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Original Research Paper

## Drifting: Feminist Oral History and the Study of the Last Female Drifters in Iceland

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### Abstract

This paper examines the story of the last female drifters in Iceland from the voices of women who remembered them. It examines the advantages of the woman-on-woman oral history interview when obtaining women's perspectives on women's history. An examination of women's narrative techniques suggests that women's narrative style is often consistent with a conversational style; and therefore it is important to construct a space in woman-on-woman oral history interviews that carries a sense of place for a conversation. It also examines the woman-on-woman oral history interview as a continuation of women's oral tradition in Iceland, especially an oral tradition from medieval Iceland; called a narrative dance (ice. *sagnadans*). Lastly, it examines the shared features of the Icelandic #MeToo event stories and the Icelandic narrative dances, in relation to woman-on-woman oral history interviews.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Now you are going to be silent, and I am going to speak. Do not interrupt me, even if I continue talking for a very long time.

Those were the words of Jófríður Þorkelsdóttir (1865-1953), one of the last female drifters in Iceland. Words that were meant for a young woman, who had just turned seventeen: "I would have liked being able to give you a birthday gift, but like the apostle said: gold and silver I do not have, but I have something else, which perhaps is superior to gold and silver, I have a life experience" (H. Halldórsdóttir, 1986).

This article tells many stories of women. Stories which together make up a collective story of female drifters in Iceland; the women who remembered them; my experience as an oral history interviewer; and women's oral traditions in Iceland. This is a story about the advantages of women interviewing women about women in history. The article examines the oral history interview as a tool to obtain women's perspective on

other women's lives. Furthermore, it focuses on women's perspective as a radical critique of narratives about homeless women in Iceland in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century; the female drifters. It concludes that an oral history interview between women resembles an oral women's tradition in medieval Iceland, called a narrative dance (ice. *sagnadans*); that both the woman-on-woman oral history interview and the narrative dance enable women to share their lived experiences as women, in a physical space; designed for female storytelling. It likewise concludes that women's narrative style is often consistent with a conversational style; and therefore it is important to construct a space in the woman-on-woman oral history interview that carries a sense of place for a conversation. The paper also touches upon the likeness of the Icelandic #MeToo event stories and the Icelandic narrative dance, in relation to interviews between women.

In order to shed light on the woman-on-woman oral history interview, I will be using my oral history

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studies on female drifters as an example (Eygerðardóttir, 2015, 2017). The principle objective of my studies was to document and analyze the history of the last female drifters in Iceland. Very little has been researched or written about female drifters in Iceland, and that alone proves the importance of interviewing people who remembered the last female drifters in Iceland and analysing their stories. My main focus has been on the lives of women who drifted between farms in the first half of the twentieth century; the last female drifters. In my studies on the last female drifters in Iceland I used oral history interviews with women and men who remembered the last female drifters. This paper is confined to interviews I took with the women.

## 2 BACKGROUND AND METHODOLOGY

Drifters were a specific subgroup of the homeless population in the Icelandic agricultural society, from early settlement till the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Drifters were men and women who travelled between farms to ask for food and shelter, largely because of poverty, mental illnesses, hard youth, and marginalization in the Icelandic rural society. It may well be argued, that there were two kinds of drifters in Iceland: Firstly, people who drifted because of great poverty, natural disasters and famines, e.g. women with children. Secondly, people who drifted because of different set of reasons, such as mental illnesses, poverty or simply just for being different. People in the latter mentioned group most often travelled alone, e. g. the last female drifters. Urbanization, folk migration and institutionalization marked an end in the history of drifters in Iceland.<sup>1</sup>



Margrét Sigurðardóttir (1869-1962)<sup>2</sup>.

Little has been written about female drifters in Iceland. One can say that the history of female drifters is a fragmented picture, based on widespread sources in; articles; memoirs; biographies; poetry and overview books etc.<sup>3</sup> The most complete historical source that comments on the life of a female drifter is the memoir *Manga með svartan vanga: Sagan öll* (Manga with the black cheek: The whole story) by Ómar Ragnarsson, a story based on the author's childhood memories about one the last female drifters in Iceland.

Very few studies have been done on the history of female drifters in Iceland. These include: The book *Með álfum* (Among elves), an historical biography about a female drifter by the name of Ingiríður Eiríksdóttir (1777-1857);<sup>4</sup> my Bachelor thesis which is an oral history study that focuses on the common features of female drifters in the 19th and 20th century, and also on the life of one of the last female drifters in Iceland (Vigdís Ingvadóttir, 1864-1957);<sup>5</sup> likewise my documentary *Against the Current* (2017), which is based on interviews I took with people who remembered female drifters from their childhood. This article originated as a lecture I gave on the NonfictionNOW conference in the summer of 2017. The lecture was about woman-on-woman oral history interviews on female drifters, in relation to Icelandic narrative dances from the Middle Ages. It is also based on my beforementioned studies on the last female drifters in Iceland, in addition to an article that I wrote about the common features of Icelandic #Metoo event stories and Icelandic narrative dances in the end of 2017, called; "Nútímasagnadansinn #Metoo" (#Metoo: A Modern Narrative Dance).

The novelty of this article is that it aims to bring to light the image of the female drifter. Furthermore, the article analyses the image of the female drifter with regard to memory studies; mythology studies and studies on Icelandic classical literature. More than that, the article aims to go beyond the image of the female drifter and bring forward their experience as women, by using female experience sampling and analysing methods, such as oral history. Oral history is a very effective method when documenting and analysing women's history; a methodology which is based on creating new sources by interviewing people, preserving the sources, and interpreting them<sup>6</sup>. This study also relies on the standpoint theory, which was set out by the sociologist Dorothy Smith (1974, 1990) and the philosopher Sandra Harding (1991, 1993 and 2004). In addition, this article provides a new way of listening to women's history by creating a space for a female narrative, by creating a space for a conversation in the oral history interview, listening to silence, and connecting the oral history interview to the history of women's oral tradition in Iceland.

The article focuses on information about the very last four female drifters in Iceland; Jófríður Þorkelsdóttir (1865-1953); Vigdís Ingvadóttir (1864-1957);

Þjóðhildur Þorvarðardóttir (1868-1953); Margrét Sigurðardóttir (1869-1962). I interviewed eighteen interviewees who remembered a female drifter from their childhood; eight women and ten men. The interviewees are a part of the oldest living generation of people in Iceland. The oldest interviewee was a 104 years old woman, and the youngest interviewee was a woman in her seventies. This article is focused on interviews that I took with the women; the last women alive who possess memories of Icelandic female drifters. I recorded all of the interviews on film and sound, in order to capture the audible and the visual aspects of the interviewees' storytelling.

### 3 READING: DISCOVERING THE MYTH OF THE FEMALE DRIFTER

This is the most natural thing in the world; telling stories. One is doing it all the time, possibly without noticing it. If one describes one's day as it were, one is shaping one's material into a story form...

