

# Amy Tooth Murphy, interviewed by Tracey Loughran, 12 September 2025

Amy Tooth Murphy is Senior Lecturer in Oral History at Royal Holloway, University of London. She specializes in queer and oral history and is committed to engaging with communities and the public in collaborative research as well as in the dissemination of research. She is the author of the chapter on 'Sexualities' in *A Practical Guide to Studying History* (second edition).

## Interview

Tracey Loughran (TL): *We're going to start out with the basics, so when, where and what did you study at university?*

Amy Tooth Murphy (ATM): Okay, this is a good question and one that I have told in class often. I started as a law student at the University of Glasgow in 1999, and I am not sure why, well, actually I do know why, I have some ideas. I was good at school and had good results and had good predicted results. I'm the first person in my family to go to university and my parents were very keen to support me intellectually. Going to university was never in question; it was always something I was going to do. But being people who really didn't know anything about the university system or tertiary education at all, my parents were of the mindset that law and medicine are the two things that clever people do and that give you a good job. And I am very squeamish, so that narrowed two choices to one. I was always very good with language and words, and so it seemed to make sense that I would make a good lawyer. But, as I've told lots of students, the trouble is that lots of things that we go and study at uni, you've never studied or potentially even heard of before you get there, so how on earth are you supposed to say you

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This is an edited transcript of an interview carried out on Zoom.

want to do these degrees when you haven't even tried them out? So, long story short, I applied to all the ancient universities in Scotland and took up the place offered at Glasgow. I immediately did not enjoy law and didn't like it. It was very boring. You have to study contract law, which I did not enjoy. You have to study Roman law in Scotland, which I did not enjoy. It was incredibly dry and there was not really any place for opinion, because it was just a case of learning precedent. And that just was not of any interest to me at all. And then the defining moment happened, studying criminal law, which I had been excited to study, but I was absolutely aghast at the way in which sexual violence was, to some extent, legitimized by the law in Scotland at that time. Or if not legitimized, then certainly the penalties seemed very low, and the bar for consent also seemed very low. So anyway, my partner at the time said, you don't seem to be enjoying this, I think you should change. And I did. I changed after six months to History and English at Glasgow. My dad was initially very disappointed by that. Not understanding the world of, you know, what you do with a degree, he was worried that I wouldn't get a job, but he came around to the idea and ended up being incredibly proud of what I was doing. So I did joint honours in History and English at Glasgow. It became quite obvious to me that I wanted to stay in academia, and I went on to an MLitt at Glasgow, in the English department, in 'Modernities and Post-Modernities', which was a relatively new flagship programme at Glasgow at the time. It was really tough. I immediately felt like the hurdle had suddenly got a lot higher. You had to really work to get your contribution in, in a seminar. It's a very rigorous environment. And, you know, it's quite, quite destabilizing in a way. I was like, wow, okay, this is quite difficult. I knew I wanted to do something in gender and sexuality. That had been the case the whole way along and I felt I was able to do that through that Masters. And then I knew I wanted to do a PhD. My PhD is actually in English, also at Glasgow. It was on lesbian literature and lesbian identity formation in postwar Britain. So actually, I feel often that I'm masquerading as a historian because I've only got a history degree at undergraduate level and then it's only fifty per cent of one. But I have worked in English departments as well, so I've been very happy to continue to have a foot in both camps. And I like that.

TL: *One of the things that's come out of some of the interviews so far is the extent to which historians seem, often, to have ended up starting with a joint degree or a different subject. And they really see that range of interests as integral to what they're doing as a historian.*

ATM: Yeah, I can totally see that, actually. I think, on the one hand, because I'd spent an undergraduate degree with that foot in both camps, I probably didn't have the range and breadth of knowledge

