

Haverford College Haverford Scholarship

Faculty Publications

Anthropology

2016

Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer History [Book Review]

Anne Balay

Haverford College, abalay@haverford.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.haverford.edu/anthropology_facpubs

Repository Citation

Balay A. "Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer History [Book Review]" *The Oral History Review*,43(2):196-198. (2016).

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology at Haverford Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of Haverford Scholarship. For more information, please contact nmedeiro@haverford.edu.

Book Review

Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer History. By Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. 312 pp. Paperback, \$38.95.

The fields of oral history and queer studies are each gaining academic and institutional traction in this new millennium, and Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez argue, in a book of essays they collected, edited, and published in 2012, titled *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, that this is not a coincidence—that these emerging fields and methodologies inspire, critique, and sustain one another.

Their introduction and the chapters that follow make theoretical, historical, and methodological claims. However, Boyd and Roque Ramírez's first intervention was in the type of book they decided to construct. They collected and edited chapters from fourteen established queer oral historians, each including a brief, transcribed oral history and a methodological reflection. The interviews are presented as raw data, with both questions and responses printed on the page in a journalistic style. Each oral historian then provides commentary that contextualizes, historicizes, and interprets this data. The collected narratives are fascinating and important, and the analysis offered is often thoughtful, challenging, even brilliant. I will say more about the book's valuable contributions later, but first I will consider the book's structure as a theoretical statement: Oral history's contribution to the fields of queer studies, history, and ethnography is being characterised as the delivery and interpretation of data.

In the volume's introduction, Boyd and Roque Ramírez cite our subfield's founders as Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis (*Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* [New York: Penguin Books, 1994]) on the one hand and Allan Bérubé (*Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* [New York: Free Press, 1990]) on the other. These pioneers' texts integrate their narratives into historical accounts, rather than present them as interviews qua interviews. Oral history's relationships to community history and to anthropology are complicated, and connections with activism, popular history, museum studies, and identity politics weave through this field-building. Roque Ramírez and Boyd describe the potential space carved by this complicated intersection: "This book recognizes that an injustice has occurred and that those seeking justice sometimes have to create new methods. As such, queer oral histories have an overtly political function and a liberating

quality” (1). Oral historians and our narrators are people acting in a world, with bodies, subjugations, interpretations, needs, and demands for justice.

Bodies of Evidence establishes disciplinary boundaries around a field with these priorities and possibilities while simultaneously drawing on queer studies and theory. Individual speakers, collective identities, structures of state power—all are critiqued even as they are invoked and challenged. Roque Ramírez and Boyd claim that oral historians do not stop with data collection, but also “shift our analytical lens to an engaged and critical analysis of the narrative structures, living exchanges, ways of remembering, detailed contents, and interactions across differences in our work with queer oral histories” (6). The editors are engaged in a delicate balancing act that privileges data collection *by* people with bodies and histories *from* people with bodies and histories; lively, sexual, contextualized, archivable, messy data is the really cool thing that we bring to the table, yet the authors remind us that we cannot do so with a naïve sense of what it means to have a body, a sex, a story—or a table to which to bring it all, for that matter.

Queer oral history, as Boyd and Roque Ramírez present it, has an origin story: In the beginning, we needed oral evidence, because there was no other data—there was no archive, there was no other way to learn about our past. So Jonathan Katz, Bérubé, Lillian Faderman, John D’Emilio, Esther Newton, and others collected stories from the actors and shaped our history from these stories. Oral historians collecting stories now are doing so in a far different world. There is an archive, there are departments and tenure lines to protect, there is a generation or more of published research, and so if we choose to continue to use this methodology, we need a different reason and a theoretically informed, rigorous discipline that we can teach and justify.

I will draw one example from the meaty center of the book to explore how this paradox plays out. Jason Ruiz works on the Twin Cities Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Oral History Project, and his chapter contains excerpts from his interview with Chuck Larson, followed by an analysis that weaves a critique of empiricism and homonormativity with thoughts about sex talk, bad gays, and Amber Hollibaugh. Ruiz reflects that he is not engaged in analyzing Chuck’s sexual history, but rather “Chuck’s memory of his sexual history” (127). Thus the analysis can be about not what a person did, but what it means to be a person, do things, remember them, and try to understand. As Ruiz puts it, “Queers who work as historians are uniquely positioned to radically transform how history is made by turning to the most subjective parts of ourselves to unpack who we are” (127). Note that Ruiz refers to “the most subjective parts of *ourselves* [emphasis added],” not of our narrators, because, simply, “sex is fun to talk about” (122). Ruiz reports loving Chuck, having fun interviewing him, and questioning how desire—both his and Chuck’s—is constructed.

To conclude, oral history sees itself as carrying the torch of community history and activist scholarship forward, as making history transformative, immediate, and engaged. *Bodies of Evidence* argues that it does so best when it is collaborative and when it remains theoretically alert to the dialectical nature of collaboration. We are making ourselves, and making our field, just as much as we are making history. If and when we do so queerly, we can collect data and allow data to collect us, shape us, shake us up. The stories and analyses in this important volume often do just that.

Anne Balay
Haverford College

doi:10.1093/ohr/ohw026