(Iris Murdoch, a novelist and philosopher<sup>7</sup>)

We are always telling stories, listening to stories, thinking stories. One could easily say that our life consists of stories and at the same time, is a story on its own. Our life is a story that we make up as we go on living, and all the while we are wondering what the final outcome will look like, sound like; our life story. My experience as an historian is that people often think of their life as a story, but rarely think about their storytellers, the individuals who will go on to tell their stories after they are gone – whose lives will shape their life story, if not more than their own. People want to be remembered and have stories told about their lives, but when one has a storyteller, there are always strings attached. The difficulty of having a storyteller derives from the fact that this individual does not share one's life, one's perspective. Yet, s/he provides the story with a voice.

My oral history study on female drifters began, as most history studies begin, with the written word. My aim was to study homeless women who drifted in the Icelandic farming community in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the last female drifters in Iceland. Women who literally drifted between historical periods in Iceland – most often on foot; drifted during times of poverty and stagnation – and times of modernization and urbanization. My goal was to look for answers to the questions: “Why did these women start to drift between farms?” and “Were female drifters constrained to women's gendered roles in the rural society?”

Written sources of history provide information about female drifters in literature and official documents such as; articles; memoirs; church records; censuses; poems etc. As if the women themselves were drifting in the written sources of history, just as they had done in real life. Their travelling didn't only affect their lives,

but also its preservation and documentation i.e. the more the women travelled the more people remembered them. Female drifters are story characters that most often appear, briefly, in people's memoirs; are passing strangers in people's life story. And since female drifters were always moving from one space to another, their story became a short story – a short memory within a bigger story. Short narratives one stumbles upon e.g. in memoirs and poetry.

Köld og bitur sorgin svarta  
sjónum hennar blasti við.  
Förukona friðlaust hjarta  
fyrir engum hafði' að kvarta.  
Líknar sýndust lokuð hlið.

Cold and bitter was the black grief  
before her eyes.

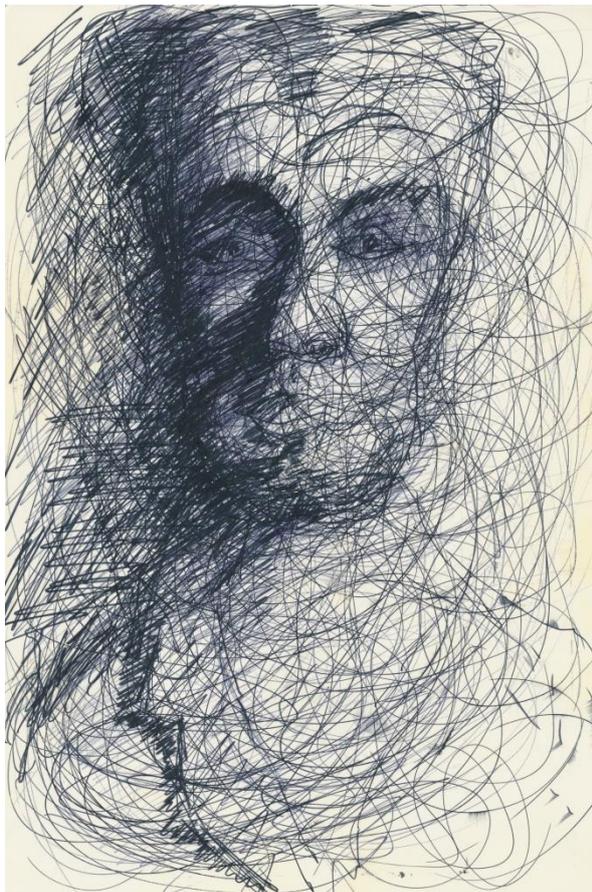
A female drifter's peaceless heart  
no one to protest to  
mercy was a closed gate.

(*The Female drifter*, by Halla Eyjólfsdóttir, 1919)

I began gathering these brief narratives about female drifters, as if I was forming a fragmented picture of the lives of women who drifted in Iceland, from the looking glass of a wide range of perspectives. I collected words about female drifters and then became a sculptor of words; hoping for precision in all angles. Still – the more I read the more I felt as if I was reading from the same perspective; a one-dimensional story. As if the majority of the stories/descriptions about female drifters in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century were written about the same female drifter and told by the same storyteller. By collecting data on female drifters, I had sculpted an identity of a female drifter; an identity that was continuing through centuries, because somehow the narrative perspective almost always stayed the same. It was as if I was reading about mythic women in a humanistic setting; a myth of a female drifter.

The image of the last female drifters is consistent with the image of female drifters from the previous centuries; ever since settlement<sup>8</sup>. The distinguishing characteristics of tales about female drifters are strongly linked to the women's travels. In fact, one can say that the women's travels were the main shaping force to their biographical storylines; plots that relied on movement. Hence, stories about female drifters depict an image of women without roots. These are stories of unmarried women, most often childless, which stopped working and started to drift between rural households. Stories about women, who never stayed at the same place for long, were constantly on the move. Their image is of women dressed in outlandish clothing, wearing rags, layer upon layer. Their character was often described as hot-tempered, sharp-tongued, intelligent, reticent, dark humorous, and above all mysterious. The women's homelessness is also a major contributor in regard to how their lives were presented by their storytellers. The fact that the women weren't constrained to a household

meant that their life story did not progress in a home, where there were witnesses to their life; for the women led a life of solitaire on their journeys<sup>9</sup>. Thus their distant past became an important element in the shaping of their identity as drifters. The drifter's past portrayed a mystery; a secretive life that took on the form of a before and after story, for example: A beautiful young woman, rich even, got her heart broken and became a drifter: "She had her heart broken. It happened when she was a young woman. That's the reason why she lost her mind. She thought she was engaged to a man. But he betrayed her" (Eygerðardóttir, 2017). Their story is a story about young women who became old women overnight – a tragedy, which often developed into a popular comedy within the local community at the expense of the drifter: "when she'd gone to bed she read her prayers out loud: Lord bless me, – I turn around – and the household – with my ass towards the panel" (Sigurðsson, 2008). These were women who were tired of the human race by cause of cruelty, and often sought companionship among those who could not speak: "The mutes, the dogs and horses / she believed to be her only friends" (Jóhannsson, 1984). These are tales of women who challenged the social structure of the Icelandic agricultural society, mainly because they were not active participants in the gendered rural social structure, which relied on the farm household as the main manufacturing unit<sup>10</sup>.



Jónfríður Þorkelsdóttir (1865- 1953)<sup>11</sup>

It is safe to assume that some of the characterizations of female drifters were indirectly based on Icelandic myths and fairy tales. Myths often serve as a tool to justify and explain the ways of societies (King, 1973) and I believe those mythical elements in the life stories of female drifters served as an explanation for why women started to drift in the Icelandic farming community, and what happened to women who didn't settle down in marriage. For example, it was often believed that female drifters were possessed by past tragedies – usually a failed romance which caused the women to become unbalanced and start drifting. Furthermore, the women's absence from society and their presence in nature influenced the mystification of female drifters in Icelandic narratives.

Woman stands as metaphor for Nature (in another characteristic dualism), for what has been lost (left behind), and that place called home in frequently personified by, and partakes of the same characteristics as those assigned to, Woman/Mother/lover (Massey, 2007).

