

“Describing Misbehaviour in Vung Tau as ‘Mischief’ Is Ridiculously Coy”: Ethnographic Refusal, Reticence, and the Oral Historian’s Dilemma

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Abstract: Since 2009 I have been part of three projects examining the history of service in the Australian military of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI). The oral histories of these current and ex-service personnel contain tales that include family violence (both as perpetrators and survivors), war trauma, alcoholism, and sexual assault. There are also many silences, particularly among Vietnam veterans, when discussing misbehavior on rest-and-convalescence leave in the Vietnamese coastal town of Vung Tau. In this article, I explore some of the ways that I have navigated the ethical dilemmas of writing these histories, referring in particular to how the concepts of ethnographic refusal and reticence have influenced my practice. I argue that interviewers need to be cautious when confronting participants’ reticence to engage with particular lines of questioning. Researchers must consider the wider social, political, and personal implications of their research for their narrators and decide whether ethnographic refusal—avoiding the subject matter to protect the interviewees—is an appropriate strategy.

Keywords: ethics, ethnographic refusal, Indigenous history, LGBTI, reticence, Vietnam War

Since 2009 I have been involved in three projects about the histories of various social groups’ participation in the Australian military: two examining Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and one on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) service. Much of this research draws on life history interviews with current and ex-service personnel. These oral histories have included tales of family violence (both as perpetrators and survivors),

I would like to thank colleagues Laura Rademaker, Melissa Bellanta, Hannah Forsyth, Maggie Nolan, and Catherine Bishop for their gracious feedback on earlier drafts of this article, as well as Kathy Nasstrom for her wonderful editorial assistance and advice on ways to push my analysis further. Also, thank you to Alistair Thomson for encouraging me to publish this work. The methodological issues raised in this article derive from research funded by three Australian Research Council grants: DP110101627, LP120200327 and DP160103548.

posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcoholism, and sexual assault. There have also been many silences, particularly among Vietnam veterans, when discussing misbehavior on rest-and-convalescence leave in the coastal township of Vung Tau. Vung Tau was the major settlement adjacent to the Australian presence in the Phuoc Tuy province, and all service personnel had at least three days of leave during a one-year tour to visit Vung Tau. In this article, I explore two concepts, reticence and ethnographic refusal, that have helped me navigate the challenges of researching and writing about the unsettling content of my informants' testimonies. *Reticence* refers to interviewees' reluctance or unwillingness to discuss problematic topics, while *ethnographic refusal* relates to a scholar's hesitancy to write about particular themes that may reveal unpleasant aspects of the interview participants' lives. Reticence and ethnographic refusal are not mutually exclusive concepts, and together they entangle the oral historian in an ethical bind about how to navigate the appropriate use of interviewees' testimonies to construct historical narratives. Researchers must consider the wider social, political, and, most importantly, personal implications of their research for their narrators and decide whether ethnographic refusal—avoiding the subject matter to protect the interviewees—is an appropriate strategy.

Ethnographic Refusal

To explain how I have confronted these challenges, I consider key moments that caused me to reflect on my practice as an oral historian. The first was in 2014 when I received a reader's report for a coauthored manuscript, *Defending Country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service since 1945*.¹ It was a favorable report containing helpful criticism, and there was one point in particular that struck a chord. In a chapter about Aboriginal servicemen in Vietnam,

I had written the following:

¹ Early manuscript version of book ultimately published as Noah Riseman and Richard Trembath, *Defending Country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service since 1945* (St Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 2016).

Vung Tau was the principal location for Australian Rest and Relaxation, and Australian troops—Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous—ended up causing lots of mischief...Many of the drinking stories ended in brawls or other trouble. For instance, Daryl Wallace got into a fight with a boy on a motorbike and wound up in jail.... Overall, though, memories of Vung Tau tended to put a smile on the face of Aboriginal veterans more so than any other aspect of their testimonies.

I included two oral history quotes that referred to heavy drinking and alluded to brawls with other servicemen, but without any specific details. I did not include more because my oral history informants rarely discussed Vung Tau on the record. Even so, the reader had a blunt but reasonable criticism: “Describing misbehaviour in Vung Tau as ‘mischief’ is ridiculously coy—they [coauthors] should call a spade a spade and talk about excessive drinking, the use of prostitutes and bar girls and the consequences—VD. Letting their informants off by accepting ‘off the record’ recollections is not good enough.”² The reader was implying that as researcher I was not digging deep enough into the infractions my informants may have committed in Vung Tau and that thereby I was letting them off the hook.

This critique opened up a series of challenging ethical and reflective questions. My research historicizes the role of marginalized social groups in the Australian armed forces. These are men and women who were often barred from participating in the services and whose histories have been on the periphery of Australia’s national memory of defense. Aboriginal historian John Maynard writes about the importance of uncovering hidden Indigenous histories to serve as an “inspirational tool in providing our future generations with a proud past with our own heroes and

² Anonymous reader report for *Defending Country: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Military Service since 1945*, March 24, 2014.

heroines. It can also play a significant role in informing wider white society of both the tragedy and celebration of our historical experience.”³ The reader’s criticism prompted me to question my scholarly practice: was my desire to introduce hitherto hidden voices leading me to exclude aspects of those histories which might undermine or taint their records?