that somebody with a single honours degree would have, right? And I mean, I still feel imposter syndrome to this day. I'm hopeless at dates, just hopeless. I don't know when anybody was on any kind of throne, and to a certain extent, I don't care. Because it's not what my work is about. But what it does do, and what I would say to students now, and what I do say to students now, is that when you have someone who just has, for example, a literary background, they don't understand the historical context in which any of these cultural productions were being made. You know, what is the historical context in which a novel is written? That seems important, but they often don't know that. Conversely, when you are a historian, who then wants to do cultural history, you lack that confidence in textual analysis, which I think an English degree gives you. So, for me, my interest in narrative has been the thing that's brought those two things together. So, my PhD was going to have an oral history component, but I thought it was a way to get to literature. Actually, that then flipped around, and I became fascinated with oral history, and I realized that my English Lit training was great for being an oral historian, because I can bring that textual analysis to people's stories, which seems much more applied. I'm interested in applied things, like I'm a theory head, but where it's applied, right? So that's why I like oral history, because there's theory, and then you see it happening, and you do it. And in the same way, some of my frustrations with English Lit were, 'This is too abstract. What does it really mean? What's the answer to the "so what" question here?' It feels kind of unmoored. Whereas if I can take my literary analysis techniques and apply it to someone's story, I can very clearly see the purpose of that exercise. So that's for me where the two things come together. In my department, there's various people who didn't start off in history. I'm not sure if they have the same imposter syndrome as me. But I think it's good to be able to bring two things together, it has been for me anyway very useful. And I do a lot of work now, in my history classes, on things like literature, film, things that we might consider non-traditional primary sources, which are to some extent about narrative, and I work with students on those. But I do find often students are quite frightened of close textual analysis if they don't have some kind of literary or other background that's given them those skills, which we need to analyse primary sources, right? So maybe in history, we need to think a bit more about how we teach those textual analysis skills.

TL: *That's really interesting. I've noticed the same thing with students not feeling confident with close textual analysis, whereas it always seemed to me the bedrock of what you do as a historian. I wondered, could you say a bit more about how you got into doing oral history?*

ATM: Yeah ... there's moments in your life that just put you on a path, and you don't know where those moments are going to come. And this for me was just, I don't know, luck or being in the right place at the right time. I don't know. So when I was doing my MLitt at Glasgow, I took a class on contemporary Irish literature, and it was with an academic called Paddy Lyons. He was old school in some ways. He was an Irish guy, he was hilarious, and he was notorious in lectures for, if you came in late, he would just make a mockery of you in front of everybody. But if you were on the right side of him, it was great. To give you a sense of this guy, he saw things in people, right? So, he didn't like time-wasters, but if you were interested, he was interested. And we had read a short story one day for class, and he gave us an exercise to write a few words about the story as we remembered it in five minutes or something, and then read out what we'd done. There was something that happened in the story about someone getting their finger trapped in a gate or something, and I wrote about that. And he seemed struck by this, that I had zoned in on this one thing, this vignette or whatever that had happened. I noted that he remarked on it. Then a bit later on in that class, I went to see him and said, 'I want to do a PhD, but I don't know what I want it to be about, something to do with lesbians, but I don't know any more than that.' And he said, 'Do you know much about oral history?' And I said, 'No, I don't know anything about it at all.' And he said, 'I think you would be good at it because you see detail that not everybody sees. You have an eye for things, you have an eye for nuance and those kind of subtleties that not everybody has.' He said, 'You know, big picture wise, you've got some work to do', which remains true. 'You know, you really need to think about panning back sometimes and figuring that out. But in terms of that fine detail, I think you've just got a knack. And we happen to have somebody here, Lynn Abrams, who teaches oral history. Maybe go to have a chat with her.' And I thought, 'OK.' I mean, that's literally how it happened. I went to go and see Lynn Abrams, and at the end of our meeting, I asked if she would consider supervising my PhD. That seemed to come as a complete surprise to her, but she said yes. And I had another supervisor, David Shuttleton, in English. And it just happened from there. So, I mean, it really was somebody seeing something in me and remarking on it. I knew nothing about oral history at all, and it turned out I loved it. So Paddy was right. I owe him an awful lot, and now I try to do that with students, right? If I see that they are good at something, I tell them. Because I didn't realize that that was anything particularly special or useful.

TL: *I was thinking about similar things that happened in my own undergraduate career, where explicit encouragement from a tutor led me to go and do certain things, and I was wondering how much*

*that's a universal teaching experience and how much it is particularly something that can be useful to first-generation students – feeling like you're negotiating a space, at university, that you're not completely sure about, maybe you don't know how to assess your talents either.*

AMT: That's actually a really good, I hadn't thought of it that way, but that's a really good point. Because the first thing that comes to mind when you say that is the very opposite experience I had in my first week in the Law Department at Glasgow, which is when, in one of my seminars, we had to go around the room and say why we decided to take law. I was the only person in that room whose answer didn't start with my dad is a barrister, solicitor, you know, Justice of the Peace, whatever, like my mum did this, my dad did that, my uncle did that, my grandfather is such a bloody important person. And I was like, oh shit, like, I had thought about class, but I had not thought of myself as someone who fell quite far down the pecking order in class. My parents had, economically, become middle-class through their lifetime. And, the work of my grandparents on my mum's side, my granddad in particular, was responsible for a lot of where my family has ended up. Culturally, we're doing that kind of working-class attainment thing. But at university I did not have the cultural capital that I now have by a long, long, long way. So yeah, I think there's something really interesting in that. The experience in the law seminar was so alienating. I was like, 'Oh my god, what am I doing here?' Versus Paddy then saying, 'Well, actually, you're pretty good at this, and I think you should probably do more of it.' I suppose it does go back to, how do you know you're good at something you've never done? I'd never even heard of oral history before. And then somebody said, 'I think you'd be good at that.' The reasons that people said, 'I think you should do law', were, I think, less to do with that I'd be any good at it and more because it was the subject you should do. Hmm. So mixed, you know, social expectation.

