"Trans Toronto: Reflections on the Practice of Oral History"

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Traditional oral history is a method that records life stories, told by the storyteller in their own words. More modern oral historians often use theory and perspective to interpret the life stories, framed by cultural and historical context, and sensitive to the needs of narrators, often taking precautions to avoid misrepresentation and exploitation. It is difficult to authentically represent the complexity of a person’s life, but oral history promises to capture complexity and paradoxes in life, providing psychologically valuable and interesting data, especially for those who are oppressed or marginalized in society. Feminist oral histories, for instance, collect stories on gender with an eye toward those who are disadvantaged by gender. This paper reflects on the potentials and problems of feminist oral history practice in a study with Toronto’s trans community called Trans Toronto: An Oral History (Hill, 2012). The focus will be on themes related to: problems in the truth and authenticity of life stories, researcher appropriation and representation of other people’s stories, how to deal with memory and storytelling problems, and the role of new technologies in oral history. The presentation will conclude with a discussion of positions and solutions for the challenges posed by the practice of modern oral history.

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