

# Who Is the Subject? Queer Theory Meets Oral History

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THE TINY SUBFIELD OF U.S. gay, lesbian, and queer history has evolved since the publication of John D'Emilio's 1983 *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* into a fledgling discipline that has over time established an overarching set of research questions and an accepted set of research methods.<sup>1</sup> With the exception of a few monographs, like Peter Boag's exhaustively researched *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (2003), there are few works in this twenty-five-year-old field that do not depend heavily on oral history methods. As George Chauncey observes in *Gay New York*, "early in my research it became clear that oral histories would be the single most important source of evidence concerning the internal working of the gay world."<sup>2</sup> The use of oral history methods stems back to the field's social history moorings, where historians of the dispossessed found themselves lacking print sources and turned to live historical actors for information about the recent past. In practicing the craft, however, U.S. gay, lesbian, and queer historians have been influenced by feminist ethnographers, whose methodology attempts to clarify the social, economic, and ideological differences that exist between researchers and their so-called subjects. Feminist researchers try to empower (rather than exploit) historical narrators by trusting their voices, positioning narrators as historical experts, and interpreting narrators' voices alongside the

<sup>1</sup> I use the phrase "gay, lesbian, and queer" rather than the more familiar "gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender" as a shorthand that collapses bisexual and transgender projects into the umbrella category "queer." I do this because (while there are notable exceptions) most bisexual and transgender projects—and many gay and lesbian projects—interrogate the limits of identity politics in ways that produce a queer analysis, that is, an analysis of the social construction of identity that contests fixed categories of identification. However, there are still a number of projects that investigate "gay" and "lesbian" subjectivity exclusively, so it is important to retain these categories of historical investigation.

<sup>2</sup> George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 370. Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

narrators' interpretations of their own memories.<sup>3</sup> Many gay, lesbian, and queer historians have followed suit.

Drawing from the methods and methodology sections of a number of historical and anthropological monographs, this essay discusses how gay, lesbian, and queer history projects have used oral history and ethnography to frame their projects. Discourse analysis and queer theory's interrogation of subjectivity raise important questions about oral history methodologies, however. Do oral histories provide reliable representations of the past? What kind of truths do oral history methods reveal? This essay examines the evolution of a discussion about oral history methods in U.S. gay, lesbian, and queer historiography by analyzing how several key texts discuss historical methodology, particularly in relation to queer theory. Beyond the discursive clash between queer theory and oral history, however, I hope to raise larger questions about the history of sexuality and its methods: Does the history of sex, sexuality, and desire have a unique relationship to self-disclosure and, thus, to oral history methods? Are questions of method particularly vexed in queer projects because they discuss illegal or illicit desire? And is there something voyeuristically compelling about the way narrators (and researchers) create social meaning out of sexual desire?

This essay analyzes the evolution of a distinct method in U.S. gay, lesbian, and queer historical research, and the texts I discuss have been chosen because they contribute significantly to that evolution. The following is not an inclusive list of significant works in queer history but, rather, a selection of texts that, through their discussion of historical methods, have pushed methodological questions forward. The texts I discuss, in chronological order, include John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (1983), Allan Bérubé's *Coming Out under Fire* (1990), Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis's *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* (1993), Esther Newton's *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* (1993), George Chauncey's *Gay New York* (1994), and John Howard's *Men like That* (1999).<sup>4</sup> I'll also offer some methodological comments on my own publication, *Wide-Open Town* (2003).<sup>5</sup> This essay explores how researchers—mostly historians but also a few anthropologists—have grappled with the challenge queer theory poses to oral history in its dependence both on self-knowing—that is, that

<sup>3</sup> Shulamit Reinhardt, *Feminist Methods in Social Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in America's First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); Chauncey, *Gay New York*; and John Howard, *Men like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

narrators will be able to articulate a coherent or consistent representation of themselves as historical actors—and on transparent subjectivity—that is, that historians can somehow come to know these “selves” through their self-descriptions. Why has sexual self-disclosure become so important to gay, lesbian, and queer historical research? And what does the dependence on oral history methods tell us about this fledgling field?