TL: *I suppose you would have started university around the time that fees were first introduced as well, wouldn't you?*

ATM: Yeah, I was quite lucky in that fees were very low, and Scotland is a different case, obviously, still today, you know, Scottish education is much more affordable than English education for Scottish people or people who have resided in Scotland. But that also meant that you could take a risk. Nowadays, we have open days and students and parents come along, and there's so much pressure on what is going to come out of this degree, you can't just speculatively take a degree because you'll enjoy it and then see where it takes you, or at least people think they can't. Whereas I'm very quick to say to parents who are concerned about that, that having a good degree is important, not necessarily what it's in, because we know that employers value that good degree. And they do value all those critical

skills that you get from a humanities degree, so I would strongly encourage that your son or daughter take a degree that they enjoy, because if they enjoy it, they're more likely to do well in it, therefore, they're more likely to have a good degree, therefore, they're more likely to impress employers with that degree. Taking a degree because you think it's something that employers will like is not, in my opinion, a good strategy. Because if you don't like it, as was my case with law, if I'd have stuck in law, I don't know what kind of result I would have got, it wouldn't have been a good one, because I just wasn't even going [to classes] and when I was there, I wasn't paying attention. I was a terrible student. Imagine trying to learn precedent, even when you were trying to pay attention, it probably wasn't going in. So it's good to realize what you're good at, good to realize what you're not so good at. And sometimes so you can improve, but sometimes you realize it's just not a door you want to start walking through. My brain does not take in that kind of information.

So of course, I'd have been a terrible lawyer. You know, my comprehension is very good, but not for that type of writing.

TL: *Which I think is actually probably really encouraging for people who are going to be reading this resource, because they will encounter things in the course of their degree that they're not as good at, and other things that they really love. And it's nice to get that sense of balance and to hear people saying it.*

ATM: Yes, I think that's true. And that's not to say that I haven't struggled with things and then overcome that, you know, it's about realizing, okay, I do need to actually work at this. The first time I ever read Judith Butler, I can remember, it's a very embodied experience of being in the library. It was assigned for my Masters, we had to read a small excerpt from *Gender Trouble*. I was in that library for hours, I could not make head nor tail of this, I just had never read anything that was written in that way. It was, of course, relying on the understanding of a lot of concepts, in order to even understand the text. So there's that. But even the way in which it was written, that kind of theoretical writing, I just had not come across before. And I was like, 'Oh my god, what am I going to do? I can't understand this at all.' And I was taking ages, I'm still a slow reader, but this was taking hours, I think it was about forty pages long. Oh my god, it took forever. And I still, I'm gonna be honest with you, I still don't understand a lot of that. I still, I just don't. But I love theory, like I said, I'm a theory head. However, I do want it to be applicable. And I also want people to understand it, because at the heart of that text and other texts like it, at the heart of what they're saying is something really important. But also, something that really is more straightforward than you would think, when you first encounter those texts. And I'm not singling out Butler here.

I'm just not into work that is needlessly obtuse or opaque. For me, the hardest thing to do, and an accomplishment that I'm proud of, is when I've managed to say a complex idea in a way that people can understand. That, to me, is a worthwhile aspiration. To say something straightforward in a convoluted way is the opposite of that. And yet, I do feel like some academic content is like that. We don't need to dress things up. As a student, I've been through that myself, where you feel like you have to write in a certain register, in order for it to be scholarly. And students are often figuring out, what does it mean to write in a scholarly way? What is academic writing? And often, in those early stages, it's just throwing in extraneous content, trying to make things sound flowery when they don't need to be. I do work with students on that, saying, you know, we don't need to dress up good ideas. We need to be eloquent. I'm a big believer in eloquent and elegant academic writing, I think that's something the humanities is really good at, that you don't necessarily see in other fields. That's something that we do well, telling a good story in an eloquent, elegant way. I'm really into style, and I love helping students to find their voice, and sometimes that's about undoing what we think academic writing should be, which is just confusing and obtuse.