Ethnographic refusal is a useful concept to explain my dilemma. Anthropologist Sherry Ortner coined the term in 1995 to describe ethnographers’ decisions *not* to write about a particular research theme or to otherwise sanitize data in the analysis, for fear of adversely portraying the ethnographic subjects. Ortner objected to ethnographic refusal on the grounds that it constitutes the researcher’s “failure of nerve” to pose challenging questions or analyses.⁴ Social worker Alexandra Crampton similarly observed that ethnographic refusal may “perhaps [be] in the guise of ethical or professional detachment. The result is thinning of understanding and insight, as well as denying the full humanity of individuals and the complex cultural context of a bigger picture.”⁵ (Other scholars consider ethnographic refusal to be a positive methodology—a point I will take up later in this article.)

Upon reflection, I came to realize that my ethnographic refusal was glossing over important aspects of Vietnam War history as part of an agenda to present a mostly positive image of the forgotten contributions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen. If oral history is meant to empower those whose voices have been overlooked in the written record, then, as Kathleen Blee argued, there is a tension if those voices are uncritically presented, thereby

³ John Maynard, “Circles in the Sand: An Indigenous Framework of Historical Practice,” *Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* 36S (2007): 117.

⁴ Sherry B. Ortner, “Resistance and the Problem of Ethnographic Refusal,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, no. 1 (1995): 190.

⁵ Alexandra Crampton, “Ethnographic Refusal as Research Method: Example from a Study of a Family Court Child Custody Mediation Program,” *Qualitative Social Work* 14, no. 4 (2015): 467-68.

potentially disempowering other marginalized voices.⁶ Following Blee, if we ignore the problematic aspects of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander service in Vietnam, we risk silencing Vietnamese experiences which, one could argue, were even more marginalized during and after the war. For instance, not talking about Aboriginal servicemen partaking in the sex trade or physically abusing Vietnamese business owners potentially erases those Vietnamese experiences from the historical record. While I refer here to misbehavior on leave, the same dilemma applies more broadly to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander servicemen's conduct in all aspects of the war.

Ethics and the Non-Indigenous Historian

Whilst the historian has a professional duty to present as full a record of the wartime past as possible, the oral historian has another, and sometimes conflicting, ethical responsibility to interview participants. These are men and women who have given their time and agreed to share their life stories, including difficult and traumatic experiences. As numerous oral historians have written, interview participants and scholars may have differing and conflicting readings and analyses of interview content, and even differing agendas for use of the interviews.⁷ Michael Frisch's notion of shared authority is a useful framework through which oral historians often navigate this tension to redress the power imbalance between interviewer-author-scholar and the

⁶ Kathleen Blee, "Evidence, Empathy and Ethics: Lessons from Oral Histories of the Klan," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 322-31.

⁷ Katherine Borland, "'That's Not What I Said': Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research," in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 310-21; Tracy E. K'Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers, "'If I See Some of This in Writing, I'm Going to Shoot You': Reluctant Narrators, Taboo Topics, and the Ethical Dilemmas of the Oral Historian," *Oral History Review* 34, no. 1 (2007): 71-93.

interview participant.⁸ Moreover, sharing authority is considered best ethical practice for any research—not just oral history—involving Indigenous peoples.⁹

For centuries Indigenous peoples have been researched as objects and their knowledges disregarded or destroyed. Since the 1990s, numerous Indigenous scholars around the world have theorized more ethical ways of conducting research involving Indigenous peoples. Several of the principles in the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) “Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies” focus on issues of ongoing negotiation, collaboration, and consultation so as to respect Indigenous knowledges. There are also points about research needing to aid Indigenous participants, with principle eleven specifically stating: “Indigenous people involved in research, or who may be affected by research, should benefit from, and not be disadvantaged by, the research project.”¹⁰ Such guidelines were part of what was influencing my ethnographic refusal: concern that portraying too many negative aspects of Indigenous military history could either disempower the veteran interviewees or, at worst, even risk reinforcing negative stereotypes (or what Emma Kowal called “unsanitised alterity”) of Indigenous masculinity as alcoholic, physically violent, and sexually rapacious.¹¹

Aboriginal academic Karen Martin argued that the shift from researching *about* Aboriginal people to researching *with* them is only a first step. Researchers across disciplines still rely on methods and theories grounded in Western knowledge systems, perpetuating the

⁸ Michael H. Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), xxii.

⁹ See Martin Nakata, *Disciplining the Savages: Savaging the Disciplines* (Canberra, AU: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012); Ambelin Kwaymullina, “Research, Ethics and Indigenous Peoples,” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 12, no. 4 (2016): 437-49.

¹⁰ AIATSIS, “Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies,” 2012, 15.

¹¹ See Shino Konishi, *The Aboriginal Male in the Enlightenment World* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2012); Emma Kowal, “The Politics of the Gap: Indigenous Australians, Liberal Multiculturalism, and the End of the Self-Determination Era,” *American Anthropologist* 110, no. 3 (2008): 344-45.

dispossession of Indigenous knowledges and experiences.¹² Martin is among several scholars who advocate that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers need to develop research protocols that are grounded in Indigenous epistemologies.¹³ Aboriginal scholar Lester Rigney argued that Indigenist research needs to privilege Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices.¹⁴ This entails abandoning the role of “expert” and instead respecting and centering Indigenous knowledge. Sharing authority is therefore my strategy to overcome, as best I can, what Emma Kowal called the “stigma of white privilege.” Essentially, while I cannot transcend my privilege, it is vital to find strategies that prevent it becoming a paralyzing barrier to conducting research ethically.¹⁵ In my writing, one way that I try to share authority and to center the Indigenous participants’ knowledge is to include long quotations. My analysis usually starts with testimonies and what they reveal about history and Indigenous understandings of the past, with archival evidence complementing, rather than supplanting, the Indigenous voices.