Before I attempt to answer these questions, let me explain what I mean by “the challenge queer theory poses to oral history.” Queer theory challenges a transhistorical and cross-cultural interpretation of history that conflates same-sex behavior with the ipso facto existence of sexual identities. Michel Foucault argues in *The History of Sexuality* that the discursive or cultural construction of the sexual self emerged at the same time as the rise of the modern nation-state and is linked to modern notions of citizenship.<sup>6</sup> In other words, broad categories of national or cultural belonging (citizenship) have become dependent on meanings attached to sexual behavior (good/bad, moral/immoral, legal/criminal) and have produced the concept of sexual identity (heterosexual/homosexual). Queer theory also relies on Foucault’s claim that the truth of one’s self came to be embedded in the sexed body through modern medical science.<sup>7</sup> Biological and psychological theories of normative bodies and behavior, codified through nineteenth-century Western European intellectual history, mapped a knowable self on a binary of normative heterosexuality and its nonnormative counterpart, homosexuality. Following these insights, David Halperin argued in *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality* that modern identities, like heterosexuality and homosexuality, should not be superimposed on historical subjects, like those who engaged in same-sex practices in ancient Greece, where sexual behaviors carried different meanings.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Judith Butler has argued that self-knowing and self-disclosure—that is, claiming a sexual identity—function to reiterate, through language and practice, the very terms upon which the ideas of normative and nonnormative sexualities are constructed.<sup>9</sup>

Queer theory’s challenge to oral history methods is multiple. When researchers depend on the voices of historical actors to narrate the history of sexual identities, that is, how individuals understood their sexual selves in relation to larger social forces, the meaning of their self-disclosure is always constructed around historically specific norms and meanings. As a speaking subject, it is nearly impossible for oral history or ethnographic narrators to

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1, *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978).

<sup>7</sup> Michel Foucault, introduction to *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, trans. Richard McDougall (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

<sup>8</sup> David Halperin, *One Hundred Years of Homosexuality: And Other Essays on Greek Love* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

use language outside the parameters of modern sexual identities. Narrators cannot remove themselves from the discursive practices that create stable subject positions. The narrators' voices must, therefore, be read as texts, open to interpretation, and their disclosures should be understood as part of a larger process of reiteration, where identities are constantly reconstructed around very limited sets of meanings. Moreover, along with queer theory's investigation of the history of sexuality and the socialization of sexual beings into discrete and knowable subjectivities came an implicit critique of self-knowing and self-telling. How can we ever really know ourselves when the idea of *self* is a discursive product of modernity that remains dependent on the idea of *not-self*, that is, other? Given this, how can we rely on historical narrators as coinvestigators or interpretive agents? Aren't they always already enmeshed in the social conditions that produce their own articulations of self through desire? Or is there something special about articulations of desire that enables some kind of greater collaboration between historian and narrator?

D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* set the foundation for the production of historical narrative in U.S. gay, lesbian, and queer history.<sup>10</sup> In it he draws from at least sixteen tape-recorded interviews and a host of "private conversations" to make an argument about the politicization and organization of lesbian and gay communities in the pre-Stonewall era. D'Emilio interviewed many of the key players in San Francisco's and New York's early lesbian and gay history, figures like Hal Call, Dorr Legg, Don Lucas, Del Martin, Frank Kameny, George Mendenhall, and Larry Littlejohn. His capacity to tell the story of the homophile movement's early history is at times entirely dependent on his oral history data, but D'Emilio does not problematize his oral history methods. In fact, he makes no mention of the interviews he conducted in his introduction or throughout the text. The challenge posed by queer theory, and the concept of oral history as a problematic method emerged after D'Emilio published his important manuscript. Nonetheless, methodologically, D'Emilio's book paved the way for future histories to be written. His use of oral histories offered a blueprint for the kind of research methods that were perhaps necessary for the production of gay and lesbian community histories.

Published almost a decade later, Bérubé's *Coming Out under Fire* is heavily dependent on oral history methods. Bérubé's text was published around the time queer theory emerged as an important analytical tool, but Bérubé calls his study of U.S. gays and lesbians during World War II a grassroots history project. There is no mention of "method" or "methodology" in the introduction, but he explains that his research was enabled by a "traveling slideshow" during which he would screen developing drafts of his work in various communities and, innovatively, cull information from the crowd to

<sup>10</sup> For a review of the impact of D'Emilio's 1983 text on the production of U.S. gay and lesbian history see Marc Stein, "Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography," *GLQ* 11, no. 4 (2005): 605–25.

further his analysis. He notes that his traveling slideshow enabled an "ongoing public dialog with the communities whose history I was documenting and to which I belonged."<sup>11</sup>