TL: *Yeah, and it's always a bit of a problem when we're trying to get students to write well, but so many texts that we set, because they're canonical, are not necessarily written in the way we want students to write.*

ATM: Yeah, yeah. And of course, you have to write to a certain register, we can't have colloquial or informal writing. As with a lot of things, you learn the rules so that one day, maybe you can start to bend them or even break them. As an oral historian, and as somebody who's coming from a feminist school of academic work, the 'I' voice is in all my writing. And, you know, even when I work with Masters students who've had years of university education, they often come with this concept that you can't put 'I' in your writing, I've been told I can't do that. Often people are told they can't do that. That leads to an interesting question about what are we saying when you say you can't put 'I' in your writing. As an oral historian, it's ludicrous, because the text wouldn't even exist if it wasn't for me, I've created the interview by organizing it and asking questions, so if I remove myself, that's really weird. That's the obvious example, but if you extend that, there is no text without the historian who brought it all together. So to deny that 'I' and be this omniscient thing, it's just weird. And sometimes when you explain it to students, starting from the perspective of oral history, and then saying, but actually, all historians are like that, they all bring all their sources together, and they all make an argument, it didn't just drop out the sky, and as yet,

it's not been written by AI, so it doesn't make any sense to take the 'I' out.

TL: *I was so fortunate in my own first term at university, the first module I did was with a fantastic and very experienced tutor, and he just said, 'Write using I', which I think was fairly unusual advice back then. I'm not sure how many other people told me to do it. But it stayed with me that a tutor I really respected had said that, and legitimated it from the outset.*

ATM: That same thing we were talking about, right? You come across these people who, they probably don't even remember saying it, but it's stuck with you. Those moments are really cool.

TL: *I also wanted to talk about theory. Often history students in particular really don't like the idea of doing theory; they think 'but I came to university to learn what happened'. So, as a theory head, how do you try to convey that enthusiasm and make it a bit more digestible for them as well, so they can understand what's good about it?*

ATM: Yeah, I think that's really a good question. And again, it comes from my dual disciplinary background. So my PhD, as I say, is in English, that's the degree that was conferred. But I was starting to get a bit irritated with English, and I felt it was too abstract. And to be fair, at Glasgow, it was a very theoretical department. There was lots of Freud, there was lots of Foucault, and there was lots of Lacan flying around.

I was starting to get a bit like, 'I'm kind of not sure where we're going with this, right?' I always thought of myself in the English department as kind of theory-lite, like a bit sort of diet theory, because I just wasn't doing it as much as everybody else was, or I didn't get it as much as everybody else did. And then a really funny thing happened. I got a desk space in a shared office, and so I started hanging around in the History Department, which was three doors down, more, and speaking more with historians. And some people started asking me questions about theory, my opinion, my advice, you know, as some kind of person who knew what they're talking about. Nothing about me had changed, but the disciplinary expectation around me had totally shifted. So, all of a sudden, I'm somebody who does theory, which was really revealing to me, actually. And it was my first indication that historians didn't like theory, or didn't know what to do with it, or didn't see themselves in that way. And I've remembered that. And I think it all comes back to application, because, in history, conceptual thinking is really important, but it's a means to an end. We're not about abstraction, I don't think, most of the time in history. So, I for me, it's about showing students, okay, so we need to bring the theory to our practice, how can we do those two things together? And that's where oral history, again, is fantastic.

And also queer history, I think, is fantastic for that, too, because we have a concept, like in the piece that I've written for *A Practical Guide*, we've got the concept of Rubin's charmed circle. And then we think about some historical examples of that. And then we're like, oh, well, I totally see that now. Then I would say to students, well, we see it in the example. So that lets us see that the theory kind of works. But now we need to think beyond the example. Now we need to extrapolate out from that example, because okay, Gayle Rubin's theory can be seen in this example, fine, again, so what? Ah, now that tells us something about the fact that this is replicable elsewhere, we see this same thing happening somewhere else, somewhere else, somewhere else, we no longer can put these down to just isolated things that just happen to have happened, or happen to be the way that a certain number of people see a certain number of things. Actually, these are systems. And once we start to understand these wider systems, we understand history on a much wider level, we understand the things that have happened and continue to happen. We understand how historical actors have or haven't been able to do certain things, the ways in which they've been treated, the ways in which they've run up against systems, the ways in which they've made systems work for themselves. So for me, in queer history, those are lightbulb moments for students, where they start to see the impact of patriarchy, or the impact of heteronormative ideas and discourse on specific historical moments, but also on their own life. Because I'm also of the opinion that, when we're studying history, we're also studying ourselves. I know that sounds very narcissistic, but we are also trying to understand our own times through how we got here, how are things now, you know. And that's one of my favourite things about teaching, is those lightbulb moments that we can have in a class, where students will literally say, 'I have never thought about that before', and they have a bit of a moment, like, either 'I'm kind of appalled, I'm shocked, I'm happy, I'm sad, I'm whatever', but quite often, it'll be like, 'I've literally never thought about that before, but now I understand why me, as a feminine woman, feel maybe that I haven't been taken seriously in X space, or now that conversation that I had with my boyfriend, where he really didn't understand me when I said this, or was uncomfortable about that, now I understand that's not just a between-the-two-of-us thing, that's a structural thing.' And sometimes that can be quite destabilizing for students, that's not always a comfortable experience.