Women/Mother/lover are characteristics that were assigned to female drifters in their past. Roles that the women could not live up to, and thus became wilderness – became lost women within the patriarchal structure. The identity of the female drifter is strongly linked to nature's mysticism. The Icelandic nature is the story world of the Icelandic mythological system, from where female drifters would appear, unannounced, on people's doorsteps, and then disappear again back to nature: "...she left the same way she came from, up the Deep-canyon" (Halldórsdóttir, 1986). The comings and goings of female drifters in people's homes, constructed an image that bore likeness to the hidden woman (ice. *huldukona*), an Icelandic elf woman who could interact with humans yet lived in another world within nature. Descriptions about the unique appearances of female drifters resemble descriptions of the monstrous Icelandic troll women (ice. *tröllskessa*) from the folktales, and also from the early Icelandic literature (ice. *fornbókmenntir*): "The image of the troll women consisted of both nature and woman, and the man must defeat both" (Kress, 1993). Stories that are rich in descriptions of conflicts between troll women and human males, in which the troll women mocked their male oppressors, and belittled their masculinity (Kress, 1993); stories that resemble descriptions about conflicts between female drifters and men. Then there is the women's vulnerability on their travels, which echoes stories about the Icelandic female outlaws (ice. *útilegukonur*); women who were vulnerable to sexual violence in nature; on the margins. Female drifters were known to have worn many layers of clothing, and when they were given new clothes, they would rip them up and then sew the patches together – thus creating an unusual outfit. One can assume that female drifters not only wore bad clothing because of poverty and/or to increase their chances of charity – but also because they were travelling alone and were vulnerable to sexual

violence. For this reason, the women might not have wanted to look appealing. Supporting evidence in relation to that hypothesis, are testimonies that state that some female drifters strongly refused to be escorted by men between farms.

Mythical narratives about women who drifted in the Icelandic farming community are deeply rooted in the perspectives of children. The reason why I was reading very similar stories and descriptions about different female drifters was because I was almost always reading childhood memories. Reading stories which portrayed a mythical woman, from a child's perspective: "I had often imagined how witches in fairytales looked like, picturing their faces in my mind, but now I was looking at such a creature in a human form" (Ragnarsson, 2013). My study on female drifters revealed that most descriptions of drifters, both female and male drifters, are based on childhood memories. Stories that often begin with words like: "I want to tell you a little about memorable people from my childhood, people called travellers or drifters" (Dýrmundsson, 1978). So, the majority of memories about female drifters are childhood memories portrayed by individuals, usually in their later years. I cannot say for sure why it are that memories of drifters are most often childhood memories. But one has to take into account that children have a tendency to remember things that are unusual in their lives, and they remember differently (Foster, 2009). Children in the old farming community in Iceland seldom left their homes. So when a stranger, with a distinctive appearance, offbeat manners and a mysterious background came knocking; they remembered. As someone who remembered a drifter from his childhood, once wrote: "Children are extremely observant and sensitive towards those who are worth noticing or learning from, but of course their evaluation is very different from those, who are mature or grown" (Bergsson, 1957).

The nature of children's memory i.e. their ability to remember unusual things in their lives, became crucial in my search for data on female drifters in Iceland. The fact that most memories of drifters are childhood memories represented a rare opportunity: perhaps there were some people alive who remembered the last female drifters from their childhood; people who could provide me with oral testimonies that would unravel the myth of the female drifters and bring forth the women. Thus a search for persons who remembered a female drifter began. The search resulted in me interviewing eighteen interviewees, eight women and ten men, who remembered a female drifter from their childhood. They brought me stories, yet untold, memories, like a movie that hasn't premiered yet. It was as if I had a date with history. It was time to part with the written word and head into the living story.<sup>12</sup> I had been given a chance to ask the sources of history – the storytellers, questions regarding the existence of the last female drifters. Question is that the written word couldn't always give answers to. Here is where my journey as an oral

historian began, a journey that brought me in into a world of women while interviewing.

#### 4 WOMAN-ON-WOMAN INTERVIEWS

It is a curious fact that novelists have a way of making us believe that luncheon parties are invariably memorable for something very witty that was said, or for something very wise that was done. But they seldom spare a word for what was eaten.

(Woolf, 1929)

"Heaven, just heaven" I said and swallowed. I was sitting in a yellow kitchen, in a house at the feet of a dove-grey glacier. In front of me sat a man who remembered one of the last female drifters in Iceland. Behind him stood his wife, the cake maker, watching us, silently, as we ate her *work*. "Would you like to visit her gravesite now?" said the man and turned towards the kitchen window. I looked through the window, at the cemetery where one of the last female drifters had been laid to rest in an unmarked grave, and replied: "Perhaps another slice first". I was an historian on historical grounds, and just as a story setting of a female drifter was in sight, all I could see - taste, was a cake I had been served, a cake they called Marriage bliss. "I can't imagine any marriage tasting this good" I said to the cake maker, the interviewee's wife. She replied: "Neither can I" and handed me another slice.

What I did not know, couldn't have known, is that when you conduct an oral history research on drifters; one has to become a drifter in some sense of the word. In order to interview people who remembered female drifters, I myself had to drift between farms, invite myself into people's homes, as drifters once did. Still, the drifters had stories to tell, news to tell from their travels, sort of a medium of exchange for food and shelter. On the other hand, I wanted to be told stories, wanted to record my hosts-my interviewees, their homes, all the while I'm drinking the coffee they serve me and enjoying their home baked pastries. It seemed that I had taken on a form of an uninvited guest that requested stories, memories, but I couldn't give anything back, except more and more questions. It seemed as if I had become the worst sort of a drifter there is; an oral historian. But how wrong I was? How very wrong I was.

The interview is like a three-act play in which the interviewer is the director and the interviewee is the main performer. First, we have part one; before the recorded interview, then part two; during the recorded interview, and finally; after the recorded interview. The interview is a performance art, and should always be regarded as such: "The storytelling tradition relies upon performance. A good storyteller knows that his or her communicative power derives not simply from remembering and retelling the stories but from knowing how to tell the stories to produce the desired effect" (Abrams, 2010). The first part of the interview could be

compared to those moments of anticipation, before the curtains are drawn in the theatre. This part of the interview takes place before the recording equipment is turned on; the voice recorder (sound) and the movie camera (image). When the interviewer and the interviewee are getting to know each other, as in a rehearsal for the “interview itself” – a back stage warm up in the art of the conversation. The interviewer depends on the interviewee’s oral narrative for his own study/story, so in order to get the interviewees to recall their memories in a successful manner, it is important to create a conversational interaction. As the historian Lynn Abrams once wrote: “We are interviewing the person because we deduce that they can tell us things we want to know. Like it or not, this is a professional relationship, and it is governed by a set of written and unwritten rules and procedures” (Abrams, 2010). When I finished knocking on the door, taking off my shoes, thanking my interviewees, nodding my head when they assured me they remembered little, looking for the question sheet; *I placed the tripod and the movie camera*. That is when the professional relationship began, the second part of the interview; the formal interview. Here is when the “official storytelling” begins. As the oral historian Eva M. McMahan once wrote: “Just as stories constitute a large portion of casual conversation, so stories constitute large segments of oral history interviews...” (McMahan, 1989).

