criminalize non-disclosure of their HIV status.

- 4 Paul Bégin, Quebec Justice Minister, and Ludovic, child from a family with same-sex parents  
**POLITICS OF THE HEART** (Nancy Nicol, Montreal, 2005)

*Politics of the Heart* is a moving portrait of lesbian and gay families who re-shaped the cultural and political landscape of Quebec by fighting for same-sex parental rights and the recognition of their relationships and families during the 1990s. The selected clip shows testimonials by both Ludovic and Minister Bégin emphasizing the need to accept same-sex parents and their children without reservation.

- 
- 5 Shawn Fowler, student  
**SCHOOL FAG** (Richard Fung and Tim McCaskell, Toronto, 1998)

In a courageous, straight-into-the-camera monologue, a testimonial by a high school student tells us what it's like to be the school fag. In the selected clip, Shawn tells the story of how he was bullied by homophobes in his small town.

- 6 Vincent Guillot, intersex person  
**CONFERENCE** presented at the Institut Emilie du Châtelet (Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris, 2011)

**During an international conference entitled “*Mon corps a-t-il un sexe? Détermination du sexe et contraintes du genre*” (“Does my Body Have a Sex? The Determination of Sex and the Limits of Gender”)** held in Paris at the Institut Émilie du Châtelet in June 2011, Vincent Guillot delivered a personal talk on “sex, gender and identity.” The selected clip shows Guillot’s emotional discussion of the injustice and symbolic violence he has experienced as an intersex person.

- 8 Lindalee Tracey, exotic dancer  
**NOT A LOVE STORY: A FILM ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY** (Bonnie Sherr Klein, Montreal, 1981)

This is one of the first Canadian feminist documentaries on pornography and the sex industry produced by the NFB. Although it has become a classic in the fight against pornography and in support of the censorship demands that characterized the 1970s “sex wars,” the selected clip shows Lindalee criticizing the contempt of certain feminists for sex work and the extent to which sex workers’ words can be exploited.

- 9 “Anonymous”, Australian sex worker  
**EVERY HO I KNOW SAYS SO: ADVICE FOR PARTNERS, LOVERS, DATES AND SWEETHEARTS OF SEX WORKERS** (Lusty Day and Jerky Beef, Toronto, 2010)

At a conference in Australia, the filmmaker recorded interviews with people with an experience in sex work on an iPhone, asking them to share advice they’d like to give to their lovers. The selected clips show some of the candid messages that could be useful for those in intimate relationships with people who are sex workers.

- 10 “Cybèle”, escort  
**SEXE, RUE SHREBROOKE EST** (Urbania, Montreal, 2011)

Screened in its entirety, this minute-long video produced by *Urbania* magazine presents a testimonial by Cybèle, an escort, talking about her work with clients who are disabled.

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## Responses to the video testimonials

After the screening, participants were divided into discussion groups and asked what had most struck them about the video testimonials as well as what most resembled or was different from their own testimonial experiences.

### Discussion group on testimonials by sexual and gender minorities

Participants in this group discussed the ways in which video testimonials can facilitate social and community action. By reducing isolation and evoking a common humanity that does not efface the individual person, testimonials can help to foster a more nuanced level of social discussion. As well, video testimonials generally aim to fight injustice and bring about social change. In this way, they can be useful as a political tactic to support the renegotiation of social relations and greater social inclusion for minority groups.

Challenges related to this kind of public disclosure were also identified. Is there an obligation to publicly **reveal one's status as a member of a sexual or gender minority? If so, in what way? There are often significant discrepancies** between a person's intended message and the final testimonial. Furthermore, it can be difficult to stay on track given the personal and public assumptions, editing and production processes, media formats, and **self-censorship that can shape a testimonial. The tension between a testimonial's individual and collective repercussions** is an ongoing challenge.

When participants in this discussion group were asked which aspects of the video compilation were similar to their own testimonial experiences and which were not, three observations were made:

- Participants felt that they had more control over their message when giving testimonials in front of a group, GRIS-Montréal's work in schools being one example. When testimonials are given in the media they run the risk of being transformed to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Because mass media are primarily concerned with attracting audiences, sensationalistic approaches often predominate.
- **One of the main challenges inherent to testimonial practices is how to establish and maintain one's credibility.** There is a tendency to conform to predominant social norms in order to be easily understood.
- Participants had the impression that there is a difference between testimonials given by members of the LGBTQI communities and those given by sex workers and people living with HIV, and that this difference is related not only to the ways in which sexual orientation and gender identity intersect with notions of personal intimacy, but also to the criminalization that affects the two other groups.

