

Trans/Feminist Oral History

Current Projects

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Abstract This piece discusses current trans oral history projects that bring together feminist methodologies, transgender studies, and queer archives. I offer a map of some of these oral history projects, and their archive partners, while offering some reflections concerning how prior work in transgender ethnography and poststructuralist history are helping to shape contemporary approaches to trans oral history. Projects discussed include the LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory, the Transgender Archives (University of Victoria), the Digital Transgender Archive, the New York City Trans Oral History Project, the Trans Oral History Project, and the Transgender Oral History Project, Tretter Collection, University of Minnesota Libraries.

Keywords oral history, transgender, feminist, queer archives, transfeminism

We're amidst an unprecedented boom of trans oral history and archives projects in North America, all of which bring long-standing commitments to queer and feminist agendas and methods into articulation with transgender issues in ways that, as Talia Mae Bettcher and Finn Enke have argued, highlight the intersectionality of sexism and transphobia (Bettcher 2014; Enke 2010). In this short research note, I offer a rough guide to some of these oral history projects, along with their archive partners, after first offering some reflections concerning how prior work in transgender ethnography and poststructuralist history are helping to shape contemporary approaches to trans oral history.

What's motivating these projects? For most if not all of them, oral history promises activists, scholars, and community members access to trans people's own narratives, rather than the medical or juridical discourses that have shaped the production of much scholarship about trans lives. As members of the New York City Trans Oral History project have argued, "although in recent years there has been a growing interest in trans histories, the voices of trans people themselves have not always been prioritized in existing accounts" (The New York City Trans Oral History Project 2015). There's a sense that trans history has been

shaped by the most readily available sources, and these sources have generally been generated by the surgeons, psychologists, lawyers, and social workers that have worked with trans populations, rather than by those in the trans community. A similar motivation drives many contemporary trans oral history and archives projects: to interview elder activists before they pass, or to make trans archival materials, hidden within other collections, visible to researchers. In this way, scholars and activists hope to “portray experiences from the perspective of folks who live them” (The New York City Trans Oral History Project 2015). The Transgender Oral History Project at the Tretter Collection at the University of Minnesota, for example, “gathers and preserves transgender voices and experiences in the Upper Midwest” (Transgender Oral History Project Tretter Collection 2015). In other words, the impetus here is “history from the bottom up”: a social history of everyday people in the trans community.

Current work in trans/feminist oral history builds on prior work in both trans history and in lesbian and gay history. Within trans history, the oral history work of Susan Stryker, Viviane Namaste, and Brice Smith provide important precedents for current projects (Stryker 1996, 1997, 1998, 2002; Namaste 2005; Smith 2011). Yet the vast majority of LGBT oral history work has focused on documenting (implicitly nontrans) gay and lesbian pasts. As Nan Boyd has argued, almost all historical projects in US gay, lesbian, and queer history have relied upon oral history methods (Boyd 2008). The reasons for this methodological choice are no mystery in the context of feminist methodologies: whether researching queer lives, experiences, or discursive frames through which historical subjects have narrated their sexual subjectivities, scholars have turned to oral history as a corrective to medical, state, and legal discourses that have historically framed same-sex desire as pathological. As E. Patrick Johnson recently shared with Jason Ruiz in a conversation about black queer oral history, when writing *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men of the South—An Oral History*, he “was interested in creating a written archive because there was nothing available about African American, queer people in the South . . . [he] really wanted to fill that gap in the scholarship, in the archive” (Ruiz 2014: 163). Scholars and community activists historicizing the experiences of men who have sex with men in the rural South, or the sexual desires and community structures of butch/fem cultures in the 1950s, to reference just two of these important projects, have found qualitative interviewing to be a preferred methodology in documenting the gay and lesbian past (Kennedy and Davis 1993; Howard 2001; see also D’Emilio 1983; Chauncey 1994; Stein 2000; Boyd 2003; Johnson 2004; Murphy, Pierce, and Knopp 2010; Boyd and Ramirez 2012).

Yet a return to social history and the “experience” of trans people seems oddly old-fashioned for historians and other scholars who have been reading poststructural theory for the last few decades. Many of us involved in these

projects are inspired by the work of scholars in trans studies, such as David Valentine, who have crafted qualitative interviewing methodologies framed by poststructuralist critiques of language's discursive power. As he wrote in *Imagining Transgender*, drawing from Michel Foucault, he was interested in not simply how the category "transgender" described discrete histories but also in how this category *produced* the very phenomena it seems to describe (Valentine 2007; see also Matte 2014). Within feminist and queer theory, Ann Cvetkovich's poststructuralist work on public feelings and queer archives, as well as the many projects that her work has engendered, have also played an important role in motivating current transgender archival work (Cvetkovich 2003, 2007, 2012).

In my engagement with these oral history projects, I experience what Elizabeth Freeman has called "temporal drag": the queer pull of the past on a present that has declared that past to be "over" (Freeman 2000, 2010). What I thought was over—a desire to give "voice" to everyday "experience"—has been critiqued in gender and queer history for decades now as reinscribing the identity formations these projects are designed to historicize. As gender historian Joan Scott argued twenty-five years ago, social histories of everyday people "have provided evidence for a world of alternative values and practices whose existences give the lie to hegemonic constructions of social worlds" (Scott 1991: 776). While such histories do provide a "corrective" to incomplete historical records—for example, by adding the voices of trans people to those of psychologists—these projects, Scott worried in a different context, nonetheless take as "self-evident the identities of those whose experience is being documented and thus naturalize their difference" (777). These projects can run the risk of producing the very categories they are meant to explain. Rather than naturalize identities, Scott urged historians to ask questions about the discursive construction of binaries, the mechanism through which difference is established. She calls for history writing that attends to "the historical processes that, through discourse, positions subjects and produce their experiences" (779). In other words: questions not about the trans "experience" and "voice," but questions about the construction of categories that produce individuals as "trans"—a different project altogether.

