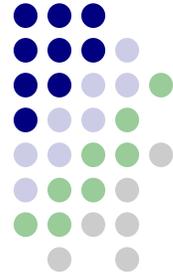


NEWSLETTER

Testimonial Cultures



A day of rich and colourful exchange

Over 50 participants gather to discuss our "Convergences and Diversity"



We're pleased to announce that the study day held on November 9 was an overall success!

More than fifty people came together to reflect on how our different testimonial cultures intersect and to explore the diversity of our practices. These participants represented or were affiliated with over a dozen organizations, including PolitiQ Queers Solidaires; Groupe de recherche et d'intervention sociale de Montréal; Stella; Prostitutes of Ottawa/Gatineau Work, Educate and Resist; Coalition des organismes communautaires québécois de lutte contre le sida, Concordia University's

Centre for Oral History and Digital Storytelling; the Institut de recherches et d'études féministes and the School of Social Work at UQAM; Maison Plein Cœur; l'Aide aux transsexuels et transsexuelles du Québec; Cactus-Montréal; and AIDS Community Care Montreal.

The day began with an introduction to the project's three working groups that allowed everyone to get to know and understand each other a little better. The screening of a brand-new video compilation featuring various examples of testimonials came next, providing a common basis

from which to begin our reflection. Small-group workshops followed that brought participants together around a set of common questions: What is our response to the testimonials you have just seen? How are they similar to or different from our own experiences with giving testimonials? A delicious meal followed that gave us a moment to cool down after this intense mental work-out.

At the start of the afternoon, thoughts and feelings were shared in a slightly different way through a testimonial "show-and-tell" activity. Participants had been (*continued, p.2*)

Launch of the « Je suis séropositif » campaign



Launched on December 1 as part of the World AIDS Day, the "Je suis séropositif" campaign (jesuisseropo.org) offers a portrait of five people living with HIV from various walks of life and different regions of Quebec.

An initiative of the Coalition des organismes communautaires québécois de lutte contre le sida

(COCQ-SIDA), the campaign aims to highlight that HIV-positive people, just like everyone else, are individuals with a wide range of interests, talents and abilities.

In posters and video testimonials bearing the slogan "C'est le sida qu'il faut exclure, pas les séropositifs" ("Keep away AIDS, not HIV-positive

people"), the five spokespeople offer messages of tolerance and respect.

This campaign is part of a broader effort to promote a more supportive social climate within which HIV-positive can disclose their status. ■

No. 7

December 2012

Holiday Cocktail

Monday, December 17
5:00 - 7:00 pm
L'île Noire Pub
1649 St. Denis
Montreal (metro Berri-UQAM)
All welcome!

Upcoming meetings

Working Group
on testimonials by people with an
experience in sex work
Thursday January 17, 2013
11 am - 2 pm
University of Ottawa
Room FSS 4015

General Assembly
*Meeting of project partners
and guests*
Monday January 28
9:00 am - noon
UQAM, room DS-1950
320 St. Catherine St. E.

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A testimonial “show and tell” (above) and workshop discussions (below) allowed participants to put their questions and ideas on the table.



“we are living in the age of the testimonial”

invited to bring an item that has symbolic importance for them in relation to the experience of giving a testimonial. These items were placed on a display table and served as a departure point for sharing various thoughts and perceptions during a plenary discussion. For some, this was an opportunity to share personal stories or insights related to the item they had brought.

Next, during a second workshop, participants focused on a more specific set of questions. For the working group on testimonials by people with an experience in sex work, these questions included: What practices and approaches have we developed with regards to disclosing that we are sex workers? Or to avoid disclosing our sex-work experience? What are the implications of using “I” when we tell our stories? What are the risks and benefits of giving first-person accounts?

A different set of questions were explored by the working

group on testimonials by people living with HIV: What are the strengths and weaknesses of using testimonials as a way to promote social change? What political challenges arise when we set out to use testimonials in this way?

For the working group on testimonials by members of sexual and gender minorities, the questions included: What types of testimonials do we tend to give? What media do we tend to use and why?

After a short break, a plenary exchange provided a venue for sharing the ideas and issues that had been discussed by each of the working groups. Some general thoughts and responses to the day's discussions were then offered by three invited panelists, Steven High, Rozenn Potin and Morgan Holmes. A summary of each panelist's comments can be found below. The day concluded with a final plenary exchange and the presenta-

tion of a colourful and very compelling work by performance artist Jordan Arseneault.