Led by audience participation and public enthusiasm, the people who attended his slideshows often "agreed to be interviewed [and even] collected funds to pay for research expenses."<sup>12</sup> In the process, Bérubé notes, more than one hundred gay men and lesbians volunteered to be interviewed about their experience during World War II, and he formally interviewed seventy-one World War II veterans. He calls these documents "personal stories" instead of oral histories, and they enabled him "to see military policies from the points of view of the people they directly affected."<sup>13</sup> Bérubé transcribed and archived many of these stories, and he was vividly aware of their role as historical documents. Still, and despite the interventions of queer theory, he does not grapple with questions of methodology beyond the implicit theory that through oral history, that is, through trusting the voices of those whose experiences he was recounting, and community feedback (the traveling slideshow) he would uncover a stable and reliable representation of gay and lesbian participation in World War II. Read together as the two most important books in U.S. gay and lesbian history to date, D'Emilio's and Bérubé's texts established a useful method without overt methodological analysis. A dependence on oral history, at least for Bérubé, carried with it a responsibility to check in with the community from which these histories emerged.

Kennedy and Davis's equally foundational text, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold*, follows D'Emilio's and Bérubé's method, but these authors take great pains to discuss their methodology in light of the challenges posed by queer theory. More explicitly, Kennedy and Davis grapple with the question of subjectivity. In their introduction they tell us that they started their project in much the same way that Bérubé started his, as a grassroots history project that sought to create an archive of oral history tapes that they would "give back to the community" in the form of public presentations. Their method is explicitly feminist in that it foregrounds the voices of women narrators and seeks to establish the sexual and political agency of lesbians who had heretofore been all but forgotten by history. Kennedy and Davis also engage the reader in a lengthy discussion of memory and its uses. Is memory too subjective and idiosyncratic a basis for historical analysis, they ask? What, then, are pertinent and reliable sources in lesbian history? What if letters, newspaper accounts, and court records cannot trace the social history of lesbian sexuality and sexual mores?

In their introduction Kennedy and Davis walk a tightrope between the material conditions of their narrators' lives, framed by feminist research protocols and queer theory's challenge to meanings embedded in oral

<sup>11</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out under Fire*, x.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

history documents. They struggle with practical questions about how the narrators would experience their collaboration with the researchers: Should the narrators benefit economically by participating in the research? Could the narrators actually speak for themselves, in an unmediated fashion, about their own experience? The results seem to position the oral histories at face value, as unmediated texts, but then the researchers pose a different set of questions about interpretation, wondering if all historical narrative—including the oral histories, the collaboration between researcher and narrator, and the authors' published analysis—is contingent, constructed, and discursive. In that case, does it really matter if some narrators tell the factual truth (for example, get their dates correct) while others remember, shall we call it, a more romantic story about their historical role?

Kennedy and Davis escape radical relativism by claiming that some interpretations might reveal more reality than others. They note that even if the results (data and analysis) are constructed, subjective, or discursive, they can still be offered up as part of the historical record. More importantly, Kennedy and Davis outline a method that enables them to produce results that lean toward material reality without dismissing discursive limitations. They asked open questions, did not interrupt the narrators, and had no set format for their forty-five interviews. Narrators, they argue, structured the interviews themselves. Kennedy and Davis only interjected questions during “a definite lull in the interview,” and they often returned for a second interview in order to allow narrators to follow up with thoughts or memories that may have been triggered by the initial interview.<sup>14</sup> Kennedy and Davis checked and supplemented their narrators' stories with research into news accounts of bar raids and state liquor authority policy, but they often note that there were “no public events or institutions to which [some of] the memories can be linked.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, the memory of how someone had sex and/or presented a certain sexual style seemed to change over time, but these changes remained disconnected from traditional historical landmarks such as news accounts or police records.