Reticence and Responsibility to the Profession

My ethnographic refusal concerning what happened at Vung Tau did not constitute silencing Indigenous voices; instead, misbehavior at Vung Tau was a topic which the Indigenous ex-servicemen themselves generally avoided discussing. These were not typical silences, but rather constituted what Lenore Layman described as “reticence.” Layman interviewed workers at a power plant in Perth, and based on those interviews she distinguished the two concepts:

¹² Karen Lillian Martin, *Please Knock before You Enter: Aboriginal Regulation of Outsiders and the Implications for Researchers* (Teneriffe, QLD: Post Pressed, 2008), 29.

¹³ See also Veronica Arbon, *Arlathirnda Ngurkarnda Ityirnda: Being-Knowing-Doing: De-Colonising Indigenous Tertiary Education* (Teneriffe, QLD: Post Pressed, 2008); Nerida Blair, *Privileging Australian Indigenous Knowledge: Sweet Potatoes, Spiders, Waterlilys and Brick Walls* (Champaign, IL: Common Ground Publishing, 2015).

¹⁴ Lester-Irabinna Rigney, “Internationalization of an Indigenous Anticolonial Cultural Critique of Research Methodologies: A Guide to Indigenist Research Methodology and Its Principles,” *Wicazo Sa Review* 14, no. 2 (1999): 109-21.

¹⁵ Emma Kowal, “The Stigma of White Privilege: Australian Anti-Racists and Indigenous Improvement,” *Cultural Studies* 25, no. 3 (2011): 313-33.

“reticence—the exercise of the narrators’ agency through conversational shifts intended to limit dialogue on specific matters—from silence, that which is unspoken.”¹⁶ While reticence may manifest as silence in response to a question, Layman distinguished between that which the narrator avoids (reticence) and that which the narrator never raises (silence). Layman found that there were four reasons for her informants’ reticence: (1) topics which did not fit narrators’ interview agendas, (2) topics transgressing the participants’ bounds of social discourse, (3) issues too painful or disturbing to discuss, (4) those experiences which challenged public memories.¹⁷ For my interviewees, behavior at Vung Tau fit primarily in the first two categories, although there are other wartime experiences which fit in the latter two.

When confronting reticence, Tracy K’Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers advocate for oral historians to take up the challenge of asking questions which interviewees may not wish to answer. They argue: “If we restricted ourselves to recording only the stories...initiated without questions or probing, we would not be doing our job. We would be serving only as recorders or transcribers. Historians must search for the story behind the story.”¹⁸ In my interviews, I did ask all of my narrators about Vung Tau, but most were reticent to talk about it. One indicative response came from Dick Bligh: “There was always stories about Vung Tau, but it’s hard to remember a lot of them. I have been back to Vietnam and I have been back to Vung Tau and it’s a totally different place now. It’s hard to remember a lot of incidents that actually happened there.” Elsewhere in the interview, Bligh was similarly evasive about Vung Tau, shifting off the

¹⁶ Lenore Layman, “Reticence in Oral History Interviews,” *Oral History Review* 36, no. 2 (2009): 210.

¹⁷ Layman, 212-25.

¹⁸ K’Meyer and Crothers, “If I See Some of This in Writing, I’m Going to Shoot You,” 91. See also Linda Shopes, “‘Insights and Oversights’: Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 265-66.

topic when asked about it.¹⁹ In a subsequent research project, Frank Mallard coyly responded to my question about Vung Tau: “Never got into any mischief at all. I was a good boy.”²⁰

All interview participants alluded to drinking and occasionally to fights in Vung Tau, but one subject which was markedly missing was references to women. One interviewee was willing to tell me off the record about an encounter he had with a Vietnamese sex worker, but there was no mention anywhere else, on or off the record, about this. As Nan Alamilla Boyd observed in her oral history research into queer histories of San Francisco, it was clear that my interviewees did not want stories about women recorded for fear of personal or family embarrassment because they fell outside the bounds of acceptable social behavior.²¹ The closest on-the-record reference to sexual relations in Vung Tau is an interview my colleague John Maynard from the University of Newcastle conducted for our *Serving Our Country* project, in which Aboriginal veteran David Nean stated: “Worst ones were the [Vietnamese] girls. You couldn’t trust the girls. You know what I’m talking about. They had terrible ideas of, you know, terrible [pause] ways of getting at people. [pause] I won’t go into it, but they were the worst of them all, the ones you couldn’t trust, especially if you [were] going with them.”²² Even though Nean would not go into details, just the expression “You know what I’m talking about” marked an imagined shared set of gendered understandings between male narrator and interviewer, hinting at the sexual nature of the story. Among American veterans there are urban legends about Vietnamese women hiding

¹⁹ Dick Bligh, interviewed by Noah Riseman, Perth, November 25, 2010, available from National Library of Australia (NLA), ORAL TRC 6260/4.

²⁰ Noah Riseman, interviewed by Frank Mallard, Perth, August 31, 2015, available from *Serving Our Country*, <http://ourmobserved.anu.edu.au/yarn-ups/yarn-participants/frank-mallard>.

²¹ Nan Alamilla Boyd, “Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 17, no. 2 (2008): 188-89.

