

The Big 5-0: The Narrative of Narratives

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As I hit “publish” on our fiftieth narrative, written by the brilliant Michelle La Flamme, and as the year turns around, I’d like to offer my reflections on working on the TRaCE project. I am the qualitative editor, working on telling the stories of the many amazing people that we’ve interviewed over the course of the project. I’ll be reflecting on the process below, and I also encourage you to read the review of our quantitative methods: both of these threads, story-telling and analyzing through words and numbers, are critical to the project, and run side-by-side in all the work that TRaCE is trying to do.

My own narrative with the TRaCE project involves a deep desire to help other grad students and a frustration with a system that often tries to keep us on one path. Like others at TRaCE, I see the humanities PhD as a route to many careers, all with different benefits to the individual, the institution, and society—but none of them worth less than the others (or, especially, less than a tenure-track job).

As the qualitative editor, I worked on creating “narratives” from the interviews gathered by TRaCE’s student research assistants. From interviews of thousands of words, I condensed the interviews into profiles, ran them by the participants, and then tried to publish them in an order that balanced representations of gender, career paths, institutions, and other factors.

This attempt at an elusive sense of balance was more successful in some ways than others. Gender parity, while difficult with our initial swath of interviews, was quickly achieved, but other equity variables continued to fluctuate. Career paths outside of academia were a particular priority, but finding these stories proved difficult at the beginning of the project. The participants willing to share their stories publicly (about 100 of our 300 interviews, of our 2700 graduates) were often those who saw themselves as successful, which often translated into getting a tenure-track job, or at least still aspiring to one. Of course, once we had a larger pool of interviews, we had an increasing diversity of narratives, though the number from any given university varied wildly, depending on the atmosphere and size of the department and the skill of the interviewer.

Now, as the end of the pilot project approaches, I am running out of these outside-the-academy stories, and I am wary of their voices being buried in the archive by the many (also wonderful) profiles of people working in academia. To that end, I’ll be featuring past alt/non-ac narratives on the blog section of the TRaCE website, but I recognize that such posts can only do so much work when a user scrolls the archives and sees page after page of professors.

Another of my priorities was featuring narratives of people of colour, people from different cultural and religious backgrounds, people with disabilities or health issues, members of the LGBTQ community, and first-generation graduate students. To find these narratives, I usually had to read the entire interview and rely on the sensitivity of the interviewer. Some—especially the students who had experienced issues of diversity themselves—were brilliant at establishing a rapport with the participants, but others did not form as strong a bond of trust, which is always difficult in a 45 minute interview.

More diversity training for our team in the future will hopefully help, and I look forward to taking advantage of such training as well. Reaching out to say “I have your life story here, in these 350 words, ready to publish?” requires its own kind of tact and sensitivity, and although I’ve brought my own experience (especially as a woman and a first-generation graduate student), I have many areas for improvement. I also feel hyperaware of asking our participants to provide free labour, hence our 350-word-ish limit and the concise, and therefore sometimes awkward, profile that I write based on their interview. Often, the participant makes clarifications or corrections, or asks for more or less detail about particular aspects of their experiences, which can be critical in today’s job market. Sometimes, a participant feels passionate enough to write their own story: this labour, time, and energy is the most invaluable, and I’m very grateful to our interviewees who took this extra step to share their voices (like [Michelle](#), [Valerie](#), [Concetta](#), [Gavin](#), [Donia](#), and [Jade](#)).

In the end, does this work, this project, feel worthwhile? I’m fascinated by our data, and I think it’s critical that individuals, departments, institutions, and governments have a comprehensive understanding of post-PhD paths. And, for the qualitative side, having faces, names, and experiences to connect with those numbers influences perspectives of the data. Sometimes, those experiences make me feel disheartened: as someone currently in a PhD program, and surrounded by all the anxieties therein, reading constantly about others’ struggles becomes too much. But, more often, I am heartened by the stories of people who keep moving forward, whether inside the academy or out, and I’m comforted by the stories of finding happiness and fulfilment, sometimes where people expected it least.

The final fears are those associated with any project, particularly pilot projects: has TRaCE made an impact, and will it get funding to make an impact in the future? Or will it become another dusty online archive buried by Google’s algorithms? I recognize that these concerns are for project organizers to worry over, but I still hope that these voices reach others—both for their own sake and for the sake of future grad students.