This factor, which I'll call the ephemeral sex factor, is Kennedy and Davis's greatest contribution in that it positions the changing history of lesbian sex as the material basis for identity and community formation. Without a link to traditional historical landmarks, the ephemeral sex factor compelled Kennedy and Davis to sort through their interviews in a more nuanced way in search of “greater reality.” In doing so, Kennedy and Davis make an innovative observation. They note that they needed five to ten narrators' stories to be juxtaposed in order to develop an analysis that was not changed dramatically by each new story. They argue that in the absence of print documents, the narrators' voices could be trusted when they belonged to a cohort that, like Bérubé's community feedback loop, could verify the

<sup>14</sup> Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

accuracy of the "data to be offered up for the historical record." In this way, the narrators themselves provided a "reality check" and a way for Kennedy and Davis to trust their data. Still, Kennedy and Davis challenge their own conclusions by wondering how history is shaped by the survival of some narrators over others, the willingness of some to speak while others chose silence, and the greater intelligibility of some narrators' stories over others (exemplified by the conundrum of the fem lesbian as the stereotypically silent partner to the more visible and vocal butch). Kennedy and Davis conclude with a sewing metaphor, noting that "we leave visible the seams by which the story is constructed," and, in fact (not to mix metaphors too boldly), these seams have become the gems of the historical record.<sup>16</sup>

Newton's *Cherry Grove, Fire Island* is an ethnographic study of a "gay resort town." For her project Newton immersed herself in the Cherry Grove community, interviewed over one hundred people, and, as she notes in her methods section (in an afterword), conducted forty-six taped interviews with "principal narrators." Personal interviews are, thus, the primary mode of data collection, and "major events and themes of each historical period [in the Grove's history] generally emerged after two to three interviews."<sup>17</sup> Newton mentions a number of protocols she employed to check for bias in the data, including cross-checking narrators' recollections to verify dates of important events, cross-checking events through news reports, and reading through other written sources. She also accounts for the ways "different points of view" could bias a narrator's discussion of a particular event. These points of view include gay/straight, owner/renter, woman/man. Interestingly, Newton cites Kennedy and Davis's methodological observation that "between five and ten narrators' stories need to be juxtaposed in order to develop an analysis that is not changed dramatically by each new story."<sup>18</sup> Newton also notes that in gay historical narrative it is important to use "real names" rather than pseudonyms. Real names counterbalance the history of hiding or secrecy that pseudonyms imply, and this representational strategy underscores Newton's stated commitment to visibility as an antidote to historical erasure. Newton also uses italics to signify drag names so readers can identify the "real gender" or cross-gender practices of certain narrators. She suggests that it is important to ground gender-transgressive identities (drag names) in biologically sexed bodies because "woman" and "man" are subjective points of view of which the reader should be aware.

Newton's text marks the evolution of a methodological discourse within gay and lesbian historiography. That is, Newton cites Kennedy and Davis's method rather than, say, that of Michael Frisch or Irving Goffman. Newton thus positions her work as the next step in an evolving genre of U.S. gay and lesbian historical narrative that investigates the history of communities built

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>17</sup> Newton, *Cherry Grove*, 302.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

on sexual self-definition: How does desire structure our lives? Why do some people build geographically specific communities around their same-sex attractions? What do these communities mean? How have they changed over time? Newton's history of Cherry Grove answers these questions by aligning same-sex sexuality and community formation with prideful assertions of gay and lesbian identity. Visibility politics play a key role in Newton's methodology in that she depends on publicly visible gays and lesbians to speak openly about their lives, and she uses these stories as the primary documents in her text. Privileging visibility biases Newton's data in favor of those who pridefully claim their queer sexual identities, but her strategy raises other methodological questions. In a separate essay Newton brilliantly outlines the impact of desire (including her own and others' flirting) on her research.<sup>19</sup> Likewise, a shared sense of sexual subjectivity as lesbians enabled the author to connect intimately with at least one key narrator. And while there is often a shared sense of historical desire between the researcher and the researched, when the subject of the research is desire itself, as in the history of sexual communities, the role of flirting and seduction can become a key methodological issue. In this instance sexual desire gave the author a crucial entrée into the community and, later, keen insights into Cherry Grove's gay history.

The territory of Chauncey's *Gay New York* overlaps considerably with Newton's study of Cherry Grove, but their methodological reflections couldn't be more distinct. Chauncey discusses his methods in a section entitled "Note on Sources." The importance of Chauncey's discussion is diminished by its ancillary placement in the text, located between the epilogue and endnotes and printed in the smaller font of the book's endnotes. Indeed, his discussion is almost apologetic, as if no one but the most stalwart researcher would bother to read this section. Yet his reflections are significant to this discussion. Chauncey's brilliant analysis of the complexities of identity construction via visibility politics in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century New York City provides a nuanced account of some of the larger issues plaguing the history of sexuality. How did men who engaged in same-sex sexual behaviors perceive themselves in the context of New York City's turn-of-the-century and Progressive Era culture? How did they make meaning out of the race- and class-based social worlds they traversed? Chauncey's methods section initially suggests that the answers to these questions could be found in the print materials he uncovered after years of meticulous research, but toward the end, almost as an aside, he notes that the seventy-five oral history interviews he conducted as part of his research provided the greatest insight into "the internal workings of the gay world." The difference between Newton's and Chauncey's discussion of their methods may be a product of discipline. As an anthropologist, Newton is more self-reflexive about the character and latent meanings embedded in her research. Chauncey, the historian, may have disciplinary