The second part of the interview, the formal part if you will, *is a conversation for the public*. A dialogue between people – that goes on the record and becomes historical data. This, the female interviewees knew all too well: “You can quote me on that”, one woman said, and waited for my nod of approval. She, just like all of the other women that I’ve interviewed throughout the years, was well aware of the fact that soon I’d leave with the interview, and all its moments – in form of recordings and memories of our meeting. This affected how the female interviewees conducted themselves in the interview; they were participating in a conversation for the public. However, the private space in the interview provided me, the feminist oral historian, and the female interviewees with a space to converse on the subject of female experience. A space to make our own history for the public.

Oral history interviews provide an invaluable means of generating new insights about women’s experiences of themselves in their worlds. The spontaneous exchange within an interview offers possibilities of freedom and flexibility for researchers and narrators alike. For the narrator, the interview provides the opportunity to tell her own story in her own terms (Anderson and Jack, 1991).

The woman-on-woman interviews brought into light women’s unique experience as women, a muted experience in history.<sup>13</sup> This discovery became possible because of the inherent characteristics of the interview – the form of the interview. The woman-on-woman

interviews consist of a female interviewer questioning a female interviewee, in the space of the interview<sup>14</sup>. A space designed for women storytelling as it happens. The very structure of interview gives room for women’s narrative techniques, which rarely come to view in the masculine history. That is, the woman-on-woman interview is a pathway for women storytellers into history. Women are different storytellers from men. Being women influences how women tell stories: “When I was a girl...”, being women influences how women remember (Abrams, 2010); “I missed her funeral, the boys were sick...”, *being women* affects how women communicate differently in conversations e.g. women are more likely to be collaborative and empathetic in interviews/conversations than men (Abrams, 2010, Langellier and Peterson, 2004).

And the purpose of the male storyteller is to entertain within a hierarchical context; the story he tells is designed to be better, funnier and more remarkable than others. Women, on the other hand, tend to adopt conversational styles, and their stories focus on the usual or general rather than on the remarkable (Abrams, 2010).

What the female drifters, the female interviewees and myself had in common, was a culture based on our mutual gender; i.e. women’s culture. The concept of women’s culture refers to the shared experience of women; what makes women a specific cultural group within the culture as a whole (Showalter, 1981). My goal was to document and analyze the history of the female drifters, from women’s perspectives i.e. how women explain the lives of other women. For that purpose, I used the feminist standpoint theory, a theory that enables historians to study history from women’s point of view. By interviewing women who remembered female drifters from their childhood, I was able to study the lives of female drifters from a woman’s standpoint. That is, even though their memories of the women derived from their childhood, the women told their stories from a present standpoint – as women. Being the oldest generation of women in Iceland, the female interviewees possessed stories about lived experiences of women in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; I just needed to listen. Still – even though being a woman influenced how the female interviewees told stories, it didn’t mean that being a woman provided me with a sufficient technique of analyzing women’s narrative. For I, just as men, was brought up in a storytelling world of men. And being an historian, I was a trained listener of men.

Listening is an art form, which requires skills in being silent, speaking at the right time, hearing what remains unsaid, spotting emotions/words from facial expressions and reading body language. Oral history is a very useful methodology when uncovering women’s perspectives (Anderson and Jack, 1991). But in order to hear women’s perspectives in history, I had to learn how to listen to women’s voices, that is to say, to learn to listen in stereo.

To hear, women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both the dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them (Anderson and Jack, 1991).

Two channels represent two perspectives women rely on when telling life stories; "one framed in concepts and values that reflect men's dominant position in the culture, and one informed by the more immediate realities of a woman's personal experience" (Anderson and Jack, 1991). I was used to listening to the dominant channel of men's perspectives, but I had to tune into the muted channel, i.e., into women's perspectives. So I switched to women's channel of history – the muted channel. At the beginning of every interview, I would say to my interviewees: "Don't worry if I do not always give a verbal response – I will be listening", and so I did. I listened, and the more I listened, the more I heard female experience as absence of sound.

Where experience does not "fit" dominant meanings, alternative concepts may not readily be available. Hence, inadvertently, women often mute their own thoughts and feelings when they try to describe their lives in the familiar and publicly acceptable terms of prevailing concepts and conventions (Anderson and Jack, 1991).

In her article "The Narrative of Silence" the historian Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir explores silence as a frame of narrative in order to analyze the perspective of a female signatory in a love letter correspondence from the 19<sup>th</sup> century – in which only one side of the letter writing has been preserved.

The lost side, in this case the woman's, can only be read through the preserved side in which she is already interpreted and represented. Wanting for her voice to be heard, however, and also wondering about different kind of gaps and silences (intentional silences and silences because of sources lost), has led me to argue that silence as a frame of narration is one way to theories about the gaps and silences (Halldórsdóttir, 2010).

Stories of female drifters are fabricated out of silence, as is women's history in Iceland even though women make a sound. Their fate is the fate of the woman in the poem, "Konan í þokunni" (The Woman in the Fog) by the poet Steinunn Sigurðardóttir: "There the woman got lost in the fog / because she walked forward / but was supposed to stay still".<sup>15</sup> Female drifters got lost in the fog of Icelandic history, they drifted forward, but were supposed to stay still within the private sphere. The question, however, was whether I could breach their historical silence – by using silence as a frame of narrative in woman-on-woman oral history interviews. At first, I was sceptical whether silence, an absence of sound, could exist as a narrative framework in oral

history; a methodology which relies on the spoken word. Only to find out that the art of the conversation relies heavily upon the art of the silence, in interviews with women. Hence the art of listening was not restricted to sound – it was also bound to absence of sound. By the example of Halldórsdóttir's study on the narrative of silence, I employed silence as a frame of narrative in my oral history study on the female drifters. This is when I literally began to hear a common chord in the stories of the female drifters, the female interviewees, and myself: I began hearing silence.

Female interviewee: It was an obsession. Speaking about such things...

*-The interviewee expressed silence by a non-verbal expression; nodding of the head and by fixing her eyes on mine.*

Me: Talking dirty?

Female interviewee: Yes, speaking about such things... It was always on her mind, the relationship between men and women. Which was probably the result of....

*- The interviewee expressed silence by a non-verbal expression; nodding of the head and by fixing her eyes on mine, implicating that I should respond to her silence.*

Me: Of a sexual abuse?

Female interviewee: Yes, that is what I think.

The myth of the female drifter from the literary sources took on the form of women's shared experience in the second part of the interview (the recorded interview). From silence came sound; a female experience. Experience of: Sexual abuse, pregnancies, miscarriages, birth of stillborn, women's work, handicrafts, foremothers, and lack of power.

Female interviewee: Abused her, yes, that's what I heard.

It was talked about, quite often. She was always on the stout side. I heard that. What is true, I cannot understand, but they said that the fetus had dried up in her womb. I don't know if this is possible, probable, but this is what they said.