²² David Nean, interviewed by John Maynard, Newcastle, October 24, 2014, available from *Serving Our Country*, <http://ourmobserved.anu.edu.au/yarn-ups/yarn-participants/david-nean>.

weapons in their vaginas, but such stories are not common in Australia.²³ Instead, Nean was presumably alluding to not trusting the girls because they would have venereal disease, and Nean's reticence expressed through "I won't go into it" means that insinuations must fill the gap.

Non-Indigenous veterans, too, are often reticent to discuss misbehavior at Vung Tau. Many Vietnam veterans still feel resentment over their unwelcomed homecomings and tarnished image and even (re)construct their memories of return around mythologies of being spat on or attacked by antiwar protesters.²⁴ Vung Tau's associations with sex work, drunkenness, fighting, and socially objectionable behavior could potentially reinforce negative stereotypes of Vietnam veterans, rather than redeem them, as so many veterans' writings and oral history testimonies aim to do. In this particular project I faced the added ethical dimension that these were not just any Vietnam veterans—they were all Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. As mentioned above, ethical practice for working with Indigenous peoples means that the research should be of benefit to them and privilege their knowledge. Māori historian Nēpia Mahuika further argued that good ethical practice does not just involve collaborating during the research collection or following cultural protocols; it also requires that histories should disrupt colonial power relationships.²⁵ Lester Rigney posed a similar argument calling for research about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people which emancipates rather than perpetuates colonial relationships.²⁶ Canadian First Nations academic Marie Batiste pointed out that jointly managed projects—in which

²³ Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 40.

²⁴ Chris Dixon, "Redeeming the Warrior: Myth-Making and Australia's Vietnam Veterans," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 60, no. 2 (2014): 214-28; "Australia's Vietnam Veterans and the Legacies of a Lost War," in *Anzac Legacies: Australians and the Aftermath of War*, ed. Martin Crotty and Marina Larsson (North Melbourne, VIC: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2010), 130-34.

²⁵ Nēpia Mahuika, "Tikanga as the Ethical Foundation of Historical Scholarship in Aotearoa New Zealand," *New Zealand Journal of History* 49, no. 1 (2015): 11-12.

²⁶ Rigney, "Internationalization of an Indigenous Anticolonial Cultural Critique of Research Methodologies," 109-21.

Indigenous people control their own knowledge—mean that at times Indigenous participants may place limits on what can be shared.²⁷

Thus, in my case there was a tension between my ethnographic refusal (which the reader's report had legitimately questioned) and my wish to respect the veterans' reticence to discuss Vung Tau. Aboriginal Palyku academic Ambelin Kwaymullina argued that non-Indigenous researchers, when confronting reticence (Kwaymullina used the word *silences*) from Indigenous participants, should engage in a process of reflection about *why* the participants are not responding to a question. Is it about protecting cultural knowledge? Will a non-Indigenous voice filling the silence make it more difficult for Indigenous voices to be heard?²⁸ After thinking through these sorts of questions, my coauthor and I decided that overlooking Vung Tau would simply open the book to the same criticism as the reader's. Such ethnographic refusal could discredit aspects of the book and thus undo the wider benefits of sharing histories of Indigenous military service. Moreover, while I did and still do respect the participants' reticence to discuss Vung Tau, this aspect of their life stories was not cultural knowledge, but rather was a history common to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Vietnam veterans.

Given the lack of veterans' testimonies, I could only write in general terms about the bad behavior at Vung Tau to avoid implicating any specific veterans whom I interviewed. Given the limitations of my source base, in the final book manuscript I wrote:

Like non-Indigenous veterans' memoirs, the Indigenous testimonies [oral histories] paint a picture of many Australians behaving atrociously in Vung Tau, including excessive drinking, fighting with other servicemen, Americans or

²⁷ Marie Battiste, "Research Ethics for Protecting Indigenous Knowledge and Heritage: Institutional and Researcher Responsibilities," in *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies*, ed. Norman K. Denzin, Yvonna S. Lincoln, and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (Los Angeles, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 503.

²⁸ Kwaymullina, "Research, Ethics and Indigenous Peoples," 440-41.

locals, sexual relations and the spread of venereal disease. Service records are filled with reports of men going absent without leave (AWOL), and several include descriptions of misconduct charges such as staying out past curfew, threatening superior officers, losing their identity cards, or even in one instance creating ‘a disturbance at the GRAND HOTEL, causing damage to two glass windows and a shaving stand.’²⁹

Interestingly, the principal scholarly texts about Australian service in Vietnam completely avoid discussion of Australians’ misbehavior in Vung Tau (although such behavior does receive minor attention in popular histories and even historical fiction).³⁰ There is ample evidence in government records and reports about high rates of venereal disease, reflecting the hypersexual activity in Vung Tau.³¹ University of New South Wales geography PhD student Campbell McKay is currently conducting research that has already uncovered online forums and Pinterest pages where veterans share photos and tales recalling sexual encounters in Vung Tau. The “insiders,” therefore, are sharing stories among themselves, yet they are quarantining much of that material beyond the reach of historians (even if doing so in semipublic forums). The implication seems to be that both the documentary record and social media postings are far richer than oral histories. This is what we might refer to as the underbelly of reticence (and, to an extent, of ethnographic refusal): it limits oral historians’ ability to expose themes and events of significance because doing so may damage the reputation of the interview participants. This of

²⁹ Riseman and Trembath, *Defending Country*, 76.