I've read my poststructural and queer theory, yet here I am, like everyone else in these projects, clocking absurd numbers of hours conducting interviews, digitizing materials, building websites, writing metadata, vetting collections management systems, and performing the endless labor of transcribing and archiving. Why? In my case, the answer is as much affective as it is intellectual. I'm interested in doing things, rather than just writing about other people doing things. Enervated by (mere) representation, inspired by the queer and feminist turn to affect, archives, and the digital, like others I'm returning to oral history and qualitative interviewing with new questions and methods. It's possible to craft oral history projects that investigate both experience and voice—which

remain important—while also asking questions about the historical processes that produce those experiences: it's not an either/or.

The list below brings together a range of contemporary trans/feminist oral history projects. I have tried to be comprehensive, though no doubt there are other excellent projects in trans oral history out there that I have missed; if so, please don't hesitate to be in touch and let us know. These trans oral history projects have been shaped by prior generations' commitment to feminist oral history, which in turn have inspired lesbian and gay oral history scholarship. In our current moment, trans oral history is motivated by the same imperatives that gave rise first to feminist oral history projects concerning cis women, lesbians, and gay men: representing the world from the standpoint of marginalized subjects, using radical and democratic methods that take account of structures of power, including between narrator and interviewee. We have the benefit of doing this work in the wake of both materialist feminist attention to voice and the post-structuralist feminist focus on discourse and power. Working with these two important legacies, contemporary oral history and archives projects promise to transform trans history.

The LGBTQ Oral History Digital Collaboratory

This is a five-year digital history and oral history research collaboration that connects archives across Canada and the United States to produce a collaborative digital history hub for the research and study of gay, lesbian, queer, and trans oral histories. The trans-focused components include the Trans Partner Oral History Project, concerning the histories of partners of trans men in the United States and Canada (Prof. Elspeth Brown, interviewer), and the Trans History Oral History Project (Prof. Margot Wilson, interviewer), focused on the life histories of senior trans activists whose papers are being collected by the Transgender Archives at the University of Victoria. Directed by Elspeth H. Brown, associate professor of history at the University of Toronto, archival partners include the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA), the Transgender Archives, the Digital Transgender Archive, and the Archives of Lesbian Oral Testimony (ALOT). Scholars and activists involved in Collaboratory include Elspeth Brown, Nick Matte, Rebecka Sheffield, K. J. Rawson, Elise Chenier, Sara Davidmann, Aaron Devor, Karen Stanworth, Cait McKinney, Al Stanton-Hagan, Margot Wilson, and many others. The project is funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. See www.lgbtqdigitalcollaboratory.org.

Transgender Archives (University of Victoria)

Founded and directed by Prof. Aaron Devor, the Transgender Archives is actively acquiring documents, rare publications, and memorabilia of persons and

organizations that have worked for the betterment of trans people. As part of this work, Prof. Margot Wilson has been conducting life history interviews with activists who have donated their personal papers to the Transgender Archives. See transgenderarchives.uvic.ca.

Digital Transgender Archive (DTA)

Directed by K. J. Rawson, the DTA is an online hub for trans-related historical materials. Based in Worcester, Massachusetts, at the College of the Holy Cross, the DTA is an international collaboration among more than a dozen colleges, universities, nonprofit organizations, and private collections including CLGA, Cornell's Human Sexuality Collection, the GLBT Historical Society, the Sexual Minorities Archives, the Transgender Archives, and others. The DTA provides a comprehensive website and flexible search engine to foster education and dialogue concerning trans history. In terms of oral history projects, the DTA has been working with the Collaboratory on developing standardized metadata protocols for trans oral histories, and it is also the digital site for oral histories collected by the New York City Trans Oral History Project and Country Queers oral histories. See www.digitaltransgenderarchive.net.

New York City Trans Oral History Project

This is a group of six volunteers, including Jeanne Vaccaro and Abram J. Lewis, who are collecting oral histories of trans people in partnership with several New York-based organizations such as the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, Visual AIDS, and others. Their goal "is to center the insights, experiences, and direction of those who have been most peripheral to existing histories, including trans people of color and low income, immigrant, disabled, and HIV+ trans people" (New York City Trans Oral History Project 2015). The Digital Transgender Archive is making these oral histories available online. See www.nyctransoralhistory.org.

The Trans Oral History Project

This project, based in Chicago and Philadelphia, was founded by André Pérez in 2008. They are a "grassroots group of queer, trans, and gender variant people who travel around recording and distributing stories of other trans, gender variant, and gender non-conforming people so that we can help folks in our community have a voice" (The Trans Oral History Project 2015). Their website includes both interview transcripts and video clips. See transoralhistory.com.

Transgender Oral History Project, Tretter Collection, University of Minnesota

The Transgender Oral History Project is a collaboration of the Jean-Nickolaus Tretter Collection in Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies at the

University of Minnesota Libraries, University of Minnesota Foundation, and the Program in Human Sexuality at the University of Minnesota Medical School. In 2014, the Tretter Collection received a three-year grant to document historical and contemporary experiences of trans individuals in the upper Midwest. They plan to collect up to four hundred hours of oral histories involving two to three hundred individuals by 2017. See www.facebook.com/pages/Transgender-Oral-History-Project-Tretter-Collection-UMN/333509150161837.

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