### Discussion group on testimonials by people living with HIV/AIDS

For participants in this group, the diversity of testimonials in the compilation attests to the range of personal experiences specific to those who choose to give testimonials. Gathering these excerpts into a single compilation offers a broader perspective on this diversity. People give testimonials for many reasons: to raise awareness, to educate, to provoke a reaction, etc. Yet each instance involves a human being who wants to express something in public and this can touch people in important ways.

The presence of the camera was strongly felt by participants as they watched the clips. The technology was seen to act as a filter, giving the impression of a flattened perspective that reduced the testimonials to a

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range of opinions lined up in opposition to one another. This was seen to be one of the important differences between filmed testimonials and those given without the use of such technology, such as in a classroom setting.

When participants in this discussion group were asked which aspects of the compilation were similar to their own testimonial experiences and which were not, two observations were made:

- The social impact of a testimonial is distinct from and sometimes outweighed by the individual impact on the person who has given it. The personal repercussions of giving a testimonial can be positive but also very negative. For example, people can face different consequences depending on their employment status. A person who is unemployed or socially disadvantaged faces a greater risk of being stigmatized.
- Because testimonials are associated with such a wide range of issues, it is difficult to find an overall ethical approach to addressing the many challenges and questions that can arise.

### Discussion group on testimonials by people with an experience in sex work

Several issues were raised with regards to the context in which testimonials are produced and disseminated and in particular the impact of processes of revising, editing, censoring, etc. While censorship can be imposed by external sources, it can also be enacted by the person who gives the testimonial. Participants in this discussion group noted that testimonials sometimes lack nuance because of the difficulty involved in disclosing the less favourable aspects of sex work for fear that this information could be used to undermine **a person's credibility. Sex workers can be stigmatized in numerous ways in relation to presumed mental health problems, sexual abuse, violence, etc.** The validity of testimonials tends to be called into question when (as is often the case) they are interpreted through the lens of these multiple stigmas. Sharing a story without having portions of it cut out can be exceedingly difficult to do.



Commonalities between the testimonials in the **compilation and participants' experiences** were easily identified. Sex workers have limited opportunities to talk about the realities they face. As was mentioned in some of the video clips, false correlations are too often made between sex work and mental health problems, drug and alcohol use, violence, and childhood sexual abuse. The constant search for causal links between sex work and other problems imposes significant limits on the impact of testimonials even as the people who give testimonials strive to deconstruct these links. Furthermore, sex worker testimonials are often taken out of context for purposes of sensationalism. While testimonials offer a power-

ful way to reach diverse audiences, there is also a need to develop social intervention and advocacy strategies that do not rely on people having to disclose and give testimonials.

### 3 Personal items as testimonials

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It has often been said that objects bear witness. With this in mind, we asked study day participants to bring along a personal item that they felt could symbolize their testimonial-related experiences. The items were displayed along a windowsill so that participants could discuss their multiple meanings during a collective interpretation activity in which the owner was invited to provide his or her description of the item, sometimes very different from the interpretations put forward by the group. Here are a few examples.



#### Rosary

##### *Collective interpretation*

- The weight of institutional influence.
- Faith in what we say, in our words.
- Discrimination on the part of religious leaders.
- **It looks old. It's like a relic from another era, either from someone with strong religious beliefs or someone who was raised in a very Christian family.**
- **It reminds me of Michel Foucault's idea of confession. For centuries, we've been incited to reveal ourselves by talking about our sexuality.**
- **Subversion. Because I'm gay, I could wear this rosary to antagonize the Church.**

##### *Item owner's interpretation*

"This is a souvenir from someone who died of AIDS over 20 years ago. The last time I saw him, he gave it to me as a present. We were very close, and our connection has had a strong influence on my activism and on the testimonials I have given."