<sup>19</sup> Esther Newton, "My Best Informant's Dress: The Erotic Equation in Fieldwork," in *Margaret Mead Made Me Gay* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2000), 243-57.

reasons to downplay the value of nonprint sources. Despite the remarkable complexity of analysis around identity formation in *Gay New York*, Chauncey gives us little insight into how the oral histories he collected impacted his analysis. He does note, however, that for a “thoughtful commentary on oral history methodology” the reader should consult Kennedy and Davis’s *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* and Newton’s *Cherry Grove, Fire Island*, positioning these two (feminist and anthropological) texts as seminal works in the evolution of gay, lesbian, and queer oral history methodology.

In *Men like That* Howard takes great pains to interpret his method—and his interpretations speak directly to the challenges posed by queer theory. Howard uses fifty sets of interviews to construct a history of those he calls “men-who-have-sex-with-men” in mostly rural Mississippi. Simply by saying, “Tell me your life story,” Howard captured the voice of “men like that” and asked these narrators to tell him stories of the more elusive “men who liked that.”<sup>20</sup> In other words, Howard was less interested in mapping identities than in the history of queer desire, and he set out to construct a history of queer desire rather than a history of those who built identities around their same-sex sexual activities. This is a completely different project from those previously mentioned—it’s a queer project that directly addresses Kennedy and Davis’s ephemeral sex factor. What is the history of queer desire? How was it structured? What were its social and cultural meanings? In order to answer these questions Howard faced a methodological problem in that, without identity as a structuring paradigm, it was difficult for him to find men who had sex with men in the 1950s and 1960s who did not identify as homosexual or gay. Identity-based organizations and post-Stonewall visibility politics would not be able to lead him quickly and easily to the histories he sought to uncover. Moreover, Howard’s interest in interracial same-sex sexuality and the post-World War II social world of African American “men-who-have-sex-with-men” further complicated his use of traditional oral history methods.

To uncover these histories Howard relied not simply on personal stories but on “twice-told stories,” in other words, secondhand stories or hearsay. He notes that “whose stories get told and how they get told are a function of power,” and “the age-old squelching of our words and desire can be replicated over time when we adhere to ill-suited and unbending standards of historical methodology.” Howard, as a result, chose an unorthodox method. Like Kennedy and Davis, he limited the questions he posed to his narrators in order to avoid scripting their responses, and he paid attention to their language and use of vernacular. “If we spin out yarns with minimal interruption, . . . we are more likely to utilize the vocabularies [that become] familiar to us, to recall the words and phrases from the era described.”<sup>21</sup> However, unlike any of the texts I’ve examined, Howard avoids questions of gay identity, gay life, and gay experiences, arguing that privileging the experiences of gay identity isolates sexuality and removes it from everyday

<sup>20</sup> Howard, *Men like That*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

life. In fact, it's this attention to the vernacular and to the mundane patterns of life through which desire is felt and experienced that Howard is able to trace the history of "men who liked that"—men who engaged in same-sex relations but didn't talk about it and certainly didn't write about it. These are the men who, heretofore, had escaped or evaded the attention of historians. Through their silence and absence these men have much to tell us about the meaning of sex and sexuality.

Howard's method is queer: it's different, it's odd, and it maps the terrain of a new cohort of historical actors. His method poses new questions to the history of sexuality in that it challenges historians to "read the silence" in the history of same-sex desire. "Historical projects, by their very methodology, tend to access and privilege the spoken (or written) over the unspoken (or unwritten)."<sup>22</sup> Queer historians must assume the presence of queer desire despite the silence. Howard's method enables previously silent voices to emerge by privileging the same-sex experiences of those who do not fall within the confines of modern sexual identities. It is not that their voices are silent but that their experiences are often vilified as cowardly or unintelligible within the limits of comprehensible speech. (Some modern gay men and lesbians might ask, "Why don't they just come out?") By using a different method, Howard uncovers new actors and new social worlds that are shaped by sexuality, but he also identifies the limits of a method that privileges the historical agency of those who claim a gay or lesbian identity.