TL: *I love that you said that you're not good at panning out to the big picture, and then just did that brilliantly, and really articulately!*

ATM: Paddy, I obviously listened to Paddy and at least tried!

TL: *That sense of destabilization being productive, though ... my sense is that now, bearing in mind we're coming out of a period where*

*lots of students went through COVID, they've had a very disrupted time across their education and their life, that students can be a lot less comfortable in holding anxiety around a subject, in not quite knowing how it's going to work. Working out how to try to encourage a productive destabilization in this context is so difficult.*

ATM: Students that we work with today, I really feel for them in a lot of ways, because there's been such an unfortunate confluence of events that have led to the student experience being so different from what it was during our time, but even how it was in more recent times. COVID, fees, cost of living crisis, Brexit, to be quite honest, and the impact it's had on the international exchange of ideas. I think that the pressure is on students to 'get it right' and so they come in wanting to know, 'How do I get a good degree?' And they come in wanting to know, 'What is the right way of doing things?' And the humanities doesn't lend itself to what is the right answer. So students can have a lot of anxieties around, 'I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know if this is the right way to do this.' Even things around their module choices, which I find really depressing, because I think students are becoming more risk-averse. It's becoming harder to get students to take something they don't already know something about, because they're so worried about the 2:1 that comes at the end of it. Which is not great news for somebody like me, because, you know, I teach a third-year course on queer British history, but I don't teach any first- or second-year courses, though I lecture here or there on other people's classes. And what we know about our students is that they like known quantities by the time they get to third year, because that year really counts. So they tend to pick things that they've studied before, and they also tend to pick staff that they've worked with before as well, because they're risk-averse. There's also an anxiety in the classroom about students putting their hand up and saying something that they're not quite sure about yet, because there's a perception that you can't say things that are wrong without it coming back on you in some way. You can't not be very sure. And that definitely plays out in my queer history class. We'll have students who are queer themselves, we have students who are not, we have students who have had some forays of their own, they've explored a bit of queer history themselves, and there are students who genuinely have no previous knowledge at all, and it's really important for me that we create a classroom where there's no hierarchies. It's not like, 'Oh, your opinion is more valuable in here because you have this, that, or the other.' But at the same time, also, we have to acknowledge that lived experience plays a big part in why some people are in the classroom. So, that has to be acknowledged as well, but it can't be to the detriment of the classroom experience as a learning space. So, we definitely can't have these hierarchies of, 'Well,

you know, because I'm this identity, therefore I get to ... ' or 'I know about this', because we're all there learning together. I mean, I learn every single year from those classes, I learn a lot. I think creating an environment where, right from the get-go, we can say, 'I don't know, I think maybe, is it this?' or a place where you can ask questions is really important. I always start off by saying there's no stupid questions. I have a colleague who's like, well, there are some stupid questions, but in a philosophical way, I'm not sure if there really are any stupid questions. I think if you want to be really philosophical about it, any question can be made complicated. So I really try to set that atmosphere at the start, that we're all here to learn. We might not be sure when we put our hand up to say something. Questions are wonderful, because if you have a question, chances are somebody else in the class has a similar question, and you're doing everybody a favour by asking the question. I don't always know the answer, and I'll be very open with you if I don't know the answer to something, and we can try to find out together, or I'll go away and find out and come back and tell you. I'm also here on a learning journey with you, and you can challenge me too. You don't have to agree with everything I say. I'm one person. And I'm also a big fan of saying, not everybody would agree with me. I'm not like a brick wall in the classroom; I really do bring my whole self into the classroom. There's still a teaching persona that's at the front of that, but in terms of an embodied or emotive or affective experience, teaching is that for me. I have become emotional in classrooms before, students have seen me become tearful about something that's particularly moving, and that's not going to be everybody's jam, for sure. But, for the type of work that I do, I think it's important, some kind of level of vulnerability, or willingness to go there, with students in a class, I think it's really important. Because I'm also very open about the reasons that I do the work that I do, that it's because of my own identity position as well. So, again, in the work I do, it doesn't really make sense to leave yourself at the door, because it's not authentic, it's not a truthful representation of why I came to be there in the first place. The whole reason I'm there is because of my identity position. So, how can I leave that out of my teaching?