Based on the comments and feedback we have received, one of our aims during upcoming events will be to offer more opportunities to reflect on the intersections between the different working groups by including workshops and activities that bring together people from each group, as well as more time for plenary discussions.

We would like to thank everyone who attended for participating so actively in the discussions. The study day has given us an amazing springboard from which to move ahead with our work on this project over the coming months. Dozens of questions and ideas have been put on the table. We look forward to seeing you again soon for further reflection and discussion of the convergences and the diversity that characterize our various testimonial cultures! ■

Three panelists share their thoughts

Steven High, holder of the Canada Research Chair in Public History

Steven High notes 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 use 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 can 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 cultural communities as well as with their children, parents, and grandparents.

High emphasizes 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. Based in his experience, however, the practice of oral history is quite the opposite. The focus becomes one of "learning with" rather than just "learning about." Such an approach should also be emphasized within the Testimonial Cultures project.

Rozenn Potin, activist and video maker, *Attention Féministes!*

The role of the media was a focus of Rozenn Potin's presentation. Gathering testimonials is a major part of her job as a video maker and she is therefore well-positioned to understand what responsibilities the media have 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 story 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, they also pose significant risks of in terms of endangerment and vulnerability for people who make public disclosures in this way. In her view, this is one of the main points of convergence between the different working committees of the Testimonial Cultures project.

Above all, Potin adds, we must remember we are social beings who have a social responsibility. Despite the risks that they can pose, testimonials have the potential to reach a large audience and to strengthen political movements. That said, in using testimonials as a political tool, it is vital that people protect themselves as much as possible. For her, media training is a concrete tool that should be made as accessible as possible to people who give testimonials. Potin also empha-

sizes the importance of establishing limits prior to giving a testimonial (e.g. what are the questions 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 can be used against us.

In conclusion, Potin summarized some of the recurring issues related to discrimination that were raised by participants during our 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 the negative. In terms of HIV, there is a strong pattern of classifying HIV-positive individuals as either "good" or "bad." The media have a tendency to pass judgment and evoke the idea that that people are in some way guilty and responsible for their condition. For sexual or gender minorities, depending on whether or not a person corresponds to certain norms, the notion of "good" and "bad" community representatives is also an idea that is commonly reinforced.

Morgan Holmes, professor, Wilfrid Laurier University

Morgan Holmes gave a moving statement about her experiences both as a person



From left to right, Stephen High, Rozenn Potin et Morgan Holmes

« ... media training is a concrete tool that should be made as accessible as possible ... »



“People were only willing to listen ... if she told her story in a specific way.”

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 it did not relay the whole truth of her life but only the negative and traumatic aspects of it, which 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 forward to the future. At a certain point, the compromises that she was asked to make became too great. People were only willing to listen if she gave a very specific type of testimonial and told her story in a 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 all those 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 in her experience, the times when 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 this is what happened during our study day. 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. ■

“In pictures and in quotes”: a mini-exhibition

If pictures could speak ... *Images et citations* ("Pictures and Quotes") is a mini exhibition created especially for the November 9 Study Day. For those who have not had a chance to see it, don't worry! We'll be putting it up again very soon, this time on the walls of the Testimonial Cultures project office at UQAM starting in January 2013.

Over the past year, we've compiled dozens of examples from mainstream and alterna-

tive media to document how testimonials are used by people from sexual and gender minorities, people living with HIV, and people with an experience in sex work. We are now working on developing a database in order to archive this corpus of testimonial examples, and in the coming months we will be consulting with project partners and collaborators to better understand your needs and interests with regards to this collection.

The mini exhibition offers a taste of the diversity that can be found in this corpus of examples. For a closer look at our collection or to contribute your own examples, contact Thomas Haig (haig.thomas@uqam.ca).

Exhibition design: Maryka Henry, research assistant, and Sindi Numa, intern.

Research and compilation: Thomas Haig, research coordinator. ■



Lecture and screening with Lara Roxx and Mia Donovan

Concordia Community Lecture Series on HIV/AIDS

You won't want to miss this film screening and public lecture by Mia Donovan and Lara Roxx, for which the Testimonial Cultures project is one of the co-sponsors. Donovan is a Montreal filmmaker and photographer who made the documentary feature film *Inside Lara Roxx* in 2011.