### Teddy bear

#### *Collective interpretation*

- Reassurance and comfort when preparing a testimonial because it takes a lot of energy.
- Comfort after giving a testimonial. Afterward, you can rock the teddy bear softly back and forth.
- **Inside the teddy bear, there's stuffing that you'll never see unless you have the heart to cut it open. What's inside remains hidden.**
- **It's a way to humanize and de-sensationalize things.**
- For me, the teddy bear represents childhood. My sense is that it has something to do with the construction of an identity since childhood.
- **There's something intimate about the teddy bear. What we hide in our bedrooms is personal.**
- For me, a teddy bear is about having a point of reference.
- I think there's something intimate about it. Showing a teddy bear means showing my personal history.
- It's about the aspect of being extremely vulnerable.

#### *Item owner's interpretation*

"I would agree that there's something intimate about a teddy bear, especially at my age. When I finished my [gender] transition, after two years of ups and downs, my father gave me this teddy bear and said, "My hope for you is to be at peace with yourself.". We keep a teddy bear close and tell it everything. Giving a testimonial grants access to that private space."



### Colour swatches

#### *Collective interpretation*

- The diversity of testimonials.
- The nuance that you can find in testimonials.
- I think that it could be a kind of colour swatch that someone has been taking from one apartment to another for a long time to inspire them wherever they happen to be.
- They are swatches that help to assess and evaluate to what extent you can go into certain contexts or express opinions on certain issues.