Howard moves beyond the limits of intelligible speech, that is, racially coded articulations of desire, in order to produce a more complex accounting of the history of sexuality and sexual communities. But in the post-Stonewall era, when political entitlements are linked to public visibility, a language about community based on the relative value of "outness" and "closetedness" has come to structure not only the way historians of gay and lesbian communities do research (via oral history methods) but the ways those who engage in same-sex practices verbalize their experiences. How does the verbal terrain or the process of ritually speaking one's identity produce and reproduce specific gay and lesbian identities and, as a consequence, a limited foundation for community interaction and expression? How can the researcher of sexuality move beyond the limits of identity politics if historical narrators cannot verbalize their same-sex experiences outside the paradigm of gay and lesbian identities? In my own research I found these questions to be particularly vexing.

I began my research for *Wide-Open Town* as an oral history project, that is, I was an archivist seeking to save certain histories from the historical dustbin. To accomplish this task I conducted forty-five taped interviews with people who participated in publicly visible same-sex sexualities, what I called queer public life, in San Francisco prior to 1965. I observed that a queer public culture emerged in San Francisco's tourist districts in the post-Prohibition era of the late 1930s. In my analysis I link the emergence of a queer public

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

culture to the city's explicit investment in a burgeoning tourist economy, and I use my book to trace the ways queer performers interacted with San Francisco's tourist cultures in the 1940s and 1950s. Ultimately, I argue that a lesbian and gay civil rights movement sprang up in the late 1950s and early 1960s not as a product of a unified homophile movement but as a grassroots movement engineered to defend these queer public spaces from the interventions of policing agencies.

Like Kennedy and Davis as well as Howard, I did not structure my oral history interviews. I started with a set of questions about the narrator's relationship to San Francisco and then let the conversation follow. I started with "Tell me about your relationship to San Francisco. When did you first move here? What was the city like back then?" I was interested in how the city of San Francisco came to be associated with queer culture and queer life. I was not interested in the development of gay and lesbian identities but, rather, hoped to link queer culture to an urban irreverence or bohemianism that was broader than the so-called gay and lesbian community. Like Howard, I was trying to avoid replicating a predictable narrative structure that bound queer life to the emergence of specific identity formations, but I could not get my narrators to cooperate with my interests. As the following three examples illustrate, narrators would often respond to my opening question by telling me their coming-out story:

BOYD: Why don't we just start off with when you came to San Francisco and why. Just that basic stuff.

ETHEL WHITAKER: Okay. Well, I was in New York City, that's where I was born. I fell in love with this woman who was about ten years older than I. She said, "Why don't we take you to San Francisco?" Of course, I would follow her to the ends of the earth. She was really basically my first love.<sup>23</sup>

BOYD: Let's start with when you moved to San Francisco and why you moved to San Francisco. Or have you lived here all your life?

GEORGE MENDENHALL: I was born and raised in Long Beach, California, to a very conservative middle-class family. My father was an executive with the fire department in Long Beach. I knew I was gay since childhood, always participating in gay sex wherever I could find it—since the age of ten (laughs), aggressively (laughs), scaring adults. I was called an adult molester. That's what I would always call myself.<sup>24</sup>

BOYD: Let's start with when you moved to the Bay Area. Part of this project is a history of San Francisco and the Bay Area, so maybe we could do a little geographical and demographic background on you.

<sup>23</sup> Ethel Whitaker (pseud.), interviewed by Nan Alamilla Boyd, tape recording, San Francisco, 30 August 1992, Wide-Open Town History Project, Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society, San Francisco, Calif. (hereafter GLBTHS).

<sup>24</sup> George Mendenhall, interviewed by Nan Alamilla Boyd, tape recording, San Francisco, 13 November 1991, Wide-Open Town History Project, GLBTHS.