³⁰ Peter Edwards, *Australia and the Vietnam War* (Sydney, NSW: NewSouth Publishing, 2014); John Murphy, *Harvest of Fear: A History of Australia's Vietnam War* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1993). For popular history, see Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War* (Pymble, NSW: HarperCollins, 2007), 278-88; Mark Dapin, *The Nashos' War: Australian National Servicemen and Vietnam* (Melbourne, VIC: Viking, 2014), 199-205. Dapin's historical novel *R and R* is specifically about Australians in Vung Tau: *R and R* (Scoresby, VIC: Penguin Books Australia, 2015).

³¹ See Brendan O'Keefe, *Medicine at War: Medical Aspects of Australia's Involvement in Southeast Asia 1950-1972* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1994).

course does not undermine the legitimacy or even importance of using oral histories as sources, but rather emphasizes the importance of using multiple informants and diverse types of sources, and being open in the final text about informants' reticence and even the possibilities of what information they are not discussing.

The reader's criticism about my "coy" reference to Vung Tau also led me to reflect on other controversial topics, beyond the subject of Vung Tau, where Aboriginal interviewees' silence left a dearth of information. The main one was the question of atrocities or massacres of Vietnamese civilians, which none of the participants discussed. This may have been because they were not involved in any, and there is evidence that Americans were more prone than Australians to such offences as the infamous My Lai massacre, which have become popularized in imaginings of the Vietnam War.³² If interviewees did participate in activity that we might classify as war crimes or massacres, it is not surprising that they would be hesitant to discuss them—particularly because university ethics approval obliges the interviewer to report criminal activity. There is also the fact that veterans were reticent to discuss most traumatic, combat-related incidents. Interviewee Geoff Shaw stated it succinctly to interviewer Allison Cadzow: "In the back of my mind I can still recall what happened, exactly what happened, you know, it's something I'm trying to get away from. I don't like to tell you, Allison, the itty gritty side of war—the lighter side, yeah, I can tell you a lot of the funny side of war."³³

Another possibility is that, as Ben Morris's research has uncovered, many veterans have reconstructed their own memories to rationalize controversial wartime incidents. Morris's

³² Historians have written about how popular representations and memories of the US in Vietnam have clouded perceptions of Australia's war. See, for example, Jeffrey Grey, "In Every War but One? Myth, History and Vietnam," in *Zombie Myths of Australian Military History*, ed. Craig Stockings (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2010), 190-212; Jeffrey Grey and Jeff Doyle, *Vietnam: War, Myth and Memory: Comparative Perspectives on Australia's War in Vietnam* (Sydney, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1992); *Vietnam Days: Australia and the Impact of Vietnam*, ed. Peter Pierce, Jeff Doyle and Jeffrey Grey (Ringwood, VIC: Penguin, 1991).

³³ Geoff Shaw, interviewed by Allison Cadzow, Alice Springs, September 17, 2015, available from *Our Mob Served*, <http://ourmobobserved.anu.edu.au/yarn-ups/yarn-participants/geoff-shaw>.

research compares differing oral memories and written testimonies about a particular incident involving the death of plantation workers, which led to public debates about whether or not it constituted a war crime. Morris, a veteran who was involved in the incident he studies, focuses his research on questions about the accuracy of memory versus the correctness of the written record in relation to alleged perpetrators of wartime atrocities. A corollary argument Morris poses, which is more pertinent to this project, is that often only interviewers with insider knowledge can elicit information from veterans, because insiders can ask about specific incidents that an outsider would be unaware ever happened. Moreover, it is that interviewer's insider status that can often overcome veterans' reticence to discuss particular contentious subjects.³⁴ In Morris's case, he knew the details of the incident intimately and could ask the narrators about it. In my project, as an outsider, I do not even know if the narrators were ever involved in potential war crimes or other controversial incidents, so I did not have any cues to ask about specific incidents. This again reveals the underbelly of reticence, and it demonstrates that an interview participant's reticence is just as likely, or indeed possibly more likely, to "thin data" than a researcher's ethnographic refusal. It also reinforces the importance of historians presenting wider contexts and being honest in their writing about the possibilities of material outside the bounds of the interview.

Consequences of Writing about Problematic Life Experiences

Although I did not have any evidence to discuss atrocities, I have written about other problematic topics, even if not in detail. One such theme is PTSD, which almost all of the Vietnam veterans I interviewed suffered from. Most talked about alcoholism, family breakdowns, and sometimes fits

³⁴ Ben Morris, "The Diggers' Wish: Set the Record Straight," *Oral History Association of Australia Journal*, no. 36 (2014): 72-85, and "Remembering Vietnam: Official History, Soldier's Memories and the Participant Interviewer" (master's thesis, University of Wollongong, 2015).

of rage.³⁵ One Aboriginal interviewee—Dave Cook—also described assaulting people, including his wife. I mentioned family violence in a scholarly open-access article I wrote about Dave Cook, but I did not raise the subject in an op-ed published in Melbourne’s daily newspaper, the *Age*. I referenced Cook merely as an introductory figure to open a discussion about remembering the history of Indigenous service in Vietnam.³⁶ Cook’s violent past was not widely known, but anyone who searched and found the open-access article could read about his life story. One blogger did not approve of my omission of his history of violence from the short op-ed, with the entry “Let’s Hail ALL Vietnam Vets Who Beat Their Wives”:

