

**Kristyn Scorsone (KS):** Hello and welcome to the Queer Newark Oral History podcast. I'm Kristyn Scorsone, your host and a PhD student in American Studies at Rutgers University Newark. This podcast is a part of the Queer Newark Oral History Project, a community-based and community-driven initiative supported by Rutgers Newark. Okay, hi, Tim, and welcome. Tim—

**Timothy Stewart-Winter (TSW):** Hi.

**KS:** Tim is the co-director of the Queer Newark Oral History Project along with Professor Whitney Strub here at Rutgers Newark. But I'd like to let you introduce yourself, so if you could tell us a little bit about you.

**TSW:** Sure. I am an associate professor in the history department, and I also teach courses in women's and gender studies and American studies here at Rutgers Newark. I've worked here since 2010. I grew up in the Midwest. I'm a political news junkie.

**KS:** Me too.

**TSW:** Yeah.

**KS:** Awesome.

**TSW:** And I'm happy to be here.

**KS:** Cool. Awesome. Tim was also a guest on this podcast before with Whit, and we talked about the—Newark's LGBTQ history, so if you want to check that out as well. So I just have a couple questions for you about oral history, like, best practices on how to—how to conduct an oral history interview. So just to start us off, like, what is, like, can you explain, what is oral history, for those that don't know, why it's useful and, like, how it became to be a, like, a research methodology?

**TSW:** Absolutely. Great question. Oral history, in some ways, is just the practice of telling stories and collecting stories, listening to stories, and in that sense it's—it's kind of no different from something that we all do all the time, and it also has similarities to other—other fields of inquiry. Like, I—I'm thinking of journalism. It's different in that it's a, you know, a little bit more formalized, even if it's just doing oral history with your grandmother about her, you know, her early life or something like that. I would say oral history is—is—became a field as part of the broadening of the field of history to encompass marginalized people. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was sort of a movement in the historical profession for a "history from below," it was often called at the time. So not just telling the history of people like the president or the king or the

mayor or people who left written records, but also of ordinary people. Workers, women, in the US, African Americans and other people of color, poor people. And it's a way to capture life stories of people who may not have left diaries or—or—or written books or kept, you know, the kinds of meeting minutes or—or—or other written sources that historians typically try to—try to use. One really important early project—I don't think they called it oral history, but in the 1930s, people working for the federal government did a series of interviews with—with formerly enslaved people and that's become a very important source for the history of slavery in the US, you know, at the—at that point, they had the—the—the few remaining ex-slaves in the US were—were elderly, right, but they were able to recount for—for these—these interviews with New Deal federal workers, what their lives had been like in ways that, you know, no other source can get at. And in the 1960s and 70s, with women's history and Black history and gay and lesbian history, the field kind of exploded as a way of—of looking at people who—whose lives are not available in other kinds of records. So in queer history, there's a—there's a—lots of examples of important works that use oral histories. Allan Bérubé wrote a book about gay and lesbian people during World War 2 where he used government records, but also interviewed people about their experiences. And for—for LGBTQ history, it's an important method because so often people don't want to leave a written record, right, if—if there is a record of gay and lesbian lives, it's often a record that's created by the police or by some sort of oppressive force, and in fact, you know, not—not being visible is a strategy that—that folks use for self-protection, for self-fulfillment and so on. And so it becomes a key source of evidence. Another oral history project that—that comes to mind is Liz Kennedy and Madeline Davis wrote a book called *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* that's about working class lesbians in Buffalo. Really, really cool early book. That book is based, I think, you know, basically entirely on oral histories. There's still a bias against oral history in the historical, you know, among professional historians, because there's—there's a sense that people may misremember things, and that a document that's written at the time is, you know, unchangeable in a—in a different sense. But—

**KS:** But doesn't, like, the way someone remembers something, even if it's wrong, kind of give you a sense—

**TSW:** Absolutely, absolutely. And of course that—you know, and—and written records have their own limitations in that they are mostly, you know, less often the perspectives of marginalized people.

**KS:** Right.

**TSW:** So yes, you—I would say that one of the problems or issues in oral history is how do you deal with the fallibility of memory? In some cases, people have told, you know, stories again and again. I would say this is probably more true interviewing activists, you know, which I did for

my—for my own dissertation and then book. You know, sometimes there were stories that they'd told a bunch of times, and there's a kind of rehearsal process.

**KS:** Right.

**TSW:** I—I don't mean to be critical in—in saying that, it's just a natural phenomenon that—that that happens. You know, interviewing people who are not activists or who, you know, just about their everyday lives or their childhood or growing up doesn't—I—I find a little bit easier cause I don't—I'm less worried about that.

**KS:** Yeah, I've noticed that when I—I interviewed someone that had been doing interviews for, like, a documentary. They—when I asked them questions not about the documentary, it was much more, I guess, like, off the cuff but when it got to, like, about the documentary they had, like, definite, like, picked up the pace and knew exactly, you know, like, had their thoughts on it all ironed out, you know, and were used to talking about it.

**TSW:** Yeah, yeah, I found the—the least interesting oral histories I did for my—for my book on Chicago politics were—was with politicians.

**KS:** Yeah, oh, I bet. Yeah.

**TSW:** You know, you just get kind of a canned story, but—but most people have interesting stories and—and, you know, it depends. I won't say everyone likes—

**KS:** Yeah.

**TSW:** Being interviewed, but it's often a really good experience.

**KS:** Yeah.

**TSW:** As you know, or I—

**KS:** Yeah. And I—I—I think it's really cool too that you can, you know, go home and—and like you said, you can interview your grandparents, you know, like, you can interview elders and your community or whatever. It doesn't have to—

**TSW:** Absolutely. And I—I did a couple of interviews with my grandmother before she passed away and I—I love having them.