TL: *Yeah, which seems to be another example of the application of theory. Logically, I'd say you can't really be a feminist historian or a queer historian and not have something of the approach that you've spoken about to teaching.*

ATM: No, I don't think so. You know, one of the things that really troubles me is all this discussion about, oh, you know, we can't make things political, or we can't make things ideological. I'm not there standing on a soapbox when I'm teaching, but it's really problematic to me to say, oh, we can't, you know, we can't bring

ideology in here, we can't bring politics in here. What are we talking about, then? How can we do humanities without it being political or ideological in nature in some way? People talk about activism, you know, people see activism as a weird, almost bad word sometimes nowadays, and my teaching is activist in nature because it's about telling a history and learning about history that has been invisibilized and marginalized and silenced, sometimes violently so, for a very long time, and continues to be. It's about also working on history that speaks to people about their own identities, that's activist too. Making sure that people can study something that feels relevant to them, I find that to be activism. Making sure that queer people don't continue to be silenced, that's activism too. These are all activist imperatives. I'm not soapboxing, but making space for students to grapple with systems of power, systems of inequality, structural inequalities that are historic and contemporary, in the classroom, that's also activist. What I'm trying to do is give young people the critical tools to take outside the classroom. I said to my students last year, our chats in here are great, we have a great time talking about queer history, super fun, really interesting, love working with you all. If all we do is talk about it in here and then walk out the door and it flies out our head, that's fine, we've had a fun two hours, but it doesn't really do anything. When it starts to do something is when you all leave here and go about your business. Those students have now graduated, they were my third-year class last year. They've now graduated, and they're going to go on and do roles in society that I'm never going to do, local government, charity work, policy work, media work, whatever they're gonna do. They take with them the skills and the tools that we've developed in the classroom, and some of those lightbulb moments, some of that working through, sometimes really learning some stuff about themselves along the way. They take that into family discussions around the dinner table, they take that to their friendship group, they take that to their workplace, and if I don't see that as activism, I'm not really sure what it is. We've all got spheres of influence, right? We live in very contested, difficult times. I can't do anything about some of the dreadful things that are going on in the world. I can't solve the climate crisis, I'm one person. I can't stop wars, I'm one person. I think there's always that feeling of, oh, we're only one person, what can I do? My sphere of influence is with my students, and they are, in most cases, the next generation. If they can go away with the critical tools that let them get into conversations with confidence, and say things with confidence, and challenge things with confidence, then I see really that as my role. Most of my students are not going to go on to be historians, but they are going to go on to use their critical analysis skills in really important ways.

TL: *That's a really great way of thinking about teaching in general, but particularly history and the underlying criticality you get from it. And when people say, 'Don't make things ideological', it's missing the point that if one of your aims is to teach critical skills, then that's partly equipping people to argue back, to argue with you as well, if they want to.*

ATM: Right, with me! And I always invite that. If you don't agree with me, that's great, that's marvellous, in fact. The other thing I talk to students about is the moment in your education, or it could be a series of moments, but it's when you start arguing back with the material. You know, you come in as a first year, and a lot of first-year work that students produce is kind of synthesis work. They read a bunch of stuff, and then they write a report of what other people think about stuff. I always explain historiography as, you're a fly on the wall in a big banqueting hall. It's all historians round tables, they're all making a racket. You've got the feminist historians over here, you've got the intellectual historians over there, economic historians here, queer historians over there, they're all yakking at their tables. You've been a fly on the wall for all this time, and you're listening in on the conversation, thinking 'Don't like that sound. Well, that's quite interesting, what they're saying. Don't really understand it, but that's interesting.' And then at some point in your degree, you build the confidence and the tools to draw up a seat to one of those tables, or multiple tables. You can go shopping around the tables, right? And you think, oh, I like what the conversation is over on this table. And you start to draw up a seat, and then you start to speak into that conversation. That is a really important shift that happens during a student's educational journey, where you start to interject your own ideas, where the 'I' comes into the essay, right? And that comes through application, you can't just do that at the start, you've got to spend the time learning. You know, if you want to be part of any conversation, you have to know what the conversation is about. The same goes for students in history, you have to know what the historiography is before you can start to contribute your own ideas. I think then the students also get really anxious, like, what if I put this idea down, and I don't cite it, but somebody else has already said it before me, right? There's always that, but it's okay, we're going to work on the principle of good faith here, it's fine. But for me, that's really important. That's that criticality, that moment that you think, actually, I have an opinion now and it's been formed by the time I've spent studying, and now I'm ready to make my own interjection.