Since all my interviewees, female and male, knew female drifters from their childhood, it was only natural that their stories ordinarily began there. But then their story continued, and in the case of the female interviewees; the story continued from women's perspective. All of the female interviewees, except one, discussed sexual violence in relation to female drifters. None of the male interviewees mentioned sexual violence in relation to female drifters. All of the female interviewees talked about pregnancies and the caring of children in relation to female drifters. There was also a noticeable difference on what female interviewees and

male interviewees remembered in relation to female drifters. Women spoke about the clothes of the female drifters, the items that they carried with them, conversations that they heard them have e.g. with other women in the household, relationships they had with other women, and customs in relation to the Icelandic food culture. The female interviewees were elderly women, reflecting on the lives of other elderly women who decades ago drifted into their childhood. The women answered my questions from different perspectives, shaped by different times in their own lives e.g. in regard to; women's work, pregnancies, female friendships, "being old in the present", "being young in the past". Different answers reflecting different periods in their lives. For example, when I asked them why the female drifter (in question) started to drift? The female interviewees would often provide me with answers that portrayed their own reality as women – what would make a woman drift.



Pjóðhildur Þorvarðardóttir<sup>16</sup> (1868-1953) as a young woman in Canada.

Me: Why do you think she started to drift?

Female interviewee: She became pregnant. She lost her fetus. It changed her, I heard.

*-The interviewee had a miscarriage when she was a young woman.*

The history of female drifters in Iceland is based on silence. That is hardly irregular, since women's mythical existence in the Icelandic history feeds on silence. But the oral history interview enabled me to question that silence by listening to silence, analyzing

silence, and breaching it by making it apart of the history. By writing silence into history it made a sound. Interviewing women about silenced experiences of women; is writing silence into history. The oral testimonies of the female interviewees, revealed that female drifters were not only vulnerable because of reasons such as poverty or mental illnesses, but because they were women. The women that I interviewed spoke from a hidden place in history; from a female experience. The woman-on-woman interviews gave a new insight into the myth of the female drifter – bringing forth a new image of the female drifter; an image of women. And when I turned the camera off, the female interviewees gave out in much more detail the story of their own life, and it was a familiar story, because sometimes it echoed the story they told about the last female drifters.

## 5 AFTER THE "INTERVIEW": THE PRIVATE SECTOR OF WOMEN'S ORAL HISTORY

"How nice it is to have someone to talk to", she said and looked at me as if she would never see me again. We were standing in a former children's room that she, my female interviewee, my host, had turned into a sewing room. The walls were decorated with carpets that displayed courtly romance, while the pillows, on the couch below us, represented dresses my host had worn as a young woman: "I met my husband in these colors" she said and picked up a golden pillow in the shape of a pineapple. I laughed – realising that I was standing in a museum of her memories; she had sewn them all together in a room of her own.<sup>17</sup> "How nice it is to have someone to talk to", she said once more. Then she smiled to me - the interviewer; who now had become a temporary friend.

In the third and final part of the interview – the interviewer is formally invited to the interviewee's life story, that is to say, if the interviewer receives an invitation. This final stage of the interview can be described as being an after party; following the main performance – the recorded interview. Now the recording equipment is turned off, coffee and cakes are placed on the table, and untold stories, secrets and regrets find their way into the conversation. This final act of the interview is crucial for the interview in whole. Here is when the interviewer receives a chance to get to learn more about the source of the oral evidence; the storyteller. Here is when the silence from the second part of the interview is breached once more, but now by new stories being told, the life stories of the storytellers. For in the second part of the interview, the female interviewees spoke for their auditorium; the interviewer; the recording equipment; their intended listeners/readers – a conversation for the public. But in the third and final part of the interview, the interviewees spoke out more freely, as in a private conversation – perhaps unaware that they were still within the public forum of the oral history interview.

By inviting myself into people's homes and asking them to remember, I had entered into a museum of endless memories – in the search for perhaps only a glimpse of a memory, a moment, which portrayed a female drifter who travelled to the interviewee's childhood home. But by doing so, I had to enter a museum, a grand museum; the life story of the interviewee. Conducting an oral history interview provides the oral historian with a chance to – enter a "bigger story" i.e. the life story of the storyteller. My experience is that the telling of the "storyteller's life story" most often takes place in final part of the interview, in a time that is likely to take on the form of a e.g. visit or a friend relationship – especially when interviewing women. Nonetheless, the historian is obliged to remember that he is still working with history; even if it hasn't passed – if it is still passing. Obligated to remember that interviewing can often take on the form of visiting and friendship (Oakley, 1981) but he must not act as a guest or a friend. For the interview is never a visit, - it is a part of the history that is being researched – and the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee is always hierarchical (Oakley, 1981).

After all, we are using this material for the purpose of writing books which are often directed, at least in part, to academic or career ends. I gained access to women's memories not as a friend, but as a professional historian (Sangster, 1994).

The "private conversation" following the recorded interview played a significant part in my study on female drifters. It was if another window to women's culture in Iceland had opened up into the world of the oldest generation of women in Iceland; a culture that the last female drifters in Iceland themselves were a part of. The stories that the women told me about themselves tainted everything – stories that revealed a common ground in the lives of the female interviewees and the female drifters. The life stories of the female interviewees and of the female drifters had become our story – women's story. The two are inevitably inseparable. And although the "formal interview" was over, I was still able to record the interviewees e.g. when they told a tale by the coffee table or their homes as we walked around it, thus literally making women's culture visible by using oral history. I just had to record the interviewees in a very different way than before: Record moments in between moments.

The after the interview-coffee-party, starts, in my experience, with a simple invitation to have – coffee.

Female interviewee: Stay. I baked you some waffles. Do you like waffles?

The fact of the matter was that I loved waffles and the entire home baked pastries that the oldest generation of women in Iceland had to offer me in the interviews, not just their memories. And I remember what I was served, how it smelled and tasted, just as I remember the

stories that I was told. Yet, as the modernist writer Virginia Woolf wrote in regard to people who write novels: "It is part of the novelist's convention not to mention soup and salmon..." (Woolf, 1929). It is also the oral historian's convention not to mention what was served during the interview, even if it relates to the interviewee's culture e.g. women's culture. Oral history studies rarely examine what the interviewee baked for the interviewer; the focus is above all on what the interviewee said to the interviewer. But I remember, I remember drinking strong coffee, weak coffee, honey brown scones with too much butter, and a sandwich with none. I remember cakes in color, which I had only seen in black and white in old food magazines – and how good they tasted, and some badly. I remember that it was the women in the interviews that offered me the refreshments; the female interviewees and the wives of the male interviewees. Remember feeling hungry when I reflect on interviews I took with widowers. Remember how calm and fascinating everything seemed, when drinking warm coffee, with brown sugar, and eating layer cakes and Marriage bliss – after the formal interview was over. Feeling well: "One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well", Virginia Woolf wrote in her book *A Room of One's Own*. A theory based on different qualities of meals – that lead to different qualities of conversations.

The human frame being what it is, heart, body and brain all mixed together, and not contained in separate compartments as they will be no doubt in another million years, a good dinner is of great importance to good talk (Woolf, 1929).