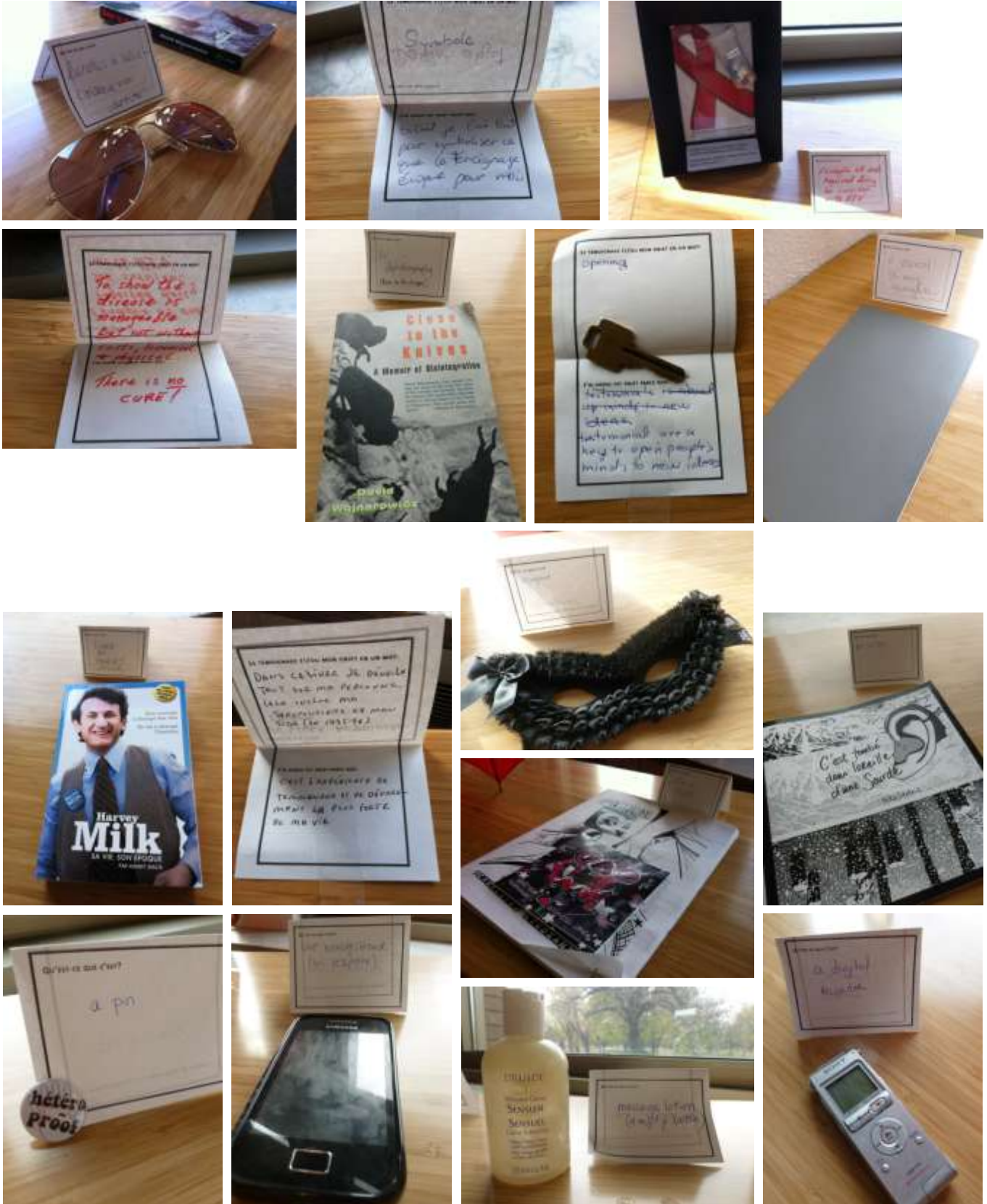
#### *Item owner's interpretation*

“I brought this because, in every society, our emotions can be expressed through colours. The swatches represent the ways we can respond to someone’s testimonial. Some people will not respond, others will respond more or less positively or negatively.”

**Overall, “Personal items as testimonials” was an activity that allowed us to explore the many possible ways that a single object can be interpreted** and the personal and intimate nature of these interpretations. The activity highlighted the extent to which objects take on the meanings we attribute to them and speak to our experiences. These reflections are useful for the interpretative work that the study of testimonial cultures involves.



# Photo album



# Personal items as testimonials



## 4 Discussion of specific questions

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### What kinds of testimonials do we give?

The discussion group on testimonials by sexual and gender minorities explored the question of the kinds of testimonials that are given. Participants noted that testimonials can come in a wide variety of formats linked to specific types of media: oral presentations, various written formats (zines, essays, poetry, blogs), videos, etc. Numerous platforms now exist to increase the number of voices that can be heard and in particular the voices of those with little access to conventional media or institutional resources.

Testimonial forms and content vary according to the philosophies of the people or groups that produce them. For example, GRIS-Montréal volunteers give testimonials to students during awareness workshops. Training is provided in advance of the workshops to help these volunteers prepare responses to questions that students are likely to ask. For PolitiQ, testimonials are mainly used to support political action. Testimonials can be given in a very personalized way such that when questions are asked, they are answered in the first person. However, some people may prefer to give a more detached or theoretical type of testimonial if the goal is to raise awareness about social injustice.

During the discussion, issues were raised regarding both the people who give testimonials and what information and messages a testimonial communicates. With regards to content, participants asked a range of questions: Is it necessary to talk about coming out experiences? How can sexual and gender diversity be illustrated and explained in a way that does not reinforce prejudice? In terms of the people who give testimonials, a problematic split often takes hold that sets apart "good" and "bad" gay people or "good" and "bad" trans people etc., and places them in opposition to one another. Who usually ends up getting to talk **(and who does not)? Who do we mean when we say "we" or "I"? Who tends to get a receptive ear from society?** Trans people in particular, but GLB people as well, face many concerns with regards to the inclusiveness of testimonial practices. If there are people who are excluded and do not give testimonials, it is possible that we will be unable to shed light on their realities or reduce prejudice towards them.

Discussing different kinds of testimonials provided an opportunity to address the fact that certain members **of the "community" may be under the impression that they cannot participate in testimonial activities** because their styles or messages do not fit within standardized formats.

### Strengths and limitations of testimonials as a way to foster social change

The members of the discussion group on testimonials by people living with HIV/AIDS assessed the strengths and weaknesses of testimonials as a way to achieve social change. This included a discussion of the political challenges inherent to the use of testimonials by sexuality or gender minority groups.

**A testimonial's main strength is its ability to put a human face on social issues, which helps to raise awareness** on an individual basis and is also useful as a way to influence decision makers. Making personal histories public creates an opportunity for dialogue. Moreover, testimonials can have a unifying effect that encourages a greater sense of solidarity within a community. In terms of weaknesses, media testimonials often communicate an oversimplification of personal experiences that are at times very complex. The tendency to privilege endearing testimonials and standardized messages in media coverage makes it difficult to see that those who give these accounts do not necessarily represent the larger group. In addition, testimonials are often re-edited in ways that can reinforce stigma. Given the extent to which taboos and dis-

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crimination have persisted, participants expressed disappointment with the characteristics and overall impact of the testimonials that have circulated in the news media.

