

New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption

Edited by Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers. London and New York: Routledge, 2022. 219 pp. Paperback. \$48.95. ISBN 9780367551131

New Directions in Queer Oral History: Archives of Disruption is edited by Clare Summerskill and Amy Tooth Murphy (both with connections to Royal Holloway, University of London) and Emma Vickers (senior lecturer at Liverpool John Moores University in the United Kingdom). The editors stay true to the title by collecting nineteen chapters that indeed provide fresh ways of understanding queer oral histories. Contributions from a variety of practitioners—recognized scholars, new professionals, archivists, and activists—make the volume appealing and accessible to readers inside and outside of the academy. Positing oral history as embodied cocreation of history, the selections produce “archives of disruption” through vibrant explorations of queer time and space, subversive methodologies, and complex analyses of power in the interview process.

As a young graduate student in the 1990s, I was transformed by the rise of queer theory. I had been studying LGBTQ+ literature for several years and loving every minute of it. Discovering queer theory, though, felt fundamental; it completely changed my worldview and helped me make sense of life in addition to the texts I was analyzing. Around this time, I began conducting oral histories with LGBTQ+ people, inspired by grassroots historians such as Alan Berube, Joan Nestle, and John D’Emilio. In large part, I was seeking a way to document history “from below” in a way that was informed by queer theory.

I was elated when *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* came out in 2012, providing the first anthology of research about queer oral history. Edited by Nan Alamila Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramirez, it documents thirty years of queer intervention into oral history and oral history’s influence on the field of LGBTQ+ history. My twelve-year-old copy still sits close by on my bookshelf—underlined, dog-eared, and worn from use. In their introduction, Boyd and Ramirez express hope that their volume inspires “a next generation of queer oral historians by providing concrete examples of what has been made possible by queer oral history collaborations—and what has not (yet).”¹

Published in 2022, *New Directions in Queer Oral History* shows that it did not take a generation’s time to inspire important new explorations. Thanks to Summerskill, Murphy, and Vickers, that which was not (yet) imaginable in 2012 is now made concrete, expanding the possibilities of queer oral history beyond the innovations of *Bodies of Evidence*.

One of the foremost ways *New Directions* moves into new territory is by expanding the focus to scholarship outside of the United States, “from where so much of the established queer oral history canon originated,” as the editors write (p. 2). Only three of the selections in *New Directions* are by practitioners in the United States, and the rest are a rich collection of projects from the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. One of the hallmarks of queer theory is deconstructing norms that reproduce inequalities. The dominance of US perspectives in LGBTQ+ history has produced a “heroic narrative” norm, according to scholar Samuel Huenke. Too often, he writes, the dominant narrative implies a correlation between democracy, capitalism, and queer liberation, suggesting “that sexual minorities abroad must hit the same milestones to be liberated.”² While the editors of *New Directions* acknowledge a debt to American innovators, they seek to “offer new contributions that open up a more international discursive context in which queer oral history can continue to expand, cross-fertilise, and be visible” (p. 4).

This is not to discount the US contributors in *New Directions*. Anne Balay writes a strikingly creative critique of power in academia, archival professionalism, historiography, LGBTQ+ normativity, and US classism by weaving the personal with the political in “I Gotta Go’: Mobility as a Queer Methodology.” She infuses queer theory with labor politics, explores how truck stops are queer spaces, and compares oral history to sex work. “In a world where queers are poor, and poor queers are invisible,” Balay insists, “an oral historian’s job is to see them and let them talk—to get out of their way” (p. 149). Another US contributor, Jamie A. Lee, writes an incisive analysis of queer chronology told through their experience of interviewing Jay Kyle Petersen, the first self-identified intersex participant in the Arizona Queer Archives (which Lee founded). Lee describes how Petersen’s “queer-chronological storytelling disrupts the limited and limiting possibilities that have often sedimented and structured LGBTQI+ and queer lives” (p. 140).

The editors of *New Directions* also disrupt the urban focus of many queer histories by featuring projects conducted in rural and small-town settings. Valerie J. Korinek writes about the oral histories that informed her book, *Prairie Fires: A History of Queer Communities and People in Western Canada, 1930–1985*. She argues that the oral histories create a “‘queer view’ of the prairies that purposefully challenges the heteronormative historiography of the prairie west with its emphasis on family settlement, agriculture, Indigenous-settler relations, and the Great Depression” (p. 31). In another project, Caroline Fela interviews nurses who worked in the small coastal town of Warrnambool, Australia, during the AIDS pandemic in the 1980s and 1990s. John, one of the nurses, narrates his first gay sexual encounter in the town’s nearby campground. Fela writes, “Within this story of how John came into his queerness lies a challenge to the ‘impossibility’ of gay life outside metropolitan centers, and the hegemonic narrative . . . that insists on the mutual dependence between coming out and moving to the city” (p. 27). These contributions show

the urgency of including the voices of country and small-town queer people to construct a deeper, more accurate account of LGBTQ+ life in the past and present.