TL: *Going onto a fun question ... What do you most like about being a historian?*

ATM: Hmm. What I most like about being the type of historian that I am, so I guess this would not go for all historians. I love being

an oral historian because there are very few places and spaces in the world where it is entirely appropriate to ask someone who is essentially a stranger, to turn up at someone's house you've never met before, maybe had a couple of emails, and ask them really personal questions about their life. It is amazing if you are nosy about other people. Historians have to be curious. If you don't have a genuine curiosity about other people, well, you definitely can't be an oral historian. I say that to my students. We can learn to be interviewers. Some of you are going to enjoy that, some of you maybe less so. It's fine if you decide this is not for you. But the best thing you can have in your toolkit as an oral historian is a genuine curiosity about other people. But I think that goes for all historians. If you're not curious about people and what makes them tick, I'm not sure what you're doing, I'm not sure what kind of history that would be. So, presumably, we're all nosy about other people, and oral historians get to be super nosy, you get to ask people questions, and they tell you. I get to sit with people and share amazing conversations with people across the world I would never have met or known about otherwise, it's such a privilege. You know, I've been interviewing people in the States, in places I never would have gone to, and having these amazing, deep conversations. And we're not encouraged to have deep exchange with people nowadays. We're time poor, we're scrolling, we're swiping, we're doing whatever. It's all about what's your hot take on this, twenty seconds on that. Deep exchange and deep listening are getting hard to come by, I think. So when you sit with somebody in an interview, and you know that you've got hours stretching ahead of you, where you can really get into something ... and my experience is that interviewees find that to be a valuable, rewarding process, too, and often, like, 'Wow, I didn't realize we were gonna go so deep on some of these topics. I didn't know ... I didn't realize we were going to talk for so long. I didn't know I had anything to say about this.' That is a privilege, to spend deep time with someone listening. I don't know where else I'd be able to do that, really. So that's what I like about being an oral historian. What I like about being a queer historian is, like I said before, you know, I'm getting to work with students on a type of history that I was not able to study. In my undergraduate degree at Glasgow, the only thing I can remember about queer anything was in *Mrs Dalloway*, where they kiss in the rose garden. And I was desperate for ... I knew I wanted to study something to do with sexuality, and I was desperate for it. I was looking for it everywhere, and gender identity. I did a lot of work on male masculinity when I was in my undergrad, because I wanted to write about masculinity. So I did quite a lot of stuff about that, and the really important thing happened when I was volunteering in Oxfam Books, when I was a student. It's a

stone's throw from the university, and I was shelving books one day, and I saw this spine, black spine with white capital letters, *Female Masculinity*. I was like, what is this? Pulled it out; picture on the front, you know, that classic painting, total bulldagger on the front, so cool.<sup>1</sup> I was like, what is this? My mind was totally blown. I do still think Jack Halberstam needs to not write in quite such an obtuse way, but a small handful of people, you know, if you're Derrida or Foucault, you get to write in these kind of ways, and Halberstam's one of those people who get to write in that kind of way. I was just like, I've been in this university for years, but I'm discovering this in the Oxfam Bookshop around the corner. That was a real moment for me, where I was like, 'Why am I not studying this at uni?' So a lot of what I really like about being a queer historian is I get to do that stuff that I just wasn't exposed to, and insist on space for that, I suppose. And I've made community that way as well; some of my friends that I've met through work, that's a really valuable community to have that I wouldn't have otherwise, so it's also brought me peer group community.

TL: *It's really nice, actually, throughout this interview, there's been so much emphasis on the whole idea of community and working together. I think people often talk about history on a 'lone scholar' model, but it's not.*

ATM: Oh my god, yeah. That really frustrates me, actually, because nobody exists in a vacuum, right? That's one of my stock phrases. When we're talking about history, nothing exists in a vacuum. Well, we don't exist in a vacuum either. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for all the people in that wider community. Collegiality is so much a part of our work, and finding a community of people who are as geeky about something as you are is pretty great, feeling understood in a community of scholars who are into the same kind of thing as you. Some of the geeky jokes, you know, if my partner hears some of the things we talk about, she's like, that is not funny.