The film tells the story of porn actress Lara Roxx, a Montreal native, who contracted HIV while performing a sexual act

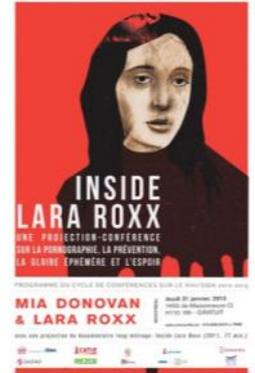
in front of the camera. The film explores, without condemning, the way in which Roxx's story was taken up by the media and resonated within the porn industry. Donovan and Roxx will tell their personal stories and talk about their experiences in relation to HIV.

Donovan and Roxx's appearance at Concordia is part of the 2012-2013 edition of the Concordia Community Lecture

Series on HIV/AIDS. The lecture will be given in English.

Inside Lara Roxx: A Screening/Lecture about Porn, Prevention, Hype, and Hope ...
Thursday, January 31, 7 pm,
1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W., room H-110. Free admission.

For more information:
<http://aids.concordia.ca/lectures.html> ■



Project receives ethical approval

The application submitted to the Comité institutionnel d'éthique de la recherche avec des êtres humains (CIÉR) at UQAM at the end of October 2012 has been approved. Receiving ethical

approval is a key milestone for our project and opens the way for the Testimonial Cultures research team to conduct interviews with people who have given testimonials in the media as members of a

sexual or gender minority or as a sex worker. Recruitment plans and interview tools are currently being prepared with the aim of getting these interviews underway in the spring of 2013. ■

In brief

Call for submissions: anthology of lesbian stories

Contributions are currently being sought for an anthology of stories by lesbians about their lives. The anthology will be bilingual and aims to include contributors from different age groups and regions of Quebec. The stories being sought can deal with any period of life (coming out, marriage, school, parenting, etc.) as long as they have a happy ending. The purpose of this book is to make lesbians more visible and increase public awareness of the positive aspects of their lives. Submissions should be between 400 and 1000 words and can be written in French or English. Deadline: Febru-

ary 1, 2013. More information can be found on the Solidarité Lesbienne web site (solidaritelesbienne.qc.ca). Send submissions to: lesbianssoul@yahoo.com

RÉZO seeks testimonials about coming out

As part of a project funded by the Bureau de lutte à l'homophobie du Québec, REZO is looking for volunteers willing to share some of their experiences. These testimonials will be used to create short videos to be disseminated via social media and on a website aimed at parents and relatives of men who are going through the process of accepting and affirming their homosexuality (coming out).

The profiles being sought are as follows: men under 25 years or over 40 years of age who have already come out or are in the process of coming out; fathers or mothers of young men under 25 years of age in the process of coming out.

To express your interest, contact: communication@rezosante.org or 514-521-7778, extension 234. A team of experienced professionals will accompany and mentor individuals who volunteer to give a testimonial. ■



Testimonial Cultures

A cultural study of testimonials as a social intervention strategy for sexual minorities: uses, challenges, issues, and benefits of a renewed practice

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contre le sida (COCQ-SIDA)
Groupe de recherche et d'intervention
sociale (GRIS-MONTREAL)
PolitiQ – Queer solidaires de Montréal
Prostitutes of Ottawa/Gatineau Work,
Educate & Resist (POWER)
Stella, l'amie de Maimie

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through financial support from the Social Sciences
and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).



Staff news

Thank you ...

We would like to congratulate **Barbara Legault** for her work as coordinator of the November 9 study day and for her talents as a facilitator. Many thanks!

Steven High has decided to step down from his role as a collaborator with the research team. We thank Steven for his contribution over the past year and wish him much success in his future endeavors.

A warm welcome!

We are pleased to welcome two interns from Concordia who are students in the undergraduate course "HIV / AIDS: Social, Cultural and Scientific Aspects of the Pandemic."

Kira McLean is currently completing her BA in Psychology with a minor in Interdisciplinary Studies in Sexuality. She will be assisting the VIH-SIBILITÉ project in conjunction with the training workshops currently being offering to community organizations in Quebec on ethical issues related to the production of testimonials and the

provision of support to people living with HIV/AIDS who give testimonials.

Sindi Numa is an undergraduate student in biochemistry. She will be working to set-up the database that we will be using to archive our corpus of testimonial examples. ■

*To all the partners
and collaborators of
the Testimonial
Cultures project ...*

*... wishing you the
very best for the
holiday season -
may 2013 bring
you happiness, love
and good health!*