I remember what was served in the interviews – because it was important in regard to what was being said. The female interviewees transformed the third and final part of the interview into an event that resembled a visit. They created an apt story setting for the conversation, with tablecloths and pastries, creating a space for a female narrative – a space for a conversation. It was as if the female interviewees had read Virginia Woolf's ideas about how to have an enlightened conversation – a gourmet conversation: "a good dinner is of great importance to good talk" (Woolf, 1929). Conversations led us from the coffee tables; around their homes – their work of art. Homes that possessed memories in a physical shape, such as facial expressions in photos or old foremother's heirlooms. In more than one occasion, I stood in front of a wardrobe, admiring dresses and hats that weren't tailored for the Icelandic weather – applauding shiny jewelry on the nightstand. All the while wondering: Is the interview over? Can I quote her on that? Why didn't she tell me this earlier when I was recording her? Why has she become a livelier storyteller? – is it the effect of the coffee, the cakes? Am I allowed to describe her furniture, her rooms, and the texture of her engraved wedding ring? The final part of the interview was the part of the interview – when I often felt as if the female interviewees looked at me as a temporary friend,

Vigdís Ingvadóttir (1864-1957)<sup>18</sup>

entrusting me with personal information.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps hoping for a long-term friend: “Do come again – soon”.

I never did come back. Sometimes I regret not having done so, wonder if the invitation still stands. Wonder if the women storytellers are still alive. Thoughts come while reflecting on our time together in women’s oral history. And when I think about them, the women that I interviewed about the last female drifters, I often find myself thinking about the third and final part of the interview (after the interview). A period of time in the interview wholly devoted to the conversation when we had left the “formal space of the interview”, into “the space of the private conversation”. The oral historian Ron Grele described oral history as being a “conversational narrative”: “conversational because of the relationship of interviewer and interviewee, and narrative because of the form of exposition—the telling of the tale” (Grelle, 1993). And according to e.g. Lynn Abrams, women storytellers tend to use a conversational style when telling stories, as mentioned before (Abrams, 2010). This I find to be true, not only in women’s oral history but also in literature; in fiction, memoirs and articles, where women writers engage their readers in their story, by addressing them directly and by asking them questions. Women such as Virginia Woolf, in her book *A Room of One’s Own*. “But, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one’s own?” (Woolf, 1929). And let us not forget that, even with the coming of the printing culture and the oppression of women’s voices – women in Iceland continued using woman-on-woman conversations to pass on their women legacy, thus continuing women’s oral tradition by speaking

about lived experience of women; –to other women. The female drifters are known to have confided in other women about their past; some of those conversations remain private, but some have become a part of the female drifters history. The conversation was a life story platform for the female drifters: “She sometimes confided in my mother in the kitchen”. So it is my opinion that the third and final stage of the interview is the apt story stage for women’s storytelling because of how “conversation friendly” it is. Here is when the women’s stories intersected. Upon till this point in the interviews, I had been listening to women tell stories about female drifters from a woman’s perspective – without giving much thought to what it is that creates a woman’s perspective; the female experience. But by listening to them narrate their own lives, making sense of what was past (Lawless, 2001); in a place that was created for a fruitful conversation – the coffee table in the moment – I made sense of women’s perspective. As the author Elaine J. Lawless once wrote: “The story each woman tells for me (and for herself) is a story that crafts a “self” that evolves from her earliest memories to this present moment” (Lawless, 2001). Nonetheless, just because I was listening to stories about the storytellers, it did not mean that the stories of the last female drifters were absent from the story table itself. It was as if the female drifters re-emerged into the interview in these life stories of the female interviewees. Re-emerged in the conversation, while speaking about all kinds of subjects from our own lives. In such cases, I would ask my interviewee: “Can I quote you on that?”. Hence continuing the interview about the female drifters in an informal way or ask in relation to their own lives: “Can I film the cake before you cut it?” or “can I film the

textile art before we leave the room?”, hence recording the physical evidence of women’s oral history.

If women need money and a room of one’s own to write fiction, as Virginia Woolf states in her book *A Room of One’s Own*, then women need a female interviewee and a room for a conversation, if they are to conduct a woman-on-woman oral history interview. However, one needs experience in the art of the conversation if one is to create a room for a conversation in an interview. I have observed that food; beverages; heirlooms; photographs; art pieces; clothing; the view from the interviewees’ windows; all play a big part in a making of a conversation. In the spirit of Kristina Minister, who encouraged feminist oral historians to create a “feminist frame” for the interview, so women can communicate to each other about their female experience – I suggest that we, feminist oral historians; create a space for a conversation in oral history interviews. That we explore the art of the conversation e.g. in women’s literature and in women conversations that take place all around us. Virginia Woolf wrote that a good dinner is of great importance to good talk (Woolf, 1929). And I conquer. I believe that oral historians have neglected the culture of food e.g. in regards to women’s culture. Not only when it comes to documenting what kind of food/beverages female interviewees serve during the interview, but also its effect on the conversation, hence women’s oral history. I also suggest a walk in the interview – to broaden the space of the interview, thus maybe broadening the story being told. Also, I want to emphasize the importance of female historians answering questions from female interviewees in regard to their own lives, thus participating in the conversation and in the sharing of female experience. I am not implying that one needs layer cake, and a fine wine – while taking a walk in the park, to do an interview. I am simply pointing out the fact that if one is doing oral history (a conversational narrative) one needs to adjust the space of the storytelling to the conversation. A simple cup of coffee could do the trick, and a walk around a room of our own.

## 6 INTERVIEWING WOMEN IN ICELAND: A MODERN NARRATIVE DANCE (ice. *sagnadans*)

Þú tókst í minn gula lokk  
og vast höfuð mitt í serk.  
Heyrðu það, herra kóng Símon,  
þú vannst þar níðingsverk.  
(*Kvæði af herra kóng Símoni*)

You grabbed my golden lock  
put a bag over my head.  
Listen now, sir Simon the king,  
you did a deed so bad.  
(*Sir Simon the King*, a narrative dance)

Women interviewing women about women’s culture in Iceland is continuing a centuries old women’s

oral tradition in Iceland that empowered women in Iceland – for hundreds of years (Eygerðardóttir, 2018b). Women’s oral tradition in Iceland provided women with a space to act as storyteller i.e. it enabled women to narrate stories from their point of view, and pass it on from one generation to another. Therefore, it is creating a space for women’s culture in Icelandic oral history.

Konur áttu mikinn þátt í varðveislu og sköpun allra þeirra þjóðkvæða sem til eru frá fyrri öldum. Má þar nefna sagnadansa, vikivaka, þulur, langlokur, lausavísur, vögguvísur, barnagælur og stef úr þjóðsögum of ævintýrum.

Women played a substantial role in the preservation and creation of all the folk poetry from previous centuries. For example narrative dances, chain dances, jingles, long speeches, rigmaroles, epigrams, lullabies, nursery rhymes, and verses from folklores and fairy tales (Kress, 2001).

The printing culture marked the end of women’s oral tradition in Iceland. Thus, putting end to an important era in women’s history in Iceland. Icelandic women were denied access to the written word well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century i.e. women were denied the chance of learning how to read and write (Kress, 1993) – to communicate their experiences. The oral tradition of women was silenced and instead came a silencing tradition of men. A change that can be traced back to the coming of Christianity to Iceland, according to the literary scholar Helga Kress, who has studied women’s oral tradition and the silencing of women in Iceland.

Með eingyðistrúnni, og síðan kristninni, klaustrunum, skriftinni og skólunum, – og ekki síst fyrstu íslensku bókmenntastofnunni á 13. öld, með ritstörfum Snorra Sturlusonar (1179-1241), var menningu kvennanna þurrkuð út, undirokuð eða tekin upp í menningu karla. Eins og oft hefur verið bent á, misstu konur mörg af mikilvægum hlutverkum sínum við heiðnar helgiathafnir, og þær lærðu ekki heldur að skrifa. Þetta hafði í för með sér að munnleg skáldskaparhefð kvennanna var borin ofurlíði af ritmenningu karla.