The pastiche of inference Riseman assembles to suggest the Army was somehow to blame for Cook’s troubles can only be viewed as deeply, and perhaps intentionally, misleading. Cook was, by his own admission, a nasty piece of work, yet Sunday *Age* editors appear not to have been up for the due diligence of checking facts against comfortable and comforting preconceptions. The Professor knows what he was smoking last night but whatever they hand out at The *Age* must [be] stronger by an order of magnitude. Don’t bogart that joint, comrades. Save some for the receivers.³⁷

The author missed the point of the op-ed, which was about remembering Aboriginal service in Vietnam, but it is significant that she or he focused only on one aspect of Dave Cook’s oral

³⁵ On the physical and mental health problems facing Australian Vietnam veterans, see F. B. Smith, “Agent Orange: The Australian Aftermath,” in *Medicine at War: Medical Aspects of Australia’s Involvement in Southeast Asian Conflicts 1950-1972* (St. Leonards, NSW: Allen and Unwin in association with the Australian War Memorial, 1994), 281-363; Commonwealth Department of Veterans’ Affairs, “Morbidity of Vietnam Veterans: A Study of the Health of Australia’s Vietnam Veteran Community,” (Canberra, ACT: Commonwealth Department of Veterans’ Affairs, 1998).

³⁶ Noah Riseman, “The Stolen Veteran: Institutionalisation, Military Service, and the Stolen Generations,” *Aboriginal History* 35 (2011): 57-77. Noah Riseman, “War Does Not Discriminate, Nor Should We,” *Age* (August 18, 2013): 15, also available online from <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/war-does-not-discriminate-nor-should-we-20130817-2s3rl.html>. See also Riseman, *In Defence of Country: Life Stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Servicemen and Women* (Acton, ACT: ANU Press, 2016), 35-56.

³⁷ “Let’s Hail ALL Vietnam Vets Who Beat Their Wives,” *Bunyipitude*, August 18, 2013, available online from <http://bunyipitude.blogspot.com.au/2013/08/what-about-hailing-all-viet-vets-who.html>, accessed July 8, 2016.

history testimony to label him as a wife-beater. It is an example of an interview participant being defamed as a consequence of a scholarly publication in which I presented problematic parts of his past.

While I was perturbed, this case did not shake my confidence that I had reasonably published Dave Cook's troubled, and at times violent, past in an open-access scholarly article. Firstly, the blogger clearly had misconstrued the facts, and I am still confident that the scholarly article had done justice to the wider context of Dave Cook's life story. More importantly, Dave Cook's past example of family violence and assault formed a central part of his life narrative and my analysis. The scholarly article argued that Cook's life story aligned with the findings of both the *Bringing Them Home* inquiry into Aboriginal child removal (1997) and the *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991), underpinning my argument that the military was not necessarily a savior for Stolen Generations survivors.³⁸ I therefore did not question my decision to include problematic periods of Cook's life in the scholarly article—which had Cook's support—because the purpose *was* to contextualize those problematic times within the military-Stolen Generations relationship. I never was an apologist for Dave Cook's (or anyone else's) perpetration of family violence; rather, I was explaining some of the factors that led to such behavior. Nor did I question my decision to neglect the family violence in my op-ed, because Dave Cook was merely an introductory figure to the text, which was about remembering the contributions of Aboriginal Vietnam veterans.

³⁸ Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Australia, National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families, *Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families* (Sydney, NSW: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Australia, *Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody*, vol. 2 (1991), available online from <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/IndigLRes/rciadic/national/vol2/>, accessed December 20, 2016.

This entire experience engendered an important exercise in self-reflexivity; I questioned whether it would have been more appropriate to “protect” Dave Cook by ethnographically refusing to write about the troubled aspects of his life. I determined that I had adequately contextualized and respected Dave Cook’s voice and story and therefore publishing it was appropriate. Yet the blogger response made me consider the unintended consequences of a publication and why ethnographic refusal may be a reasonable approach in other contexts. For instance, when considering whether or not to write about problematic aspects of an interview participant’s life, I always consider these questions: Why do I want to include this aspect of their life? What will this information add to the analysis and understanding of this person’s life story, actions, motivations, and relationships? Who is the primary audience, and who else may have access to this written work? Could this publication potentially harm the interview participant’s familial relationships or employment? Might the interview participant regret this material being in the public domain, even if they were comfortable enough to consent at the time of interview? Such questions do not always have clear-cut answers, and that is where we historians need to make judgment calls, weighing up the potential effects of our work on the very people we discuss. This is where ethnographic refusal may, as outlined below, be seen as a positive tool of self-reflexivity.

Ethnographic Refusal: Protecting Interviewees?