I was struck by several chapters focusing on bisexuality in *New Directions*. A 2022 Gallup Poll based on over 10,000 interviews reported that more than half of US LGBTQ+ people identify as bisexual.³ Similarly, the UK census in England and Wales documented 1.5 percent of the population identifying as lesbian or gay and almost as many (1.3%) identifying as bisexual.⁴ The numbers alone justify more research about bisexual people and communities; the history of bisexual invisibility in the queer community signifies a pressing need for it. Contributors to *New Directions* begin to fill this need. Lauren Jae Guttermann, for example, analyzes power relations in lesbian oral histories that contribute to bisexual erasure. She found that quite a few narratives classified as “lesbian” in archives catalogs tell stories of bisexuality within the recording. Numerous lesbian oral histories reveal sexual defensiveness from women who had been involved with men, exposing a fear that such relationships compromised their lesbian identities. Other narrators consider bisexuality as solely an intermediary identity on the path to lesbianism. Guttermann argues that while we need more explicitly bisexual oral histories, we also need to recognize that bisexuality is already present in narratives we do have: “Reading lesbian and gay oral histories differently suggests not a scarcity, but rather an abundance, of interviews documenting bisexuality’s past” (p. 57). Because of the bisexual stigma in heteropatriarchal culture *and* in queer communities, Martha Robinson Rhodes, another contributor, finds it useful to distinguish between bisexuality (as an identity) and multiple gender attraction (as a capacity of sexual and romantic attraction) to bring out stories from reluctant narrators. She concludes, “attention paid to bisexuality and multiple-gender-attraction has the potential to inform, build on, and complicate the field of queer oral history” (p. 121).

I find queer theory helpful when talking about oral history with students in our university archives at Regis University. It is a perfect way to prepare them to do interviews for our queer experience collection documenting LGBTQ+ life on campus. While it is possible that many of the students identify as queer, it is just as possible that they do not. The question arises whether nonqueer-identifying people can do queer oral history. Many of the selections in *New Directions* offer compelling evidence that when an interviewer and a narrator identify as LGBTQ+, oral history can be a remarkable experience of cocreation that can lead to shared self-affirmation, queer joy, and even lasting friendships. Yet El Chenier also offers a compelling argument that queer oral history can be just as beneficial to nonqueer participants in their essay, “An Army of Listeners: Interviewing Lesbians as a Practice of Liberation for All.” In a seminar on lesbian oral history, they found that “the intimate and relational experience of gathering oral testimony expanded students’ sense of what is possible in their own life,” whether students were straight or cisgender, queer or

trans. I tend to agree with Chanier who asserts: “*that* is the radical potential of queer oral history” (p. 203).

I could write about similar “ah-ha” moments while reading each chapter in *New Directions*. Already my copy is streaked with neon yellow highlighter and dog-eared just like its predecessor, *Bodies of Evidence*. *New Directions* will live next to it on the shelf of books I reference often. The variety of perspectives and nuance of analysis in this volume lead me to marvel at what future generations of LGBTQ+ people will document about nonnormative gender and sexuality. Whatever emerges, the editors of *New Directions* believe that “queer oral historians will similarly develop ways in which to tease these out via the interview and analytical process” (p. 10). So do I.

New Directions could be classified as a book for and about queer people, and more particularly for and about queer people participating in oral history projects. Yet I believe this book can be important to additional readers in several contexts. Anyone involved in historical work or museum/archival professions will appreciate the unrelenting analyses of power involved in history-making activities. Students and lifelong learners in social sciences and humanities will find fascinating narratives about identity formation, affect, community building, political struggles, and LGBTQ+ life in a variety of settings. Every chapter contributes important understandings gained from thoughtfully applying theory to practice to address and subvert normative pressures in archives and oral history. Researchers with similar motives in any discipline or professional area will benefit from the insightful examples in *New Directions*.

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Regis University

NOTES

- ¹ Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, eds., *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 17.
- ² Samuel Huneke, “The Problem with a U.S.-centric Understanding of Pride and LGBTQ Rights,” *Washington Post*, June 4, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/06/04/problem-with-us-centric-understanding-pride-lgbtq-rights/>.
- ³ Jeffrey M. Jones, “LGBT Identification in U.S. Ticks Up to 7.1%,” *Gallup*, February 17, 2022, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/389792/lgbt-identification-ticks-up.aspx>.
- ⁴ “2021 Census: What Do We Know About the LGBT+ Population?,” UK Parliament, House of Commons Library, January 16, 2023, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/2021-census-what-do-we-know-about-the-lgbt-population/>.