A significant new challenge to the use of testimonials arises from the growing impact of HIV-related legal issues. For those who give testimonials, disclosing certain elements of their story must now be carefully considered in light of possibly serious legal consequences. There are very few ways to circulate information about testimonials in relation to these matters. Another challenge relates to breaking out of organizational



silos in order for public dialogue on HIV/AIDS to reach a wider audience. A final major challenge is the fact that there continue to be many people who are in denial about their HIV-positive status.

### Risks and advantages of using “I”: strategies for managing public disclosure

The discussion group on testimonials by people with an experience in sex work explored different strategies that can be used to manage public disclosure or to avoid it. This led to a discussion of the risks and advantages of using first-person narratives when giving a testimonial.

By conveying a personal tone, speaking in the first person can establish a degree of credibility. Putting a face on reality that is often different from what audiences expect to see can help to deconstruct stereotypes. That said, people are generally alone when they give a testimonial and this can cause feelings of **isolation and vulnerability**. **For this reason, people who give testimonials sometimes prefer to use “we” rather than “I.”** Using “we” can help to bolster a sense of inner strength by serving as a reminder when people give a testimonial that other community members stand behind them. In this sense, “we” can be useful in promoting solidarity in order to fight stigma and assert “our” collective right to well paid work, whatever it may be. However, the use of “we” also has its limitations. For example, if one risks being criticized for speaking on behalf of others, the use of “I” may seem preferable. In short, giving a testimonial partly involves **deciding when the use of “I” is most appropriate and when “we” makes a better choice.**

Participants shared several strategies for managing disclosure. Coming out can happen in several stages and a range of terms can be chosen from: activist, dancer, escort, etc. It is important to evaluate how receptive the audience is likely to be as well as the context in which public disclosure will be taking place: is this or is this not a safe place for this kind of revelation? Disclosure can strengthen alliances among sex workers, allowing them to share strategies and clients and to work together to fight for their rights. Yet it is **also possible to advance the cause by speaking as an activist without disclosing one’s personal experience** in sex work. Ambiguity can be another strategy: the person giving the testimonial neither confirms nor denies that she or he is a sex worker.

A major concern with regards to disclosure, public or otherwise, is the risk of delegitimization. Those who give testimonials without disclosing their personal experience risk being delegitimized and accused of talk-

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ing about something they do not *really* understand. Meanwhile, speaking from the perspective of “we” or “they” can offer a way to safeguard the privacy of personal information but also creates a situation in which people can be accused of speaking on behalf of others who do not necessarily feel or think in the same way. Each of these concerns constitutes an important challenge.



## 5 Thoughts from three panelists

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At the end of the day, participants heard from three panelists who provided overviews of what they had heard over the course of the day and drew links to their own experiences. The panel's comments were published in issue 6 of the *Testimonial Cultures* project newsletter and are reproduced below.

### The age of the testimonial: from singularities to politics

**Steven High** *Canada Research Chair in Public History, Concordia University*

Steven High argues that we are living in the age of the testimonial such that no matter where we go in the world, we are likely to encounter a proliferation of autobiographical material. In his observation, this shift from a political to a personal mode makes it possible to connect with people and is sometimes the only way to achieve political goals. The human rights issues raised by people who have sought refugee status are one example: many of the refugees who come to North America have used rational and politically-based arguments in an attempt to raise critical awareness of the problems they encounter in their adoptive country, but with little effect. There are no tangible results. However, when they leave aside this rational and political approach and tell personal stories instead, their words start to attract attention, they are listened to, and it is at this point that certain changes start to occur.



As director of the Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling at Concordia for the past seven years, High worked on *Montreal Life Stories*, a project that focused on gathering testimonials from individuals who have experienced displacement due to mass violence in their country of origin. Participants in the project included people affected by the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, and the war in Haiti. As part of this project, numerous interviews were conducted with participants from a range of communities as well as with their children, parents, and grandparents. High notes that within such a project, each interview becomes a distinct conversation. The commentaries, points of view, and understandings of each individual are unique, and therefore each testimonial is also unique. The characteristic that comes to the fore is one of diversity. This is an idea that is also central to *Testimonial Cultures*, a project that has defined "testimonial" in a much broader way than High has previously seen.