With the arrival of monotheism, and then later Christianity, convents, the confessions and the schools, – and not least because of the first Icelandic literary establishment in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with the writings of Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), women’s culture was wiped out, oppressed or made a part of the men’s culture. As often has been pointed out, women lost their important roles in heathen rituals, and they did not learn how to write. This resulted in the destruction of women’s oral tradition caused by the printing culture of men (Kress, 1993).

The sound of women, their experience, was reduced to a meaning of silence in history. Names of women oral storytellers took on the form of anonymous sources in Icelandic literature (Kress, 2001) – and their oral history narratives were written down by men – for the eyes of men (Eygerðardóttir, 2018c). Hence future generations of Icelandic women were cheated out of their inheritance: Women’s culture in Iceland.

Signý tók í beltið  
en Ingigerður í hár:  
“Nú skal hefna níðingsverks  
þú veittir fyrir í ár”.  
(*Ebbadaetra kvæði*)

Signy took his belt  
Ingigerdur his hair:  
“Now we revenge a dastard deed  
you did to us earlier this year”.  
(*The poem of Ebbadaughters*)

Now, one cannot write about women interviewing women about women in Iceland, without writing about the Icelandic narrative dances (*sagnadansar*). It would be like writing a story without a beginning, a present without a past. Therefore, I am dedicating a few words to the dancing foremothers of the female drifters; the female interviewers; and myself. A few words for the women in the Middle Ages who created a room of their own in Icelandic history, by singing about female experience, and dancing to its beat.

Enginn maður það vissi  
á meðan það var,  
utan mín yngsta systir,  
og það fór þar,  
þó hlaut ég minn harm að bera í leyndum  
stað.

Systir sagði móður það,  
vissum við af því allar þrjár.  
(*Systra kvæði*)

Nobody knew  
while it lasted,  
besides my youngest sister,  
then that was that,  
still I must carry my sorrow in a secret  
place.

Sister told mother  
then we knew all three.  
(*Poem of Sisters, a narrative dance*)

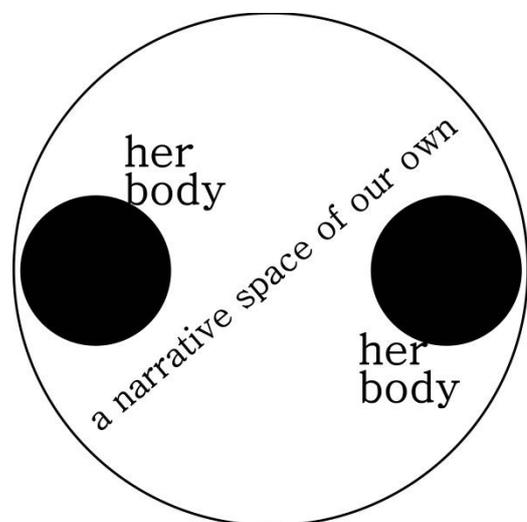
Narrative dances (*sagnadansar*) are oral poems that were preserved in memory, and transmitted orally, most often by women (Ólason, 1979). Poems that were sung and danced to on festive occasions, or sung in the evenings, when the members of the household were all gathered together in one room (Kress, 2001) to process wool – while listening to stories. In her article “Eru sagnadansar kvennatónlist?” (Are narrative dances women’s music?), the singer Nina Björk Elíasson argues that the tempo of narrative dances echoes women’s

work in Iceland e.g. the spinning of the wool or rocking of the baby (Elíasson, 1980). The same applies to the subject of the narrative dances.

Sagnadansar fjalla mjög um líf kvenna og konur gegna miklu hlutverki í atburðarás þeirra. Algeng viðfangsefni eru ofbeldi gagnvart konum, forboðnar ástir, nauðgun og sífjaspell, dulsmál og barnaútburður, en einnig samstaða kvenna og vinátta, umhyggja þeirra fyrir börnum og hefndir gegn illgerðamönnum.

Narrative dances are very often about the lives of women and women play a big part in the storyline. Common subjects of narrative dances is violence against women, forbidden love, rapes and incest, infanticide, but also the unity of women and friendship, their care for children and revenge towards those who did them wrong (Kress, 2001).

The woman-on-woman oral history interviews about the last female drifters in Iceland came to show, that women in Iceland have a shared story. A story that I was able to obtain by creating a space for women storytelling by using oral history. Both the narrative dance and the oral history interview provide a space for women to share their female experience, both in physical terms and in sound terms. Both are also good examples of sound being transmitted orally – to the written word (Eygerðardóttir, 2018c), therefore creating spaces in the present time of the storytelling, and in written history. Spaces that empower women, spaces based on women’s voices in: “an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification” (Massey, 2007). And by listening to their stories and carrying on the experiences of women – one is fulfilling once obligations as an historian of women. Like the historian Joan Sangster once wrote in regard to feminist oral history: “As feminists, we hoped to use oral history to



A graphic model<sup>20</sup> that presents a narrative space for women e.g. a woman-on-woman interview; a narrative dance; a woman-on-woman conversation etc.

empower women by creating a revised history “for women”, emerging from the actual lived experiences of women” (Sangster, 1994).

Lastly: I would like to expand our view from the dance floor in the Middle Ages, and away from the space of the interview – to the global system of the internet, where the battle for justice for women is being fought – and it’s battle cry is #Metoo. The great technological changes of the past decades have created a new forum for women to come together and demand changes. And when women come together and share their unique experience as women – women create spaces, be it a physical space or a virtual space. With the coming of the #Metoo movement, women have created “the largest dance floor in history”; a narrative space based on women’s voices sharing lived experiences of women. The *coming together of women’s voices* online in the #Metoo movement has created a strong female unity. Women in Iceland (Icelandic women and women of foreign origin) have become a part of the global #Metoo space for women, and when looking at the Icelandic #Metoo stories from a present and a past standpoint, it becomes clear that the #Metoo event stories have many of the same characteristics of the narrative dances and of the woman-on-woman oral history interview.

In the end of 2017, the year of the #Metoo revolution of women, I wrote an article about the common features of Icelandic #Metoo event stories and Icelandic narrative dances (more specifically a category of narrative dances called forced love (ice. *naudug ást*) which are about sexual abuse against women). The article was based on Icelandic #Metoo event stories and the research of Vésteinn Ólason on Icelandic narrative dances; the book *Sagnadansar* (1979). The article concluded that both the Icelandic #Metoo event stories and the Icelandic narrative dances originated over the Atlantic Ocean; their strength and power was based on the concept of the group; their vast distribution relied upon its narrative style i.e. both the #Metoo event stories and the narrative dances most often revolve around a single event and its preludes and consequences; both narrative forms are linked to classes; both use anonymity as a method of operating i.e. the women storytellers and the sexual offenders are most often anonymous (e.g. the anonymity of men and women in narrative dances appear in the form of standard names); and both narrative forms serve as a revenge for the women storytellers and listeners/readers, in relation to a silenced crime that goes largely unpunished. Also, both the #Metoo event stories and the narrative dances are known for informal narrative styles e.g. the using of foreign words – and for using conversations as a main storyline (Eygerðardóttir, 2018d). All of the aforementioned common features of Icelandic #Metoo event stories and narrative dances can also apply to woman-on-woman oral history interviews. It seems that we are looking at a women’s communicating tradition. A tradition to tell female experience.