**KS:** Yeah. I keep thinking I have to interview my parents and I keep not getting around to it and I'm—I'm gonna regret it if I don't do it.

**TSW:** Me too, my parents.

**KS:** Yeah. So I guess for another question, how do you, like, when you're in the interview, how do you frame your questions to get the best response? Do you use prompts like "tell me a story about" or—or—and do you come in there with a set of questions or do you go off the cuff a lot?

**TSW:** I would say it varies somewhat and to some extent, it's a process of trial and error. You know, what works for one person may not work for another person. I usually, unless I'm, you know, doing a narrow interview for a specific purpose, I sort of say, you know, begin by asking someone to tell me about where they were born and what they remember about their early childhood. People usually have something to say about that, and then about, you know, significant people in their early life. I guess I tend to—I—I do try to get people kind of on the record about significant transitions, like, when they started school, when they, you know, moved to a new home, when people came into or left their lives, just so that—and—and those tend to be things that people do remember accurately dates for, right? But then other kinds of memories are more open-ended. People, you know, if—people may not—may remember having a conversation but—but not necessarily like what year it was or.

**KS:** Right.

**TSW:** So I—I try to kind of anchor the interview with significant life events but—but also kind of ask questions about the flavor of everyday life. Tell me something about, you know, what was your—what was your brother like or—I know Beryl Satter suggested a really cool question, which is, like, what did you really like to wear for a night out?

**KS:** That is a really good question.

**TSW:** Yeah, it depends on the person and—and some people, I'm trying to think. What are—what are—how—how do I frame questions? If—if—yeah, if I'm struggling, you know, I'll stick to the scripts, but then if someone kind of delves into it, a—what—a topic that I didn't expect, I usually will—will go.

**KS:** Yeah.

**TSW:** Go there. Unless I'm pressed for time.

**KSb:** Yeah. Yeah, that—that actually—cause I'm wondering too, like, how do you sort of gently keep an interviewee on track? I have trouble with this. I'll let people go off the rails because then I'm like, what if it leads to something really interesting and I've cut them off, but sometimes it doesn't. Sometimes it's just—it's just a tangent.

**TSW:** It is a real dilemma. Yeah. And—and it can be off-putting to people to have you—to interrupt. Yeah. I mean, there are some interviews where someone just—you have no trouble getting them to talk, but then they want to tell stories that aren't what you're looking for or—or they, yeah, or it's just really tangential. I try not to just, like, flat out interrupt but I wouldn't say I never—

**KS:** Yeah.

**TSW:** Do it. You know, try to be kind of gentle, maybe using cues, like looking at the—at—at the person or body language, I guess.

**KS:** Yeah.

**TSW:** To—to communicate those kinds of things. Obviously harder on a phone interview. What else? You know, convey a sense that—that I want to cover these life events or—or sort of signal that something is—that a topic is—is winding down. Like, "is there anything else you'd like to say about your childhood?", or "is there anything else you'd like to add about your—your coming out experience?". Sometimes I ask people to describe what they remember about a space, like their childhood home or their walk to school or—or even, you know, what they remember about a public event, like in Newark, the—the Newark Rebellion. Or I'm doing a project about a scandal, so in my own research, so I asked people about, like, what do yo—when did you—when and how did you hear about it? There's a sort of famous effect in—in psychology, you know, everybody remembers where they were when they heard about the Kennedy assassination, right? And there's, you know, the personal significance of news events I find useful and interesting and with—with LGBT history, you know, there are certain things like the marriage debate.

**KS:** Right.

**TSW:** Or the debate over gay people in the military or the AIDS crisis that, you know, that that pop up.

**KS:** Yeah, I bet that's good for getting people into the mode of then telling stories in regards to other questions.

**TSW:** Yes. Yeah, that's right.

**KS:** That's cool.

**TSW:** Yeah. So it depends on the person and—and—but, you know, I would encourage people to go with trial and error, right, you know, get out that tape recorder or get out that phone and—and just start asking questions of your—your family members, you know, and go from there.

**KS:** Yeah. And I think that even if you buy like a cheap tape recorder, like, I—the one I use is—was like \$30 and it has a—it—the sound is really good and I also really liked how Svetlana Kitto, who came and did our, like, oral history workshops, she's a—she graduated from Columbia, their masters in oral history, and she had said that with her grandfather, she just keeps a recorder on her at all times and if he starts going into, like ,a really interesting story, she can just turn it on, and so she just like—

**TSW:** That's so smart.

**KS:** Yeah, it's really cool. So, but yeah, thank you. This is awesome. And I just wanted to ask you too, like, is there anything else you want to add or—or anything or plug or where people can find you or anything like that?

**TSW:** You can find me on campus or on—I tweet @timothysw or come to a Queer Newark Oral History Project event.

**KS:** Yes.

**TSW:** You're one of our longest—longest-running folks and at this point, you know more about—more about interviewing than I do, I think, so.

**KS:** Thank you.

**TSW:** Thanks for having me.

**KS:** Thank you. The Queer Newark Oral History podcast is produced by me, Kristyn Scorsone. This episode was recorded in the Queer Newark office, located in Conklin Hall at Rutgers University in Newark. Our theme music was remixed by DJ JustLove, an amazing local Newark DJ, and is from an original song by K. Sparks. The title is "Music" and you can find more from K. Sparks on freemusicarchive.org. As for DJ JustLove you can find her on Twitter @DJJustLove and on Facebook. Thank you so much for listening, and we'll see you next time.