Moreover, unlike other projects with which he has been involved, the focus of *Testimonial Cultures* is not necessarily on gathering stories from "survivors" but instead on working within a political framework where people are speaking out from the perspective of their activism. It is in the context of these social movements that testimonials become tools for change and for social critique.

For researchers, High concludes, there is often pressure to keep a distance and above all, to remain as objective as possible. His own practical experience within the field of oral history, however, has taken him in the opposite direction toward "learning with" rather than just "learning about." Such an approach, he contends, should also be emphasized within the *Testimonial Cultures* project.

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## In front of the camera: testimonials and shared responsibility

Rozenn Potin *Video activist and director of the film Attention Féministes! (2010)*

Rozenn Potin's presentation focused on the role of the media. Gathering testimonials is a major part of her job as a video maker and she is therefore well-positioned to understand the responsibilities of the media with regards to the content they produce and disseminate. Potin points to a number of studies that have shown that in certain cases, the impact on those who agree to sit in front of a camera and tell their stories can be more negative than positive. For her, this is one of the key issues raised by the use of testimonials. While they can indeed serve as a means to reduce prejudices, address taboos, and foster empowerment, testimonials can also lead to significant risks of in terms of endangerment and vulnerability for people who make public disclosures in this way. For her, this is one of the main points of convergence among the different working committees of the *Testimonial Cultures* project.

Above all, Potin notes, we must remember that we are all social beings who have social responsibilities. Despite the risks that they can engender, testimonials have the potential to reach large audiences and strengthen political movements. That said, in using testimonials as a political tactic, it is vital that people protect themselves as much as possible. For her, media training is a concrete measure that should be made as accessible as possible to people who give testimonials.

Potin also emphasizes the importance of establishing limits prior to giving a testimonial (e.g. what are the questions that I want to answer? that I don't want to answer?) and ensuring that these limits are respected, given that one can never be too careful these days about what is going to be done with one's image. Testimonials have become so important that it is essential to know how to use them wisely to avoid their being turned into a weapon that is used against us.



In conclusion, Potin summarized some of the recurring issues related to discrimination that were raised by participants during plenary discussions. For people with experience in sex work, the media often focus on establishing an association between prostitution and sexual abuse. It becomes difficult to speak out about the positive aspects of sex work because there is a systematic tendency to focus on negative issues. In terms of HIV, there is a recurrent pattern of classifying HIV-positive individuals into categories of "good" or "bad." The media have a tendency to pass judgment and evoke the idea that that people are in some way guilty or personally responsible for their situation. For sexual or gender minorities, depending on whether or not a person corresponds to certain norms, the notion that there are "good" and "bad" community representatives is also an idea that is commonly reinforced.

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## Paths to activism

**Morgan Holmes** *Professor, department of sociology, Wilfrid Laurier University*

Morgan Holmes gave a moving statement about her experiences both as a person who gives testimonials and as an activist. In the 1990s, Holmes was called upon to give testimonials about the terrible trauma of growing up as an intersex child. Eventually, she found she was no longer willing to give this type of testimonial because instead of adequately conveying the whole truth about her life, it focused almost exclusively on the negative and traumatic aspects and this became too great of a burden. The constant return to the moment of trauma obliged her to remain in the past and prevented her from living her life in the present and looking toward the future. At a certain point, she found she was being asked to make too many compromises. People were only willing to listen if she gave a specific type of testimonial and told her story in a very specific way. These compromises became risky and she was no longer willing to remain involved in this way.

As a result, Holmes withdrew from the activist movement and retreated to the relative safety of the academic world. Last winter, however, she was invited to Montreal to give a presentation on her experiences by Janik Bastien-Charlebois, a researcher from our working group on sexual and gender minorities. This invitation has led Holmes toward a renewed interest in activism.

She emphasizes that she now takes care when giving a testimonial to discuss not only the trauma, but also the wonderful life she has lived and is currently living. In her view, a good life lived is indeed the best form of revenge for the surgical procedures endured over so many years because "you can do what you want my body to try to make me into what you want me to be, but I will not be a good little intersex patient and I will not live by your rules, I'll do what I want: something powerful and good."