## 7 CONCLUSION

Since the age of the settlement to the present day there has been women’s silence in Icelandic history (Halldórsdóttir, 2010, Kress, 1993). But even silence tells a story of its own; howls from the pages of history. A story in the form of spaces – between words of men. Not a lost story, rather a hidden one. A story that requires the historian to develop a second sight; to read silence, to listen to silence, to challenge silence with women’s voices. By doing women’s oral history on the last female drifters in Iceland, I was continuing women’s oral tradition in Iceland. The woman-on-woman oral history interview is a reflection of an old Icelandic oral tradition of women, called a narrative dance (ice. *sagnadans*); especially a category of narrative dances called forced love (ice. *naudug ást*). A dance that is based on female narration, to which women and men danced to in the Middle Ages. The oral traditions of the Icelandic foremothers, teach us that women need a space of their own in order to tell stories about women’s lived experiences. The physical space of the woman-on-woman interview enables women to talk about their female experience e.g. oppression in the Icelandic patriarchal society or stories about pregnancies or female friendships – stories that the grand-narrative excludes from its history books. This study revealed the importance of women’s perspectives when telling stories about other women, in this case the female drifters. The female interviewees’ perspectives shed a new light on the history of female drifters in Iceland by speaking about female experience; thus confronting a mythical image of women. It is my opinion that oral history is an apt method to document and analyze women’s experiences, a method that provides women with a space to tell stories, thus engaging women in the *design* of women’s history. Women remember differently – than men. They tell different stories – than men, in different ways – than men do. These factors call for different methods when studying the spoken words of women. From my experience in interviewing women in my historical studies, I conclude that it is very important to adapt the space of the storytelling/interview to women’s narrative style; the conversational style. One does not analyze a monologue, in same way as one would a dance. And a woman-on-woman oral history interview is nothing, if not a dance between two women. For if women’s history – the history of the female drifters, has taught me anything, then it is that women rely on the art of the conversation when sharing female experiences; and by creating a space for a conversation in women’s history, one is creating space for women in history. Just as the aforementioned female drifter Jófríður Þorkelsdóttir did – that sunny afternoon, when she sat a young woman down on the grass, on her birthday, in order to share her life with her (Halldórsdóttir, 1986). That young woman would go on to be a writer, and publish books. And words, spoken by a silent woman, on a sunny afternoon, became a chapter in women’s history.

I would have liked being able to give you a birthday gift, but like the apostle said: gold and silver I do not have, but I have something else, which perhaps is superior to gold and silver, I have a life experience.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Some scientific researchers have been done on drifting in Iceland e.g., the article “Í „öruggri vist” eða förufólk?: Hlutskipti fólks með geðsjúkdóma á Íslandi á 19. Öld” (In “a safe place” or drifters?: Fate of people with mental illnesses in Iceland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century) by Sigurgeir Guðjónsson, which deals with drifting in relation to mental illness resources.
- <sup>2</sup> A photograph of Margrét Sigurðardóttir (1869- 1962) from the book *Manga með svartan vanga – sagan öll. Sagan um Möngu með svartan vanga, Ásdís skáldkonu frá Rugludal, systurnar í Baslhaga og aðrar hvunnadagshetjur fyrri alda*. Published with the permission of the author/photographer Ómar Ragnarsson. The photograph is taken in valley Langidalur in East Hunavatns county.
- <sup>3</sup> Female drifters sometimes appear briefly in overview books about social misfits e.g.: *Utangarðs? : Ferðalag til fortíðar* by Halldóra Kristinsdóttir and Sigríður Hjördís Jörundsdóttir. Also: *Snöggir blettir* by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon.
- <sup>4</sup> Yngvi Leifsson, 2015. *Með álfum: Ævisaga Ingiríðar Eiríksdóttur frá Haga í Þingeyjarsýslu*. Sögufélag, Reykjavík. The book is partly based on the author’s Bachelor and Masters theses about the same subject.
- <sup>5</sup> Sytrur minninga úr Mýrdalnum: Rannsókn á munnlegri sögu (A Flow of Memories from Myrdalur: A Study on Oral History) is an oral history study on female drifters in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. The thesis focuses on one of the last female drifters in Iceland.
- <sup>6</sup> See Myth and Materiality in a Woman’s World: Shetland 1800-2000, by the historian Lynn Abrams. In her book Abrams uses the oral testimonies of women in Shetland in order to explore the female culture on the island incl. myth-making.
- <sup>7</sup> flame0430, (13.7.2008) Irish Murdoch on Philosophy and Literature: Section 1 (video file). Available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m47A0AmqxQE>, accessed in march 22, 2018.
- <sup>8</sup> Especially in relation to the second category of drifters. See: Background and methodology.
- <sup>9</sup> In some cases, elderly female drifters had a temporary address that could change between years. However, the women would always continue their drifting between farms.
- <sup>10</sup> Not being a part of a household could allow the women the freedom of behaving in a different manner within the private sphere of the homes than e.g. a female domestic laborer or a housewife.
- <sup>11</sup> A drawing of Jófríður Þorkelsdóttir (1865-1953) by the artist Guðbrandur Ásmundsson (1927-2008). Drawn by a description of Jófríður Þorkelsdóttir from the book *Öll erum við menn* by Helga Halldórsdóttir.
- <sup>12</sup> I refer to oral history as being a living history in my article “Konur á vatnaskilum: Hugvekja um femíníska munnlega sögu” (Women on the Wathershed: On Feminist Oral history), 42-57.
- <sup>13</sup> In relation to women’s muted experience, see: Kathryn Anderson and Dana C. Jack, 11.
- <sup>14</sup> The advantage of a female interviewer interviewing a female interviewee is that they share a common female

culture. Hence the female interviewer can e.g. express herself more openly when interviewed by a female interviewer.

- <sup>15</sup> Steinunn Sigurðardóttir: “Konan í þokunni”. *Stúlka: Ljóð eftir íslenskar konur*, 287: “Þar villtist konan í þokunni / af því hún áfram gekk / en átti að vera kjur....”.
- <sup>16</sup> A photograph of Þjóðhildur Þorvarðardóttir (1868-1953). The photograph is taken in Canda where Þjóðhildur lived for some years before coming back to Iceland.
- <sup>17</sup> A reference to the book *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf.
- <sup>18</sup> A photograph of Vigdís Ingvadóttir (1864-1957) taken in Myrdalur in West Skaftafell region.
- <sup>19</sup> See: Lynn Abrams, 61. See also M. Zukas, 1993. Friendship as Oral History: A Feminist Psychologist’s View. *Oral History*, 21, 2.
- <sup>20</sup> The sentence “a narrative space of our own” is a reference to the book *A Room of One’s Own* by Virginia Woolf.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author confirms that the content in this article has no conflicts of interest.

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