MARILYN BRAIGER: Sure. I was born in New York. I grew up in New York. I went to the University of Florida, and that's where I came out. Actually, I came out in New York in the literal sense of coming out, which is when you make a transition from being straight to being gay. I came out in New York but went back to Florida to finish school. I went back to New York after college, worked in publishing there, Doubleday and Viking, had a restaurant in the Village. All this time, of course, I was gay. I've never been anything but gay ever since I came out. I went to California at the behest of a friend of mine who had also come out and who was living in San Francisco and who kept saying for five years "you've got to come out here."<sup>25</sup>

In these examples the narrators link their migration to San Francisco to their first same-sex experience or their process of identity formation, immediately positioning themselves as a gay-identified narrator. In doing so they reassure me, the authoritative researcher, of their authenticity as a speaking subject. By highlighting San Francisco in my opening question I had hoped to de-center gay identity from the heart of my project, but most narrators worked hard to recenter gay identity as the space from which they could speak about themselves as historical actors. The impulse to position one's self as authentic subject reflects and reiterates the possibilities of intelligible speech. In other words, even though prior to the tape-recorded conversation I had spoken to each narrator about the nature of the project, each narrator justified his or her historical value through a prideful claim to gay or lesbian identity. And even though I did not ask narrators about their identity or meet them with my own (and the expectation that the value of our connection was based on a shared sense of identity), they understood that the collected histories would be placed at the Gay and Lesbian Historical Society in San Francisco (now the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender Historical Society). That is, they understood that their histories were valuable as a "gay and lesbian" product, and this may have encouraged them to map their memories onto an intelligible gay/lesbian narrative structure.

Interestingly, there were a number of times when, after the oral history interview had finished and I had turned off the tape recorder, a different kind of conversation ensued. In one instance, after a lengthy taped conversation about the narrator's participation in the formation of the Society for Individual Rights, a gay civil rights and social service organization, the narrator began telling me about his long history of public sex. He hadn't mentioned his public sex activities, which were clearly central to both his sexuality and his political sensibilities, as he discussed his participation in the gay civil rights movement. When I asked him why, he said he didn't think

<sup>25</sup> Marilyn Braiger, interviewed by Nan Alamilla Boyd, tape recording, Berkeley, 2 December 1991, Wide-Open Town History Project, GLBTHS.

they were appropriate for the historical record. In fact, he wasn't sure he should be talking so openly and explicitly about public sex with a woman. When I reassured him that I thought these topics were appropriate for the historical record and that they were fine by me, we turned the tape recorder back on and continued our conversation. In another instance a narrator asked me to erase a lengthy segment of the interview that discussed the history of "leatherdykes" and lesbian sadomasochistic practices. She didn't want to be associated with these practices. In yet another interview a narrator did not want me to reveal the identities of several lesbians who worked as pimps and/or prostitutes during the 1940s and 1950s, suggesting that this aspect of their history might embarrass or humiliate their families and shouldn't be included in the historical record. In these examples narrators struggled with their own ideas about the limits of acceptable gay and lesbian sexuality. That is, the history of same-sex sexuality is limited by articulations of gay and lesbian identity both through the imperative coming-out story, which suggests a self-consciousness about gay or lesbian political agency, and through a caution about illicit or tawdry sex. What kind of sex is important to gay and lesbian history? Would these unseemly stories taint the gay and lesbian movement? Are these memories too private or too embarrassing to archive? Even when researchers work hard to move beyond a lesbian and gay frame in order to expand the limits of public speech or the parameters of queer community formation, narrators self-edit and curtail the stories offered up for the public record.

These observations speak to the difficulties of oral history as a primary method in U.S. gay, lesbian, and queer historiography. It is difficult to escape the trap of subjectivity because it is through coherent and intelligible subject positions that we learn to speak, even nonverbally, about desire. Howard's innovative use of secondhand stories challenges us to comprehend the way the history of sexuality is structured through the voices of intelligible speakers. We understand the "men who liked that" through the voices of "men like that." We understand the silencing of folks who refused to live within the binary of modern sex/gender systems through the voices of those who volunteered, as narrators, to articulate the nuances of these codifications through their known identities. It might be useful to consider how U.S. gay, lesbian, and queer historiography, in its dependence on oral history methods, does the same thing. Despite the best of intentions and the lightest touch, these oral histories are always offered up in relation to the larger gay and lesbian research project, always articulated around what the narrator thinks the researcher wants to hear, always structured around a certain historical desire for gay and lesbian political visibility. Not that political visibility is a bad thing, it's just something to observe as we continue our quest for "greater reality" in the narratives we construct for the historical record.

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