In conclusion, Holmes noted with some emotion that the social contexts in which she can be at one and the same time an academic, a mother, an intersex woman, queer, and a sex worker are exceedingly rare and that the study day had provided her with this opportunity. Moreover, she pointed out that holding a bilingual event is truly unique and it is a privilege to be able to listen to another language in this way, because each language creates its own sentiments.



## 6 Other study day activities

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Two additional contributions rounded out the day's activities: an exhibition of drawn from our archive of testimonial examples, and a colourful performance by a politically-engaged artist.

### Mini-exhibition: selected testimonial examples

*Images and Quotations* was a mini-exhibition of the media testimonials that we have been archiving since the beginning of the *Testimonial Cultures* project. The archive includes numerous examples of testimonials from the media and the arts that serve to document the many ways in which testimonials are used by members of sexual and gender minorities, people living with HIV/AIDS, and people with an experience in sex work.



The following is a non-exhaustive overview put together earlier this year by Bruno Laprade during an initial inventory of our corpus of examples.

### Who gives testimonials?

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- Activists
- Artists
- Athletes
- Celebrities (Lady Gaga, Obama, etc.)
- Clients of sex workers
- Ex-gays and ex-ex-gays
- Doctors and other experts
- Filmmakers
- Gay immigrants
- Health professionals
- Hijra
- HIV-negative people
- HIV-positive people
- Immigrants with HIV
- Parents
- Pimps (sex industry managers)
- Porn actresses
- Researchers
- Sex workers
- Soldiers
- Survivors
- Youth

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## Testimonial formats

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Advertising</li> <li>● Blogs</li> <li>● Blog compilations</li> <li>● Community and organizational newsletters</li> <li>● Conferences</li> <li>● Documentary films</li> <li>● Email conversations</li> <li>● Exhibitions</li> <li>● Fictional films</li> <li>● Guided tours</li> <li>● In-person presentations</li> <li>● Mainstream and community magazines</li> <li>● Mainstream newspaper articles</li> <li>● Photo albums</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Podcasts</li> <li>● Print books</li> <li>● Research reports</li> <li>● Social media (Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter)</li> <li>● Songs</li> <li>● Summaries of presentations</li> <li>● Television interviews</li> <li>● Testimonials within testimonials (HIV-negative man in conversation with an HIV-positive man)</li> <li>● Training workshops</li> <li>● Video blogs</li> <li>● Vox pop booths</li> <li>● Writing contests</li> <li>● Zines</li> </ul> |
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## Subject matter

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Sexual and gender minorities	HIV	Sex work
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Activism and repression</li> <li>● Being too gay</li> <li>● Bullying and violence</li> <li>● Coming out in the army</li> <li>● Criminalization</li> <li>● Disclosure and coming out</li> <li>● Discrimination</li> <li>● Ex-gays and ex-ex-gays</li> <li>● Genderfluid children</li> <li>● Health issues</li> <li>● Homosexuality and race</li> <li>● Homosexuality elsewhere in the world (laws in certain countries)</li> <li>● Homosexuality in sports</li> <li>● Immigration and refugees</li> <li>● Intimate relationships</li> <li>● Public figures and coming out</li> <li>● Responsibility</li> <li>● Sex education</li> <li>● Transgender, transvestite</li> <li>● Transitioning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Aging with HIV</li> <li>● Criminalization</li> <li>● Disclosure in sexual contexts</li> <li>● Drug use</li> <li>● Friends who have died</li> <li>● Living with HIV</li> <li>● Medication</li> <li>● Outing in the media</li> <li>● Positive aspects of using condoms</li> <li>● Rejection, discrimination</li> <li>● Responsibility</li> <li>● Stigma in other countries</li> <li>● Using HIV-positive people to raise awareness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Activism</li> <li>● BDSM</li> <li>● Conflict between abolitionist and pro-sex work approaches</li> <li>● Dominatrixes</li> <li>● Exploitation</li> <li>● Human trafficking</li> <li>● Legal advances</li> <li>● Legislation/decriminalization and policies elsewhere in the world</li> <li>● Life after porn</li> <li>● Pornography</li> <li>● Prisons</li> <li>● Survivors</li> <li>● Trafficking of minors</li> </ul>

*Testimonial Cultures* is currently working on transforming its testimonial archive into a database. The mini-exhibition offered a preview of the richness and diversity of this developing corpus and has been on display in the project's offices since January 2013.