TL: *Yeah, I've still got a WhatsApp group with people I used to teach a historiography module with ten years ago, for particular historiography in-jokes, it's very niche.*

ATM: Yeah, see, that's the kind of thing, anybody would be like, you people are just such a bunch of losers. I'm like, I know, alright.

TL: *So, the last couple of questions. We already touched on this a bit, but what do you think has changed most about the student experience since you were an undergraduate?*

ATM: I think a lot's changed. I think it's really different. The world that students go out into is very different, and unfortunately, it does colour people's experiences even before they walk through the door in first year. There's less ability to, or less emphasis on students just being able to try stuff out on a whim, or try something new. There's

a lot of pressure on students that a degree is costing a lot of money, and so it has to do what it needs to do. And students have to work. I mean, we always had to work, but I think students have to work more. The cost of living crisis has had a big impact. We've got more commuting students. I don't know how that plays out across the country, but we've got more commuting students now than we used to, and I think that's out of financial necessity, I get it, but it's a shame, because students are less able to take advantage of all the wonderful extra stuff the university allows you to do, that kind of freedom. But I also hope that that experience of mine, of not being able to find my history, or my people, I hope that's changed. I hope students are more able to take a more diverse range of modules, you know, I think Royal Holloway's great for that. I hope that continues, and I hope students are able to see themselves in the history that they study. Not uncritically, of course, and I've written about that in the chapter for *A Practical Guide*, right? I've said that for me, there's a head and heart thing. I'm motivated by a desire to find people like me in the past, as erroneous or problematic as a concept as that might be, it's still a motivator. So I still think it's important that students see history that's relevant to them, and I hope the history that they are able to access is more diverse. Those are the main things that have changed about the student experience. I think also, although students are anxious, on the flip side, some of them are more confident than I was when I was an undergraduate. I was very shy. Some students are very anxious, and some students are very entangled with anxiety around things like giving presentations, but in other ways students are more confident than I was, so it's a bit of a mixed picture.

TL: *I'd expect a historian to say there's a mixed picture!*

ATM: One of my colleagues the other day said, well, you know, the historian's answer is, 'Well, actually, it's a lot more complicated than that, and it started much earlier.'

TL: *That's not a bad description of the entire discipline! Okay, so my final question. What's your top tip for students on getting the most out of studying history at university?*

ATM: Whoa, that's a tough one ... There's a couple, you can choose one. You said before, the students who come to university saying, 'I want to know what happened. I've come to study history because I want to know what happened.' And that, actually, that's the thing that's changed. In our poststructural world now, I find that students, even compared to when I started, are less likely to think there is one story about what happened. And that's a fantastic development, that's a fantastic improvement, I hope that continues. I think when talking in a poststructuralist way, students are immediately more receptive to that than they used to be, acknowledging straight away you're never gonna know exactly

what happened, or there isn't one story about what happened. I think that's important. I think your life as a historian will be more comfortable as soon as you get comfortable with that discomfort, embrace a bit of discomfort. I say to our Masters Public History students, what we're trying to do here is create a safe space for you to feel out of your comfort zone. Being able to leave your comfort zone will pay back dividends, even if it feels uncomfortable. I also say to students, if you don't feel uncomfortable, I don't think I'm doing my job properly, because you're not growing, you're not developing, unless you're pushing yourself – not into torture and torment, but I'm just saying, if you're not uncomfortable, we need to push you a bit more, because that's what the university experience is for. So you need to be willing to be a little bit uncomfortable, and get to grips with that. And asking questions. You know, some of my students that really stuck with me, one student in particular, she just would always ask questions that I think a lot of people would have been afraid to ask, because they might feel they were going to sound silly. And I admired her because she just wasn't bothered by that. She came in with no understanding of queer history, she never studied it before, she had no idea, but she was interested and she wanted to know. And she would just ask very bold questions, like, 'I don't understand that, I've never heard of that. What is that? But how can it be like that? Why is it like that?' And I loved that, and I was like, 'You are blowing my mind. That's so difficult. That's such a good question. I don't think I can do it justice right this minute, but can we come back to it next week?' And I know that a lot of the students in that class really benefited from her asking those questions, because they wanted to know the answer too. Or, they thought they knew the answer, but then when we actually started to discuss it, none of us knew the answer.

TL: *They're great tips.*

## Notes

- 1 'Bulldagger' is a slang term for a butch lesbian. The term originated in the Black queer community in the early twentieth century, and is not as much in circulation now as it was in the twentieth century. The image referred to here is Sadie Lee, *Raging Bull* (1992): <http://www.sadielee.f9.co.uk/bull.htm>.