My final example, and where ethnographic refusal may be an especially appropriate practice, is a challenge I am confronting with my current research into LGBTI military service: ex-service people as survivors of physical and sexual abuse. A few of my interviews with LGBTI ex-service personnel have described physical, verbal, and sexual abuse they experienced within the Australian Defence Force (ADF). This is a germane topic, given sex abuse scandals that have

recently tarnished the ADF's reputation. Most of the government inquiries have focused primarily (although not exclusively) on women or minors who suffered abuse; the abuse of LGBTI service members has received less attention, which my research project aims to address.³⁹ My collaborators and I will need to be sensitive to how we incorporate this information, but we are not questioning whether or not to include ADF abuse. Indeed, interview participants have spoken about abuse in the ADF because they explicitly *want* their stories to be shared—a common feature of this age of testimony.⁴⁰

What is more complicated is the question of physical and sexual abuse outside the ADF. In March 2016, I conducted four life interviews over a five-day period. Three of those four gay interviewees told stories of physical and/or sexual abuse during their childhoods, being cautious never to name the perpetrators. Some of these stories were quite distressing; during the interviews I was sensitive in the questioning, assuring the participants that they did not need to discuss the topic if they were uncomfortable. All three of them said they wanted to talk about it because they found it therapeutic and part of their ongoing healing processes. A few other gay, lesbian, and transgender service personnel whom I previously or subsequently interviewed also alluded to abuse (although not so explicitly), and two further gay and one intersex interview participant indicated that they, too, were sexually abused as children. Thus, I see a pattern emerging and am curious to investigate possible links between childhood sex abuse, sexuality or

³⁹ See Australian Human Rights Commission, "Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force: Phase 2 Report," (Canberra 2012); "Report on the Review into the Treatment of Women at the Australian Defence Force Academy: Phase 1 of the Review into the Treatment of Women in the Australian Defence Force," (Canberra 2011); Gary Rumble, Melanie McKean, and Dennis Pearce, "Report of the Review of Allegations of Sexual and Other Abuse in Defence: Facing the Problems of the Past," (Canberra 2011); "Case Study 40, June 2016, Sydney," *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse*, available online from <http://www.childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au/case-study/bfb3bfe0-8b4b-4cc8-923b-00ffff789ff5/case-study-40.-june-2016.-sydney>, accessed July 26, 2016.

⁴⁰ See Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey, "Testimonial Cultures: An Introduction," *Cultural Values* 5, no. 1 (2001): 1-6; Bain Attwood, "In the Age of Testimony: The Stolen Generations Narrative, 'Distance,' and Public History," *Public Culture* 20, no. 1 (2008): 75-95.

gender identity, and *some* LGBTI people's motivations to join the ADF. I have recently read some psychology literature that suggests that survivors of abuse are disproportionately over-represented in the US military, suggesting that many have used the armed forces to escape from their troubled childhoods.⁴¹

In spite of this research interest, I remain cautious about both *if* and *how* to use these stories, which returns me to ethnographic refusal. Although Ortner introduced the concept to criticize it, other scholars have turned ethnographic refusal into a positive methodological approach, precisely *because* the very boundaries researchers may self-impose can open up methodological or contextual insights. Social worker Alexandra Crampton acknowledged that ethnographic refusal may lead to the thinning of data, but she also argued that ethnographic refusal “provides a means to refine one’s ethnographic stance. This can also lead to analytic insight to thicken understanding of the larger social and cultural contexts.”⁴² Native American scholar Audra Simpson discussed her own experience interviewing other Iroquois people about their Native identity and questions about membership of particular bands. Their hesitancy to respond to particular questions about Status Indians under Canadian law prompted her to limit her line of questioning. Simpson wrote: “Rather than stops, or impediments to knowing, those limits may be expansive in what they do not tell us. I reached my own limit when the data would not contribute to our sovereignty or complicate the deeply simplified, atrophied representations of Iroquois and other Indigenous peoples that they have been mired within anthropologically.” Simpson also explained her own thought process when determining what was “enough”: “What

⁴¹ John R. Blosnich, Melissa E. Dichter, Catherine Cerulli, Sonja V. Batten, and Robert M. Bossarte, “Disparities in Adverse Childhood Experiences among Individuals with a History of Military Service,” 71, no. 9 (2014): 1041-1048.

⁴² Crampton, “Ethnographic Refusal as Research Method,” 468.

am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?”⁴³

Essentially, ethnographic refusal was a self-reflexive methodology for Crampton and Simpson, one that allowed them to consider the wider implications of their research and its benefits. By engaging in ethnographic refusal, they were able to think more about the wider social, cultural, and political contexts of their research and saw ethnographic refusal as a way to ensure that they were not disempowering and disadvantaging the struggles of the communities they were researching.

I am grappling with similar questions to determine whether and how to include childhood sexual traumas in any forthcoming publications about LGBTI military service. In my earlier research, one Aboriginal veteran testified to being raped as a teenager at boarding school. I never included this in any write-ups because, as a solitary example, it did not contribute substantively to broader historical narratives of Indigenous military service.⁴⁴ But in this project on LGBTI military service, it is quite possible that childhood sexual assault is an important point to include because it lies at the very heart of several people’s identity constructions. In this regard, Katherine Borland reflected: “The performance of a personal narrative is a fundamental means by which people comprehend their own lives and present a ‘self’ to their audience. Our scholarly representations of those performances, if not sensitively presented, may constitute an attack on our collaborators’ carefully constructed sense of self.”⁴⁵ If we ethnographically refuse to include interviewees’ voices because we think something they said is too disturbing, we are denying those aspects of their sense of self.

⁴³ Audra Simpson, “On Ethnographic Refusal: Indigeneity, ‘Voice’ and Colonial Citizenship,” *Junctures: The Journal for Thematic Dialogue*, no. 9 (2007): 78.

⁴⁴ On the challenges of writing community histories from oral testimonies, see Linda Shopes, “Oral History and the Study of Communities: Problems, Paradoxes, and Possibilities,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 261-70.

⁴⁵ Katherine Borland, “‘That’s Not What I Said’: Interpretative Conflict in Oral Narrative Research,” 317.