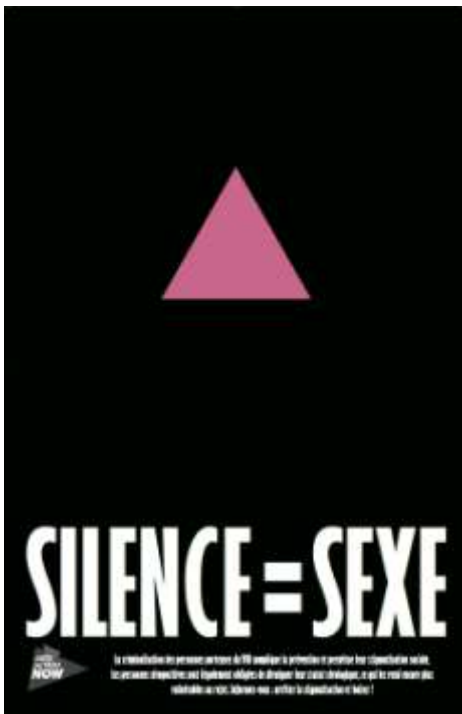
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## “Silence = Sexe”: a performance

The day ended on a social note with a reception and the premiere of “Silence = Sex: The New Equation,” a new performance piece by Jordan Arseneault. Originally mounted for the *Visual AIDS* campaign, this work addresses issues faced on a daily basis by people from sexual and gender minorities and people living with HIV/AIDS.

Arseneault is an artist, translator, writer, and activist in the queer and HIV communities in Montreal. He holds a degree in Philosophy from McGill University and is a founding member of the *Radical Queer Semaine* collective. In 2012, he launched *SéroSyndicat*, an activist collective aimed at combating the criminalization of HIV-positive people (born in 1980, Arseneault describes himself as “one year older than AIDS”). Under the stage name of his drag queen persona, Peaches Lepage, he has worked as host, performer and master of ceremonies for numerous cabaret fundraisers including Meow Mix, Cabaret Faux Pas, Glam Gam Productions, and STALLE.

In 2012, he created the “SILENCE = SEX” poster as part of Toronto’s AIDS ACTION NOW “Poster/Virus” series. He currently works as a freelance journalist and cultural producer. For more information about his work: <http://thedutymyth.blogspot.ca>.



poster, Jordan Arseneault, 2012)



(SILENCE = SEXE,



## 7 Conclusion and outlook

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### **Evaluation of the day's activities**

A total of 24 people (half the participants) completed the study day evaluation form. These evaluations indicated that overall, participants came away having had a positive experience. Words used to describe the day include “inspiring”, “educational”, “rewarding”, “refreshing”, “challenging” and “stimulating”. Participants generally rated their experience as excellent, both personally and professionally, and appreciated making new connections and being introduced to new approaches.

According to the evaluations, the study day provided participants with an opportunity to reflect on the production of testimonials as a strategy for a social and cultural intervention and to share experiences related to giving testimonials. Participants reported that at the end of the day, they had a better understanding of the *Testimonial Cultures* project and felt better equipped to fight stigmatization related to sexual practices and gender identities.

### **Most interesting and most useful**

Overall, respondents reported that they especially enjoyed the conversational exchanges, diversity of participants, group dynamics, dialogue between different groups, and opportunity to meet new people. Differences of opinion among participants and within groups were seen to be helpful in that they allowed people to call into question some of their pre-existing ideas about testimonials and provided information about alternative techniques and approaches that could be useful when preparing a testimonial.

### **Least interesting and least useful**

In general, it was felt that the plenary sessions had been too short and that more time was needed for plenary discussions. Several participants mentioned that time restrictions made it difficult to retain information and develop ideas. There was also some dissatisfaction with the video screening and subsequent small group discussions. Participants noted that the video excerpts were too short, making it difficult to develop a full understanding such that the discussions that followed were felt to have been somewhat superficial.

### **Suggestions for improvement**

The need for more time for mixed activities that would bring members of different groups together was a key recommendation. It was also felt that more time should be allocated to plenary discussion as these were seen to be important and useful. Some participants noted that they would prefer to have had a bit more freedom to formulate their own questions during the discussion groups. On a positive note, participants seem to have enjoyed their experience and were very much in favour of holding another event open to a larger number of participants, perhaps over several days in order to be able to cover more ground.







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