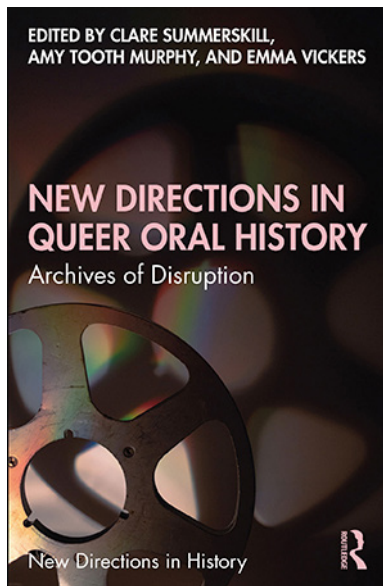


# QUEER INTERVIEWS

## New Directions and Various Challenges

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Clare Summerskill, Amy Tooth Murphy, and Emma Vickers (eds). 2022. *New Directions in Queer Oral History. Archives of Disruption*. London and New York: Routledge. 219 pages.

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*New Directions in Queer Oral History* is an incredibly detailed collection of 19 articles from queer oral historians with various backgrounds. In their articles,

the writers revisit their queer history interviews and discuss the difficulties and possibilities that queer oral history has as a practice. The book also gives tools for its readers to prepare for different kinds of obstacles they might discover while interviewing sexual and gender minorities. In this book review, I discuss themes of the book and reflect on them in relation to my own oral history interviews in my MA project on Finnish trans history.

### Generational Gaps and Personal Archives

*New Directions in Queer Oral History* is divided into four parts. The first part of the book focuses on narrating LGBTQ histories and the visibilities and invisibilities that may be caused by different oral history practices. In his article “Queer Intergenerational Reticence: A Religious Case Study”, George J. Severs examines his interview with “Jeremy”, an older HIV/AIDS activist of the Church of England, pointing out that the age of the interviewer and the interviewee play an important role in oral history interviews. Severs has studied the relationship between the Church of England and HIV/AIDS activism in the 1970s and the 1980s by interviewing the Church members. Severs argues that in his case, the generational gap between him and the interviewee caused him to be reluctant to ask certain questions and not to question further the answers given to him. He also notes that due to his admiration of Jeremy, he failed to take into account that Jeremy’s activism might have affected his career harmfully as a priest (p. 40–48). Importantly, Severs’ article reminds us that younger researchers, who admire the queer elders they interview, may be easily blinded by positive images of history produced by the interviewees. The article also points out that the admiration may prevent them from asking difficult questions that could result in different narratives about

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the history of LGBTQ activism. In order to produce critical analysis, younger and older researchers must evaluate their attitudes and ties with the researched movements and the research participants so that their own idealized images of them do not guide the interview process.

Severs' article skillfully shows that different backgrounds, like age differences, may have an influence on the interviewing process. According to Severs, the generational gap between young queer researchers and queer elders can create a wall between the groups since the younger generations haven't lived during, for instance, the criminalization of homosexuality. These differences might also create distrust between the interviewer and the interviewee (p. 44–45).

However, this isn't always the case, as El Chenier's article "An Army of Listeners" wonderfully proves. Chenier's article is located in the fourth part of the book, which discusses the authority in queer oral history processes. Chenier writes about a queer history seminar, during which their students interviewed a group of older lesbians, who had been involved in the women's movement in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s. According to Chenier, their students found common ground and shared mutual interests with the older lesbians even though students were not of the same generation as the interviewees (p. 195–200). This demonstrates that in order to be successful, a queer oral history interview does not necessarily require the participants to share a common generational background. According to Chenier, during their course, one of the key elements to a successful interview was, instead, cross-generational respect for each other's experiences. This seemed to break the generational wall between the participants (p. 195–201).

Cross-generational respect played an important role also in the queer oral history interviews I conducted for my MA thesis in Cultural History. While interviewing older cross-dressers and transfeminine people about

their life experiences in Finland in the 1990s and 2000s, I made sure that the interviewees were allowed to describe their identity in their own terms and words, even though I otherwise used modern language to describe gender diversity in my own work. Meeting and interviewing older people from the trans community was also important to me personally because it gave me role models from the past. According to Chenier, it is important for younger queer students to meet queer elders. After Chenier's course, one student commented that meeting older queer people made their own future easier to imagine (p. 195–200). This is an important observation since trans and queer histories are often fractional, and historical role models can be difficult to find.

Noah Riseman's article "Finding 'Evidence of Me' through 'Evidence of Us': Transgender Oral Histories and Personal Archives Speak" highlights this fractionality of trans histories. Riseman has researched transgender history in Australia from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During his study, he noted that it was common for the research participants to have a personal collection of different trans-related articles and newspaper clippings. These personal archives, as Riseman explains in his article, can help the researcher discover hidden or forgotten aspects of history. Riseman also notes that these personal collections of trans people often serve as collections of "evidence of me" and "evidence of us". By this, he refers to the collector's urgent need for collecting every little piece of information about trans people and the trans community they can find, regardless of the quality of the source. As Riseman writes, these collections can offer exceptional opportunities for the researcher to discover new information about, e.g., smaller organizations that don't have the resources to organize their own archives (p. 59–68).