A simple solution would be to ask interviewees whether and—perhaps most critically—how they want their abuse interpreted, and to let their answers guide whether or not to ethnographically refuse. Yet even this approach is problematic because of the ways many abuse survivors compose their own life narratives. As child welfare historian Shurlee Swain argued, since the 1980s abuse survivors have deployed a discursive construction of childhood “innocence” shattered by abuse, which has (re)shaped public discourse, histories, and the complex dynamics and effects of childhood abuse.⁴⁶ Rather than simply deferring to informants’ interpretations, Borland and other oral historians, such as Joanna Bornat and Alicia Rouverol, advocate for the extension of sharing authority to the interpretive phase as the best strategy for oral historians to grapple with sensitive interview contents.⁴⁷ Such a strategy is one possible approach to determine whether or not it is appropriate to deploy ethnographic refusal when writing about sensitive subject matters.

Yet the examples of shared interpretation that Borland and Rouverol discussed were feasible because theirs were projects with one narrator. Indeed, I did engage in collaborative interpretation (or, as Rouverol called it, “reciprocal ethnography”) when writing my article about Dave Cook.⁴⁸ Bornat acknowledged that reciprocal ethnography is not as plausible in larger projects based on numerous interviews because of the scope of working with so many narrators concurrently. Of my three research projects, *Defending Country* was based on over thirty-five interviews, the ongoing *Serving Our Country* Indigenous military service project has conducted over 200 interviews, and the LGBTI project already has over 115 interviews completed and still

⁴⁶ See Shurlee Swain, “Narratives of Innocence and Seduction: Historical Understandings of Child Sexual Abuse in Australia,” in *The Sexual Abuse of Children: Recognition and Redress*, ed. Yorick Smaal, Andy Kaladelfos, and Mark Finnane (Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing, 2016), 35-44.

⁴⁷ Joanna Bornat, “Reminiscence and Oral History: Parallel Universes or Shared Endeavour?,” in *The Oral History Reader*, ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2006), 465-66; Alicia Rouverol, “‘I Was Content and Not Content’: Oral History and the Collaborative Process,” *Oral History* 28, no. 2 (2000): 72-77.

⁴⁸ See Rouverol, “‘I Was Content and Not Content,’” 72.

more interested participants. I would go further than Bornat and argue that trying to share interpretive authority amongst multiple narrators concurrently can be problematic. Each narrator's tale is open to others' potential critiques before the narrators themselves have approved the content and analysis—the very dilemma that shared authority is meant to resolve. I confronted this challenge when drafting a recent article about transgender military service.⁴⁹ Two of the informants insisted on reviewing any work before it was published, and this proved challenging when each informant was questioning the veracity of the other's account (and thereby authority).

Given these points, depending on how future interviews play out, I am likely to take one of the following approaches:

1. Mentioning childhood sexual assault generally without quoting or naming any of the specific survivors
2. Including some excerpts if they contribute to a historical narrative about the background or motivations of LGBTI people to join the ADF
3. Specifically returning to the interviewees to explain why I want to include those parts of those testimonies in the final document(s), and to ensure that they are explicitly okay with this (The interviewees never identified the names of their assailants, but even with this option I still worry that in future there may be unanticipated consequences for the interview participants.)

All of these options—like the challenges of reticence and ethnographic refusal—require the historian who works with living subjects to consider the consequences of her or his work on the lives of the participants. As Lynn Abrams noted, even using testimony anonymously does not

⁴⁹ Noah Riseman, "Transgender Policy in the Australian Defence Force: Medicalization and Its Discontents," *International Journal of Transgenderism* 17, no. 3-4 (2016): 141-154.

necessarily protect interview participants, if they or someone they know recognize their testimonies.⁵⁰ Tracy K'Meyer and A. Glenn Crothers emphasized that “ethics demand insuring that interviewees understand why we ask certain questions, and being honest about the purpose. But ethics do not require abdicating the professional responsibility to use our training to produce the most complete and historically significant document possible.”⁵¹ Essentially, it seems that the best way to share authority with interviewees is to exercise ethnographic refusal when it is driven by the interview participants’ reticence rather than by the interviewer’s own perception that something might be awkward or better left out.

Regardless of what problematic life experiences we include, one other matter lingers in these and many other research projects: the interviews are being archived. As Linda Shopes explained, archiving preserves the interview but concurrently transforms it into another historical document for future researchers to integrate with other records to produce historical accounts.⁵² We oral historians may see ourselves as ethically bound to share authority with our interview participants instead of simply engaging in forms of ethnographic refusal that we alone choose or determine. But how do we ensure that ethical responsibility extends to future researchers? Ambelin Kwaymullina called this second layer of research, where the researchers are not actively engaged with the participants, *desktop research*.⁵³ That is an equally important layer—and a discussion for another article.

⁵⁰ Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (London: Routledge, 2010), 166.

⁵¹ K'Meyer and Crothers, “If I See Some of This in Writing, I’m Going to Shoot You,” 91.

⁵² Linda Shopes, “‘Insights and Oversights’: Reflections on the Documentary Tradition and the Theoretical Turn in Oral History,” *Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 260-62.

⁵³ Kwaymullina, “Research, Ethics and Indigenous Peoples,” 446. John Neuenschwander provided some options, albeit through a legal framework, in John A. Neuenschwander, “The Legal Ramifications of Oral History,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Oral History*, ed. Donald A. Ritchie (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 351-71.

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