Working together with Dreamwear Club, a support organization of cross-dressers and transfeminine people in Finland, has taught me that personal

archives often offer vital clues about the organizations and people within them. Therefore, I found Riseman's descriptions of trans people's personal archival practices very relatable, as the members of Dreamwear Club had also collected old newspaper clippings from other magazines and printed them out on their own club magazines.

## Bodies Matter?

The second and third parts of the book discuss important themes of bodies and intersubjective meaning-making and how they affect queer oral history. Articles in these sections underline that bodies are physical constructions that have both affected the experiences of the interviewee and the interviewer in the past and affect the oral history processes in the present because they offer visual clues of sameness or difference to the participants of the interview. Several writers refer to the book *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History* edited by Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez, in which Boyd and Ramírez argue that bodies have an effect on the interview process and that similar bodies present in the interview situation contribute to the authenticity of the interview (Boyd & Ramírez 2012, 2).

One notable example of how bodies have affected the experiences in the past is given in Margaret Robinson's article "Bisexual Women's Storytelling and Community-Building in Toronto", in which she discusses her interviews with 40 bisexual women about bisexuality and polyamorous relationships. In her study, Robinson analysed her interview data using Voice-Centred Relational Analysis (VCRA), in which the researcher examines the research participant and the cultural and physical frameworks they are speaking from. One aim of the analysis is to pinpoint what kind of body the interviewee is talking from (p. 111–114). Robinson found out that the discussion about bodies was often related to the interviewees'

gender identity and their attitudes towards gender norms in the past. For instance, one participant reported that they didn't conform to society's norms of being a woman at the time of the interview because of their big size (p. 115). Robinson's article demonstrates that, regardless of the same background, people with bodies that do not conform to societal norms may experience history differently.

Bodies can also create trust and queer intimacy in the present. Martha Robinson Rhodes's article "Filling the Boxes in Ourselves" distinctively points out that interviewees often attempt to search for clues of "sexual sameness" from the interviewer's appearance. In her study, she interviewed self-identified bisexuals and people attracted to multiple genders about their life experiences in Great Britain from the 1970s to the 1990s. As reported by Robinson Rhodes, clothing choices and hairstyles can be markers of the queerness of the researcher. According to her, these signals help to build mutual trust between the interviewer and interviewee (p. 121–123). Amy Tooth Murphy notes the same in her article "In Search of Queer Composure: Queer Temporality, Intimacy, and Affect", in which she examines her interviews with butch lesbians. In her article, Tooth Murphy suggests that similar bodily markers, such as butch haircuts, combined with similar queer backgrounds can result in mutual bonding and create queer joy and intimacy during the oral history interviewing process. She argues that it is important to create a queer space and queer time for the interview that allows the participants to be comfortable and to connect with each other. Tooth Murphy also suggests that granting space for queer joy and solidarity in the interviews contributes to creating more diverse interpretations of history (p. 163–169).

What sets these articles apart is that in Robinson Rhodes's study, her participants asked whether she was bisexual or not, whereas Tooth Murphy seems to have either passed as a butch lesbian to her interviewees or talked

about her orientation beforehand (p. 122–123; 163–169). As Robinson Rhodes argues, it is not easy to pass as a bisexual in the interviews because of the generational differences and the lack of universal visual signs of bisexuality (p. 123). This proves that even though the bodies of the interviewer and the interviewee would visually seem to be similar, they do not necessarily create mutual bonding if the meanings we give to our bodies are not the same. For instance, when I interviewed trans women for my MA thesis, I was sometimes confused to be a trans woman myself. As a masculine-leaning nonbinary person, this took me by surprise during the interviews, but the misunderstanding was cleared up quickly. Tooth Murphy's article brings up an important point about mutual bonding and queer joy, but when read alongside Robinson Rhodes's text, it seems to lack reflection on the fact that every identity group does not have clear visual signs indicating what their sexual orientation or gender identity is. However, this does not mean that the groups who have these markers should not feel queer joy over them – on the contrary, it is important to cherish the diversity of the LGBTQ community and remember that all queer oral history theories do not work with every group in the same way.

## In Conclusion

*New Directions in Queer Oral History* is a great book for anyone conducting research on queer oral history. It gives wonderful advice on how to plan and carry out successful oral history interviews. It also helps you to prepare for the interviews and the obstacles you might encounter while interviewing LGBTQ people. Reading about the difficulties and possibilities in queer oral history also gives the reader insight into how to analyze the interviews and how to find a new level of nuance in them. *New Directions in Queer Oral History* is also a book that I would have needed when I started planning my MA thesis on Finnish trans history. I'm delighted to have this book as a guide now, as I am starting to work on my PhD thesis.

## References

- Boyd, Nan Alamilla & Ramírez, Horacio N. Roque (eds.). 2012. *Bodies of Evidence. The Practice of Queer Oral History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.